LIVE THE LOVE LETTER

In the introduction I compared God's Word to the lyrics of His love song to you. When you know and experience God's active love in your life, you are naturally drawn to the words of the song. His lyrics are written in the form of a Love Letter, God's inspired Word in the collective work of the Holy Bible.

For many, the draw isn't there because His love doesn't feel real and personal. It will come in time if you are willing to take a step of faith and begin to read. There's a valid reason why each believer needs the Word of God: transformation.

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."
(Romans 12:2)

Your life experiences have shaped your mind and thoughts. The way you were raised, where you were raised, events in your childhood and young adulthood, all these life experiences tell you who you are and what you feel. Many are lies. The serpent has deceived, and you have eaten. Those lies need to be dispelled with truth. The Bible speaks truth over those lies and tells you who you are and Whose you are.

No matter how your mind, feelings, and emotions have been shaped, whether negatively or positively, you still hear one call: "Come to Me..." (Matthew 11:28). That one phrase of the love song tells you all you need is to run to Jesus.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."
(John 1:1)

In the passage above, John is referring to Jesus as the Word. So when you read Scripture, you are in actuality getting to know Jesus – *The* Word. The divine Book is His introduction of who He is and how much He loves you.

Previously you were encouraged to pursue Jesus as the desire of your heart. That's impossible to do without getting to know Him. It's impossible not to love Him once you get to know Him in Spirit and Truth.

Our verse from Romans about being transformed applies here. None of this makes any sense at all without your mind being renewed. The world-shaped, human brain can't grasp how we can have someone who isn't physically present as the desire of our heart. That's why this is difficult for women to believe. Our boyfriend, husband, children, parents, and all the others who vie for our heart's affection are living, breathing, walking-with-us beings. Horizontal love relationships are something we can much more easily wrap our minds around. But a faraway Jesus, how can we embrace Him?

If this was a natural process, I would stop here and list some bullet points on how to know Jesus as your intimate companion, but that's not at all how it works. The supernatural process of getting to know Jesus is something that happens over time. At least it did for me. My heart was only accustomed to accommodating human love, so it fought against spiritual love for way too long.

In my own experience, I found that getting to know Him was an incremental process that happened as I chose to meet with Him each day. I would read something from the Bible or do a day's homework in whatever Bible study I was attending and hope to hear something that would apply to me. I noticed that something happened more frequently. As I would read certain passages, it was like I couldn't move

beyond those words. Even if I did continue to read, the words of what I was reading would never sink in because all I could think of was the previous passage that had caught my attention.

Sometimes, that captivating passage would make sense, and I could see how it applied to me in my present situation. Other times, a verse would strike a chord, but I couldn't understand why. Here is one such example:

> *"No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier."* (2 Timothy 2:4)

I read this and couldn't read past it. I read it again and again. I fretted over what it might mean to me specifically since God seemed to have me stalled there. I prayed and asked, but revelation never came. A year or more later, I ran into someone who mentioned me coming back to work at my previous job. My first thought was that the spending money would be nice.

Bam! That verse came to mind. My understanding was finally opened. My call is ministry, in whatever form that takes. I knew I was supposed to pursue ministering to women and not that job. I wasn't to get entangled in the affairs of this life. When that passage originally caught my attention, God was giving me an answer to a question I wouldn't ask for another year.

Don't think I was some spiritual giant back when that verse stopped me in my tracks. Hardly! As a matter of fact, that was soon after my fall and return. I wasn't at all experienced in hearing from God through His Word, but that ended up being just one example of how He spoke to me through reading my Bible.

How did that help me to get to know Him better? I saw that He was actually present with me through His Word. He took an obscure verse and pinned it to my heart so that when the temptation came for me to take that job, illumination followed. I absolutely *knew* I wasn't supposed to say yes.

Though more than a decade has passed, when an opportunity comes up for me to consider a job outside of ministry, that verse comes to mind, and I know I'm supposed to keep doing what I'm doing.

Maybe that verse doesn't apply to you in the same way, but that isn't the point. I am hoping to give you an example of a practical application of living the love letter. As you practice this dance, you will have your own verses that grab hold of your attention and won't let go. It'll make sense when it happens but only to you.

When I think of the concept of getting to know Jesus, I think of a mail order bride. Two people meet from afar and send letters back and forth in order to get to know one another until the time comes to meet in person.

At first they are perfect strangers, but the more they read each other's words on paper or talk on the phone, the closer they become. They learn to recognize their intended's handwriting or detect certain inflections in tone. Anticipation and excitement builds until both can hardly wait for the day they begin to share a life together.

Jesus is called the Groom, and us collectively as believers the Bride. There will come a day when we will all meet him face-to-face. I don't want to meet a stranger. I want to know Him, what He sounds like, what it feels like to be with Him. That can begin now, even when it seems impossible as our Groom is with us only in Spirit.

Will you arrive in heaven someday and hardly know the One who laid down His life so that you could be His? If so, then you have to shift your current approach to your walk of faith. You absolutely have to invest in getting to know your Groom through His Word.

If you don't currently spend time reading the Love Letter and you consider doing that intimidating, take a step of faith and begin. He will lead the way and help you get to know Him. The supernatural part is His part. You don't have to figure it out. Your only job is to show up each day. Allow Him access to your heart. Read. Study. Apply what you read to the best of your ability. Divine encounters will begin to happen. The first verse that speaks to an exact situation will blow your mind. Then it'll happen again. Then again. There will come a time when you open your Bible with the sure knowledge that Jesus will show up through His Word.

I can't remember where I read this phrase, but I think it's beautiful: breathless anticipation. There should come a day when you approach your time with Him with breathless anticipation. Isn't that what every longing heart desires, to come together with the one they love in breathless anticipation? This topic requires more depth than can be covered here, so this concept of expectation will overflow into our next section.

For now, let's shift our focus to a contrasting view of the Love Letter – your letter back to Jesus.

Years ago I began journaling. I'm not sure how others use a journal, but in mine I'm basically having a conversation with God. I address Him as "You" since I'm writing directly to Him. It's a focused way I pray. I also use the journal space to make note of things I've read and how He has led me in His Word.

If I tried to express the hundreds of ways He has led me to a perfect verse at the precise time I needed it, I would never be able to do it justice. There are times when I think a particular thought or have a question come to mind, then soon after, through some chain of events, I land at the exact verse that responds to that thought or question. That's no coincidence. I know it the moment I see it. I love to record those encounters.

I remind myself of the forgetful Israelites. I have these Wow! moments over the years and ask myself how I can ever doubt His intimate presence in my life again. Before you know it, I'm faced with a new challenge and find myself wondering if He will come through. Those are the times my journal comes in most handy. Since I often actually write the word *Wow!* beside some of my most notable God-sightings, when I glance back in my journals, those are the entries that catch my eye. Joshua would call those Stones of Remembrance.

This is my sixth book to write and publish. The others, being fiction, were entirely different animals. I didn't have much reason for doubt, other than wondering if they would be well-received. This book, however, keeps me doubting myself daily. I wonder if it will all come together as I envision it. I wonder what I'm thinking for even attempting it. I am on a mountain of inspiration one day and in the valley of doubt the next.

Recently, I have found myself so tossed back and forth that I have learned a new method of maintaining my resolve. I read back over one of my journals, the one that most represents this *You. Are. Loved.* journey. When I'm on the borderlands of doubt, I open my journal to some random page and begin looking for Wow! moments, those times when the Lord was so clearly leading the way toward this journey that doubt can't hinder me. It renews my strength so that I can soar again in belief.

I often wonder if other people are as bipolar in their spiritual moods as me. It's easy to see that King David was if you read the Psalms. Maybe that's why I retreat there often. When you read the chapters he penned, you will ride along with him through his highs and lows. Like David, I see the evidence of God and never, ever stop believing His goodness. Still, I need a glance back at times so that my current day's difficulties won't suck the wind out of my sails.

I can't recommend journaling enough. I recently heard a friend say that she wished people would stop trying to get her to journal. She feels it becomes a checklist, something she feels like she needs to do in order to check the box. The way I journal is nothing like that. If I have something I want to record, which is most days, I do. If not, I never feel bad about not writing.

Recently, I was trying to remember something from several years ago. I began to sift through old journals and scan the entries looking for that one particular thing. I came across one entry that got my attention. The date was there with this one line: "I'm hanging on by a thread here." That was it. I remember the season but not my exact woe. I just know that even when I was at my most discouraged, I wrote out my desperation in the form of my own love letter. I knew Who could pull me up from hanging off the ledge. He did.

Maybe looking at journaling differently will help you too. When God speaks to you through His Word, it can't hurt to respond in kind through your own love letter back to Him. Not only can you narrow in on your thoughts as you write, but you also are recording His goodness for later use.

I spoke on this topic recently, and a woman asked how I write personal things without fear of others reading what I write. Most of what I write anyone can see. For things more private, I'm vague in a you-know-who did you-know-what kind of way. When I read back later, I almost always know what my cryptic entries mean. I can tell by all that surrounds the season I was writing about.

She was wise to ask that question, and you would be wise to consider what someone would uncover if they read your journal. What if they find your love relationship with Jesus growing? That wouldn't be so bad.

Here is one more thought: There's this girl I know, After Nine Lisa. She's so negative and spends the last hours of the day trying to drag me down. I've learned to try and tune her out when she says I'm crazy for pursuing this writing ministry. Some nights, though, her voice is so loud that I believe the things she says.

I can hardly believe I'm on the mountaintop with Jesus at seven a. m., then I listen to After Nine Lisa insult me later that same night. I guess being tired after a long day makes me susceptible. A new way I've found to combat her is to scan my morning journal entry. It serves as a reminder of all the Lord spoke to me that morning. If I have nothing from the morning to read, or if my entry was on the negative side, then I have found that ending my day with a quick entry of thanks for the day can hush After Nine Lisa.

Journaling doesn't have to look like anything in particular. Find what works for you. I just know from experience that having a record of all that God has done, your prayers and praises, and how your closeness with Him has grown, can have power over doubt.

Scripture along with prayer and journaling back to Him has explosive power. His Word to you and yours back to Him are like singing a duet, a beautiful new love song every morning. If you don't feel naturally drawn to read, give it time. Until you do, you will have to walk (and read) in faith that He will whisper His love over you.

LIVE THE LOVE LETTER:
TAKEAWAY

LOOK WITHIN:

How has the world shaped your mind regarding your belief in who Jesus is?

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We act out of what we believe. If we are convinced that intimacy with Jesus isn't something we can attain, then we will never seek Him with our whole heart (Psalm 9:10). What heart attitudes and mindsets do you believe need to be transformed within you?

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Does the fact that Jesus is with you in Spirit rather than physically make intimacy with Him seem unbelievable?

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Do you believe the Bible is God's infallible Word to you, His Love Letter to introduce Himself to you?

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List one or two areas where you are actively inviting God in to do a mighty work.

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Do you have an example where a Bible passage spoke directly to you?

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If you don't, plan to encounter your own Word from Him when you choose to begin to read the Bible consistently. He is faithful. He does speak.

KEY POINTS:

- The world has misshaped our minds and hearts.
- Lies are combatted by the truth of God's Word.
- Our minds are renewed through Scripture reading.

PRACTICE THE DANCE:

How can you apply the Key Points of this section to your day-to-day life?

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LEARN THE LYRICS:

- Write Matthew 11:28 below.

This is a key scripture that would benefit you to remember each day. Write it out on an index card as your reminder that He will carry your heaviest burden and give you rest.

- John 1:1 calls Jesus the Word.

What correlation does that have with us spending time reading the Love Letter?

NEXT STEPS:

- Commit to a quiet time reading each day. Don't stress over reading long passages. If you only read a few verses and then ponder what you've read, you will find a renewal of your mind begin to take place. Be patient as you learn to navigate your Bible.
- Commit to applying what you read. If you feel the sting of conviction in an area, don't allow pride to prevent your obedience.
- Try a journal entry or two. Use the space for a conversation directed to the Lord. Find your own groove. You may be a morning person or night person. You may be long winded, or a few short words might make your point. Allow yourself the freedom to make your journal look any way you want. Your entries should reflect you.
- Keep track of significant verses. Record insights and questions. Write out entire verses in your journal so that when you go back and read, you have the context of the verse already there for you.
- Write outside the lines of your journal. Make notes in your margins next to jaw-dropping revelations. When something touches my heart, I will draw a little heart next to an entry or a smiley face. I have even made a copy of a devotional entry and taped it onto a journal page.

STRIKES A CHORD:

What have you learned through this topic that requires further reflection?

OUT OF TUNE:

Are there areas of your life that are out of balance with God's Word? These may be actions, attitudes, or hidden places in your heart you are withholding from His touch. If so, will you commit to pray and allow His truth to dispel any lies you are holding onto?

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SING YOUR OWN SONG:

Praying God's Word back to Him is a powerful song. Find verses that mean something to you and turn them into prayers.

Example:
I ask, Lord, that You make your Word come alive and have power in my life. I ask that you divide soul and spirit and look within the depths of me (Hebrews 4:12). I want to be transformed by the renewing of my mind (Romans 12:2).