

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

ACTIVATED

Vol 14 • Issue 2

BEING SOCIAL

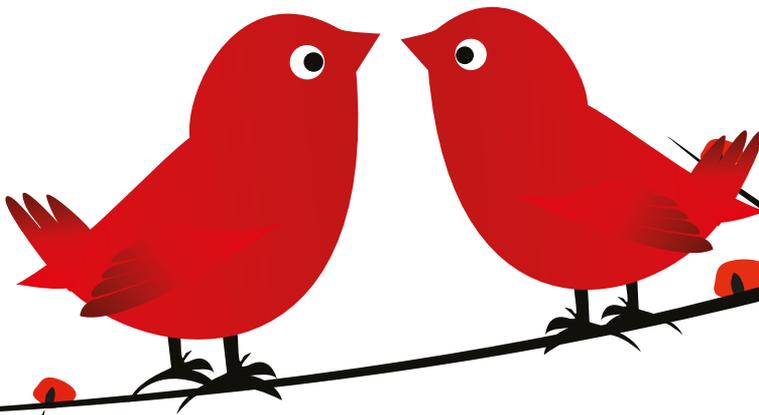
Why love tops all

My Princess

Why children are worth the cost

36 Seconds

An elevator affirmation





PERSONALLY SPEAKING

The expression “Love me, love my dog” came to life when my wife and I got a puppy—a first for me. We adore Sophie and she adores us. Actually, she adores everyone. She is not only one of those hyperactive toy breeds, but also one that is famously

sociable. She starts wagging her tail as soon as a new person enters her world, and within a second or two her tail is wagging the rest of her so hard that she nearly comes unglued. If the new person so much as acknowledges Sophie’s existence, she gets even more excited and eager to “bond.” This is when we find out who loves dogs and who doesn’t.

I’m about to make a larger point, but before I do, another little story that I think most parents will be able to relate to. When my children were small they acted, well, childish. They whined and cried over the littlest things, spilt more food and drink than they swallowed, broke stuff out of clumsiness and curiosity, and as soon as they were old enough to understand boundaries, began pushing them. I loved them anyway. They could be annoying, even aggravating, but they were only children, after all, and this was all part of the learning, maturing process. Plus they were mine. What really annoyed me was when others let their annoyance show. “Love me, love my children.”

In that context, the connection between the two rules for life that Jesus said encompass all the rest—love God, and love others¹—becomes clearer. “Love God, love those He loves,” which is everyone. If we truly love God and believe that He created us in His own image, as the Bible says, we will love and respect each of His creations enough to try our best to understand and accept him or her—faults, foibles, and all.

This issue of *Activated* is the first in a nine-part series on the fruits of the Spirit,² beginning with that all-encompassing, all-important one: love.

Keith Phillips
For *Activated*

1. See Matthew 22:37–39.
2. Galatians 5:22–23

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Being Social

BY LANI WOODS



“WHO ARE YOU HERE TO SEE?” the petite dark-haired nurse asked as I sipped tea in the waiting area and scrawled in my journal.

“My nephew,” I answered with a smile. “He’s asleep, though, so I’ll wait.”

“Oh, he really needs visitors. He’s still a child,” she said in her motherly way. Although my nearly full-grown teenage nephew now towers over me when he’s not wasting away in a hospital bed, I still remember his chubby cheeks and legs when I first held him at three months old.

The nurse, like the kindly orderly outside his bedroom who showed me how to wear the plastic cover-all robe, spoke of my nephew with affection. “We’re concerned about him. Some days, nobody visits.” I nodded in agreement, even though he was in quarantine and on chemotherapy, so it wasn’t as though we all could just waltz in at any time.

A little later, during the course of a conversation with my nephew, he



gave me his cell phone number and said he’d love for more people to call him. Now, even more than before, excuses seemed feeble. How hard could it be to pick up a phone?

I was sickly as a child and into my teens and twenties, and I remember being confined to my bed while my more robust siblings and friends rushed around enjoying fresh air and sunshine, bikes and playmates. The sense of frustration at my body’s failure to operate properly was pretty hard to deal with, and any visits by people to check how I was doing meant a lot. I certainly experienced feelings of isolation during my

illnesses, but now that I’m healthy, I find myself making excuses. “I don’t know him that well.” “He probably doesn’t consider me very cool anyway.” “Why would he want to spend time chatting with his aunt?”

In our modern world of zipping around, trying to balance work and children, housekeeping and pet care, errands and other obligations, we must be living in the most time-challenged era ever. But when we meet Jesus someday, He isn’t going to say, “You were busy, yet you still fit in time to read that great novel or to paint your toenails. Good for you!” He kindly arranged our priorities for us two millennia ago when He said, “I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison, and you looked after Me.”¹ Lesser things tend to fall away with that kind of clarity.

LANI WOODS IS A WRITER WHO LIVES IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA. ■

1. See Matthew 25:34–40.



◀ Samuel and Audrey at her 1st birthday party

My Princess

BY SAMUEL KEATING

FOR MY DAUGHTER AUDREY'S FIRST BIRTHDAY, my wife and I planned to have a small celebration with a few friends and family members at home; instead we ended up with a cupcake-themed extravaganza at the restaurant her grandparents manage. Admittedly, it was probably more for everyone else's benefit. Audrey spent much of the time observing the proceedings warily from the safety of someone's arms and flatly refused to pose for photos by her lone candle, despite (or because of) much encouragement to do so.

People talk about how fast time flies, and I feel it really does. Maybe that's because I'm getting older. When I was a child, days, weeks, and months—not to mention years—seemed to pass so slowly; now it seems like only a few weeks ago that I first met Audrey. I remember that day so well, along with all my

first impressions and emotions as I watched the nurse give Audrey her first bath, and then her falling asleep in my arms for the first time.

Before she was born, I often heard parents talk about the joys of having children, but I wasn't convinced. I believed those parents truly thought they were happy, but I didn't understand how. Weren't their lives more stressful, tiring, and hectic than before? Didn't they have less free time? Weren't they embarrassed by their children turning over a plate of food, frazzled by their children's whininess when they were tired, annoyed by their clinginess or repeated petty disobediences? I was sure I would be. While I enjoyed being around other people's children, I felt I valued my time and comfort too much to ever have any of my own.

Now, however, I can't imagine my life without Audrey. Every smile,

every peal of laughter, every new discovery she makes, every new toy she masters, every animal sound she learns fills me with deep happiness and gratitude for her presence in my life. Her latest discovery is that a piercing shriek is an effective way to get my attention when she wants me to play with her or read her a book, but even that doesn't take away from the love I feel for her or the happiness she brings.

One would think that our heavenly Father would be embarrassed by our lack of wisdom, frazzled by our constant need for Him, and annoyed at our limitations. But God never gets fed up with us or tires of having us around.

SAMUEL KEATING IS *ACTIVATED* MAGAZINE'S PRODUCTION COORDINATOR AND LIVES IN MILAN, ITALY. ■

lovingkindness

BY PHILLIP LYNCH

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN READING THE BIBLE, a word that captured my attention was “lovingkindness.” I felt very warm inside when I read passages like “I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy,”¹ or “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you,”² or “[God] redeems your life from destruction [and] crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,”³ or “The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with me.”⁴

In some modern English translations, expressions such as “steadfast love,” “mercy,” and just plain “love” are used in place of “lovingkindness,” but I miss that word. It seems to encapsulate in a single word what God means most to me. It is the translation of the Hebrew word *chased*, and it was coined long ago by Miles Coverdale, one of the very first translators of the Bible into English. In the Greek and Latin translations that had preceded Coverdale’s English effort, *chased* had been translated as *eleos* and *miser cordia* respectively, the equivalents of the English word “mercy.”

Mercy is a wonderful thing, and certainly we can all agree that God is merciful, but

Coverdale sensed it had a deeper, more nuanced, meaning; that’s how we ended up with that wonderful word, “lovingkindness.” Obviously, later scholars agreed, as the term was carried over into the other early English translations such as Tyndale’s and the Authorized or King James Version.

At a time when love is in the air—or at least on our minds—due to Saint Valentine’s Day, I find it appropriate to recall this wonderful love that God has for us. John captured the very essence of God in that wonderful declaration, “God is love,”⁵ but clearly many of the Bible writers who had preceded him by hundreds and even thousands of years had also understood this. Those who knew Him deeply knew that He cared for them with lovingkindness.

Those who think of God primarily in the context of the Old Testament picture Him as judgmental, angry, the destroyer of those who dare cross Him. That is a very selective view and disregards the majority of God’s interaction with humanity. God has always loved us. It is in His nature to. Even if He wanted *not* to, He couldn’t help Himself. He can do anything, of course, except go against His own nature. And so He goes on showering us with lovingkindness, and I for one am glad for that!

1. Hosea 2:19
2. Jeremiah 31:3
3. Psalm 103:4
4. Psalm 42:8
5. 1 John 4:8

PHILLIP LYNCH IS A NOVELIST AND COMMENTATOR ON SPIRITUAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL ISSUES, LIVING IN ATLANTIC CANADA. ■



36 SECONDS

BY MISTY KAY

MY HUSBAND DANIEL AND I LIVE WITH OUR FOUR CHILDREN ON THE 13TH FLOOR OF AN APARTMENT BUILDING IN TAICHUNG CITY, TAIWAN.

Needless to say, the elevator is a part of our daily lives.

It had been just another normal, busy day, with most of my time and energy spent keeping the kids happy, fed, and out of one another's hair. We had all been out together, doing what I don't even remember, and were coming home. We stepped into the empty elevator, and one of the kids pressed the button. The number 13 lit up on the panel, and the doors closed.

"Children, your mother and I have an important announcement," Daniel said in a way that commanded everyone's attention.

I had no idea what this was about. Daniel is a spontaneous man, full of surprises, and I never know what to expect from him. I decided to play

along. I moved next to him and put my arm in his to add authority to whatever he was going to say.

"Your mother and I want you to know that after fourteen years of marriage, we are still totally and emphatically in love."

The kids laughed a little and asked, "Why is that an important announcement?"

Daniel replied that with so many marriage problems in the world and divorce so common, children need to know that their parents love each other. Then he looked our son in the eye and said, "When you get married someday, you need to treat your wife right."

A loud ding announced the thirteenth floor, and the elevator doors opened. When we walked into our apartment, the kids' chatter was punctuated by little giggles, and Daniel and I slipped into our room to enjoy a private moment together.

In 36 seconds between the first and thirteenth floors, Daniel had brought our family closer, put smiles on our faces, taught our son a life lesson, and put warmth in my heart that filled my whole being.

MISTY KAY IS A CANCER AND FIBROMYALGIA SURVIVOR AND AUTHOR. TOGETHER WITH HER HUSBAND AND FOUR CHILDREN, SHE HAS SPENT MANY YEARS ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN VOLUNTEER WORK ACROSS ASIA. ■

HOLDING POWER

A braid appears to contain only two strands of hair. But herein lies the mystery: What looks like two strands requires a third. The third strand, though not immediately evident, keeps the strands tightly woven. God's presence, like the third strand in a braid, holds husband and wife together.

—Catherine Paxton

Happy Valentine's Day!

BY MARIA FONTAINE

WHEN I THINK ABOUT VALENTINE'S DAY, a day when people give special love gifts to one another, I think most of all about God's great gift to us in the form of His son, Jesus. Then I think of how all the love that we feel for others on Valentine's Day and every day of the year is possible because of His love. There's no time for Him that isn't a time to give. I want to follow His example as much as I can.

I found a poem that was very meaningful to me and expresses some of the gifts we receive from our great Valentine every day of the year. When our love cups are overflowing with His gifts, it makes us want to share that love with others so they can experience it too.

Here's the poem:

He doesn't bring me roses,
For He is my Rose of Sharon.
Nor does He leave flowers at my door,
For He grows them in my garden.
He doesn't kiss my lips,
For He caresses my entire being with the touch of warm sunshine
and softly falling rain.
He doesn't give me sparkling diamonds to wear,
For He set the sparkling stars in the night sky and made them mine.
He doesn't whisper in my ear,
For His still, small voice fills my spirit and is ever with me.
He isn't a Valentine who has pledged lifelong love,
For He is eternal love.
He isn't limited to only sending gifts or making sweet promises,
For He Himself is the ultimate gift and fulfillment of promise.
He won't fill my life by standing at the wedding altar with me.
For He placed Himself on the altar, that I may know life, that I may know Him,
That I may love Him forever.¹

Our dear Jesus is our ultimate Valentine, the One who has given us limitless love and who loves it when we help Him communicate that love to others, both today and always. Happy Valentine's Day!

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■

1. Janice K. Lawrence, adapted.





▲ Kristina and Bryan



IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

BY BRYAN CLARK

I RECENTLY WATCHED THE MOVIE *LOVE AND OTHER DRUGS*, a romantic comedy based on Jamie Reidy’s memoir, *Hard Sell: The Evolution of a Viagra Salesman*.

While I thought the film was a mixed bag, it did have a down-to-earth kind of love story that wasn’t your typical movie romance or a common Hollywood storyline: young and beautiful Maggie Murdock (Anne Hathaway) has an incurable degenerative illness—Parkinson’s disease. That sort of made up for the parts that I didn’t enjoy, because in real life, in the real world, in real relationships, things like that happen.

A few weeks earlier I had listened to a heartrending interview with Toben Heim, who has coauthored several books with his wife, Joanne, including *Happily Ever After: A*

Real-Life Look at Your First Year of Marriage. He has also solo-authored several other books, and he and Ryan Dobson coauthored *Wrecked: What God Can Do When Things Crash and Burn*.

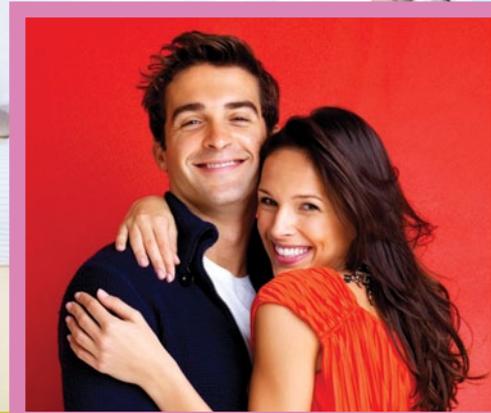
In the interview, Toben talked about his deepening commitment to his marriage in the wake of Joanne’s recent massive stroke, which has left her paralyzed, unable to speak, and in terrible physical, mental, and emotional pain. It was very touching to hear him explain how it has affected their and their children’s lives, as well as how it has strengthened his love for his wife and his faith in God’s promises.

I also recently read excerpts of an interview with Laura Hillenbrand, the best-selling author of *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. She’s known for her animated storytelling and powerful

characters, but she herself has been practically bedridden for decades, suffering from a severe and debilitating disease. Often she doesn’t even have the strength to talk or to roll over in bed.

When the interviewer asked how she manages, Hillenbrand gave much of the credit to her husband—her “college sweetheart.” She explained, “[When we got married] I was too sick to go to the reception and was at the wedding for only a few minutes. He has been through this with me. Some couples it would drive apart; it has drawn us together. We have a deep understanding. He doesn’t see me as a sick person. He sees me as everything else I am. We had to learn how to do it. It’s not easy at all to be a couple with a disease.”

As I read her touching account and thought about what a saint



of a guy she must be married to, I couldn't help but be reminded of my own situation and everything that my saintly wife, Kristina, has selflessly put up with year after year. And it's not just my regular migraines and other ongoing illnesses that she's had to help me endure. Those have greatly affected her life for sure, but she has also gracefully survived everything else about me, as well—things that I personally would have had a very hard time putting up with if I were in her shoes.

I think it could be said that most of us are afflicted in one way or another. The truth is that making any relationship work isn't easy. We all have weaknesses and ongoing problems that require a limitless supply of sacrificial, unconditional love and forgiveness from our partner. I know I do! I don't know how Kristina has

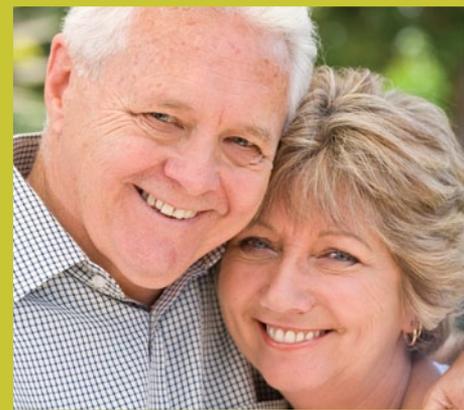
managed to put up with me all these years, but she has. I admire her for that, and I thank God for her. She's a saint for sure!

I also listened to another very touching interview—this one with bestselling author Joni Eareckson Tada and her husband Ken. Joni (pronounced *Johnny*) is a long-time quadriplegic who now also has breast cancer. It was such a moving testimony of faith and marital devotion that I haven't been able to forget it. Coping with cancer and the ensuing, debilitating medical treatments is of course difficult for anyone, but the particular challenges that it presents for Joni and Ken are especially so. The interview was intended to inform and update Joni's public about her cancer and to ask for prayer for her and Ken, but over the course of the interview it became

much more than that—a beautiful and amazing love story.

As I listened, I was moved to tears, not just by the struggles that this amazing woman has faced, but even more by the profound love that was reflected in her husband's trembling voice as he explained how difficult it has been for him to see Joni in such extreme pain, as well as how it has brought them even closer together and caused them to be even more in love.

Joni said, "It's quite wonderful—when you're going through the worst of it and it's just a nightmare—to have someone standing by you. The other night I was in such pain, and I prayed right before I went to bed, 'Oh, Lord Jesus, would You please show up tonight? Let me see You and feel You. Let me know You're with me. You've promised that You will never leave or forsake me. Let me sense that tonight.'



“Well, sure enough, I had to wake Ken up to help me, and as he was standing there in the dim light of the bedside lamp, I said, ‘You’re Him! You’re Jesus! Ken, I feel Him in your touch, I see Him in your face, in your smile. [I hear Him] in the tone of your voice.’ It was the sweetest thing to feel the presence of Jesus through my husband.”

I can totally relate to what Joni was saying. Thankfully, I’ve never had to go through the kinds of things that she has so bravely lived with since being paralyzed in a diving accident decades ago, but those close to me know that I have multiple health problems and am often hurting. At times I’ve been so sick or in such pain that I couldn’t even think or talk. I’m sure that those with ongoing health problems can relate.

1. See Hebrews 4:15.

But even in the most difficult times, Jesus has always been there with me, to soothe, comfort, and ultimately heal me. And more times than I can count, it has been Kristina who has been Jesus to me through her tender care, unending patience, resilient endurance, and unconditional love. That’s just the way she is. Like Joanne Heim’s husband, Laura Hillenbrand’s husband, Joni Eareckson Tada’s husband, and many, many other husbands and wives the world has never heard of, my wife sticks with me through thick and thin, in sickness and in health.

Of course, there isn’t always someone like that around. Even in those times, though, Jesus is always there. He sees our needs, is touched by our weaknesses,¹ and never fails to see us through the darkest nights. Even when we don’t appreciate Him as we

should, He remains faithfully by our side. No matter what happens, He’s always there.

But when there is someone else in your life—a spouse or relative or close friend—someone who willingly chooses to be there for you no matter what you’re going through, someone who doesn’t see you as a sick person or a mess but as everything else that you are or could yet become, it’s an amazing, wonderful thing, almost too good to be true.

May we each live sacrificially, selflessly, lovingly, day in and day out, being Jesus to others God has put in our lives—“for better or for worse, in sickness and in health.”

BRYAN AND KRISTINA CLARK LIVE IN GUADALAJARA, MEXICO, WHERE BRYAN WORKS IN THE MEDICAL TOURISM INDUSTRY. ■

LOVE—THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING FRUIT

BY RAFAEL HOLDING

“THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”¹

How important is love? When Jesus was asked which commandment was the most important, He answered, “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. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”² In other words, if you can do those two things—love God and love your neighbor—everything else will fall into place. All of the other

commandments were given to teach us to do the right and loving thing.

How does love rank among the fruits of having the Holy Spirit? The Apostle Paul concluded his explanation of the gifts of the Spirit³ with an exhortation to put *love* first: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”⁴

It sounds simple enough, but of course it’s not always easy. Where do you find the kind of love that reaches out, that gives, that sacrifices? Where do you find love that helps you be as concerned about your neighbor’s happiness as you are about your own, or to be loving even to your enemies, or to sacrifice for others?⁵ Such love is not human nature; it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit working in your life.

How do you get it? If you have received Jesus and the Holy Spirit, you already have a measure of that love, and you can always ask God for more. But the best way to get more is to *give* what you’ve got. “The generous soul

will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself.”⁶ Just a little love can go a long way—much further than you could ever dream.

RAFAEL HOLDING IS A WRITER IN AUSTRALIA. “LOVE—THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING FRUIT” IS ADAPTED FROM THE *GET ACTIVATED* BOOK *GOD’S GIFTS*, AVAILABLE FROM AURORA’S ONLINE STORE ([HTTP://SHOP.AURORAPRODUCTION.COM/](http://shop.auroraproduction.com/)). ■

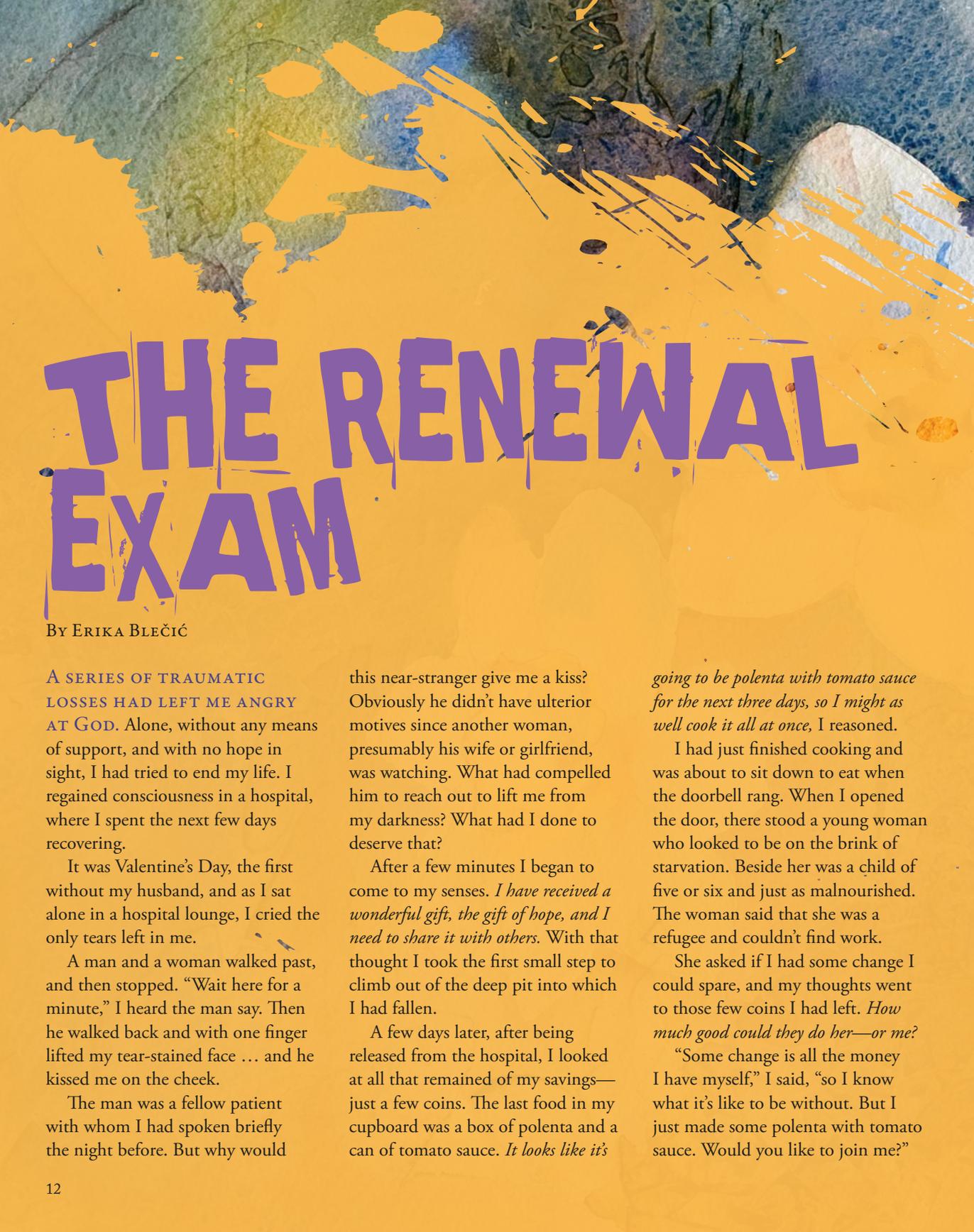
DEFINING FEATURE

A central part of Jesus’ last message to His disciples at the Last Supper, before He was arrested, taken to jail, beaten, and killed was: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁷

The early Christians turned the world upside down with the love of God that they found in Jesus Christ. The way the Christians lived convinced the Romans that their faith was real.

—David Brandt Berg (1919–1994)

1. Galatians 5:22–23
2. Matthew 22:37–40
3. 1 Corinthians 12
4. 1 Corinthians 13:13
5. Matthew 22:39; 5:44; John 15:13; 1 John 3:16
6. Proverbs 11:25
7. John 13:35



THE RENEWAL EXAM

BY ERIKA BLEČIĆ

A SERIES OF TRAUMATIC LOSSES HAD LEFT ME ANGRY AT GOD. Alone, without any means of support, and with no hope in sight, I had tried to end my life. I regained consciousness in a hospital, where I spent the next few days recovering.

It was Valentine's Day, the first without my husband, and as I sat alone in a hospital lounge, I cried the only tears left in me.

A man and a woman walked past, and then stopped. "Wait here for a minute," I heard the man say. Then he walked back and with one finger lifted my tear-stained face ... and he kissed me on the cheek.

The man was a fellow patient with whom I had spoken briefly the night before. But why would

this near-stranger give me a kiss? Obviously he didn't have ulterior motives since another woman, presumably his wife or girlfriend, was watching. What had compelled him to reach out to lift me from my darkness? What had I done to deserve that?

After a few minutes I began to come to my senses. *I have received a wonderful gift, the gift of hope, and I need to share it with others.* With that thought I took the first small step to climb out of the deep pit into which I had fallen.

A few days later, after being released from the hospital, I looked at all that remained of my savings—just a few coins. The last food in my cupboard was a box of polenta and a can of tomato sauce. *It looks like it's*

going to be polenta with tomato sauce for the next three days, so I might as well cook it all at once, I reasoned.

I had just finished cooking and was about to sit down to eat when the doorbell rang. When I opened the door, there stood a young woman who looked to be on the brink of starvation. Beside her was a child of five or six and just as malnourished. The woman said that she was a refugee and couldn't find work.

She asked if I had some change I could spare, and my thoughts went to those few coins I had left. *How much good could they do her—or me?*

"Some change is all the money I have myself," I said, "so I know what it's like to be without. But I just made some polenta with tomato sauce. Would you like to join me?"



The mother and child timidly accepted, and we ate at my kitchen table. How I wished I could have offered them an enormous steak, grilled to perfection, instead of that polenta! Then I remembered that someone had given me a chocolate bar a few days earlier, which I had tucked away for even harder times. I gave it to the child in exchange for a hug I will never forget.

When I found out that they lived nearby, I invited them to return. I couldn't promise full-course meals, I explained, but we would share whatever I had at the moment. With a smile and a handshake, they left. I haven't seen them since.

Three days later I saw a job offer in the newspaper and applied, even though I didn't have any credentials

or prior experience for that job. Only a few minutes into the interview, I was asked one question I hadn't prepared myself for. "Would you like to start tomorrow?" Before I could answer, a thought struck me like a lightning bolt. *Had those two strangers at my door been angels on a mission?*

I felt like I had not just passed a job interview, but an exam. First God had sent that man to show me that He loved and hadn't forgotten me, and then He had sent the mother and child to see if I would keep my promise to pass on that love and hope. When I did, He opened the floodgates of His blessings.

CONTINUED...

Today Erika is happy and fulfilled in her work as a newspaper reporter,

and just as happy in her "other work" of helping to spread God's love. She began by sewing clown costumes for Family International volunteers, and now sometimes goes with them to give "clown therapy" to children at a local hospital. "It fills my heart with joy to see a small child, sick and separated from family and home, be lifted above the suffering and loneliness," she says. "All it takes is someone being willing to put on a red nose and sing a song or two." And those children aren't the only ones who have felt God's love through Erika. Seniors in the retirement homes she visits appreciate her friendship, concern, and listening ear.

ERIKA BLEČIĆ IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CROATIA.

third TIME'S the CHARM

BY YVETTE GLADSTONE

I'M ON MY THIRD MARRIAGE—a fact that I don't normally mention in the presence of newly married couples. I'm grateful for my first two marriages because they resulted in several beautiful children, my most precious treasures, but for me the third time has been charmed.

When my second marriage ended, I thought that was it, that I was now a single mother and would have to just do the best I could from then on. I was soured on the marriage experience and didn't expect there to ever be another man in my life, but I was wrong.

Every day I see the love of God for me in my dear husband's eyes. He not only fell in love with and married me, but he also legally adopted five of my children, who were minors

at the time. This happened over ten years ago, and we are still very happily married today.

What makes our marriage even more unconventional is that he was also married twice before. We don't understand all the reasons why our lives turned out this way, and truth be told, it is humbling for us to have to admit that we have four failed marriages between us. But if God can love and accept us with all our flaws, weaknesses, and mistakes, isn't it awesome that He can also send along someone in a flesh-and-blood body who can love and accept us too?

Because of our similar pasts, we can better understand each other and share our hearts and thoughts very intimately. We laugh together, cry together, and experience life together so beautifully. At the very beginning of our relationship we determined to

keep God at the center of our lives, and we have helped each other stick to that commitment. Daily, we read God's Word together, pray together, and discuss the various lessons God is teaching us as a couple and individually. We continue to learn from each other, which helps us respect each other deeply. Ours has become a very spiritually satisfying relationship.

My advice to newly married couples, as well as those going through a rough time in their marriage or recovering from a broken one is this: God's love is the genuine "charm" in any marriage. Whether it is discovered the first time around or, as in our case, later, it's all God's love, which never disappoints.¹

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1. 1 Corinthians 13:8

LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

BY ABI MAY

IN ONE OF HER MOST FAMOUS POEMS, Elizabeth Barrett Browning penned a beautiful declaration of love that started like this:

How do I love thee? Let me count
the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth
and height
My soul can reach.

These words are a gentle echo of another expression of love. This time the writer is the apostle Paul, and he is speaking not of love between people, but of the love of God for each of His children:

I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.—*Romans 8:38–39*

1. See Romans 3:23.
2. Psalm 9:1

God loves *you* like that? Really? Even with all your faults and failings? Yes! Everyone falls short,¹ but God's love is not diminished by this.

Take a few moments to meditate on the following statements about God's love for you. Don't try to analyze them; just savor the words and rest in the knowledge that His love for you is unconditional and unending.

Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love.—*Jeremiah 31:3*

I will never leave you nor forsake you.—*Hebrews 13:5*

[I would that you] may be able to comprehend what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.—*Ephesians 3:18–19*

Behold the love of God. In those years that have passed away it never failed. When we fell, it raised us;

when we wandered, it recalled us; when we fainted, it revived us; when we sinned, it pardoned us; when we wept, it comforted us. In those moments of agony and doubt and almost despair, which some can recall, it was all-sufficient.—*Reverend Canon Money, adapted*

God loves you as though you are the only person in the world, and He loves everyone the way He loves you.—*St. Augustine (354–430)*

Now it's your turn to express your love in return. Perhaps you'd like to write God a letter, a poem, or a card. Tell Him what He means to you. What do His presence, His gifts, and the promise of eternal salvation bring to your life? How does the knowledge of His unconditional love affect you? Put your feelings into words, as David of old did time and time again in the book of Psalms. "I will praise You, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will tell of all Your marvelous works."² ■





FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

NO STRINGS

I don't love you for what you are or what you aren't. I don't love you for who you are. I don't love you for how much you do or how well you do it. I don't love you for how little you sin and mess up, or for how much you do the right thing. I simply love you—no strings attached. That truth may be hard to grasp, but once you do, everything in your life will take on new meaning and new depth, a new reality. You are complete because you are loved. You are free because you are loved. You are able to love others truly because you are loved completely and unconditionally.

I didn't decide to love you based on your love for Me or on what you do for Me. I loved you before there was any of that, before you took your first breath.

I love it when you tell Me you love Me and when you put that love into action by drawing close to Me in prayer. I love how you love Me and want to please Me, but even when that wanes or gets crowded out by the affairs of life, My love for you is unchanged. My love for you never lessens, and I am never too busy for you.