



YOUR
newborn
promise
PROJECT

A CHRISTIAN PRE-PARENTING PRIMER FOR HUSBAND & WIFE



CALLIE GRANT, AUDRA HANEY, AND CHARISSA KOLAR

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Graham
Blanchard

Austin, Texas

Your Newborn Promise Project
A Christian Pre-Parenting Primer for Husband & Wife

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Dedication

Rob, Jack, and Zachary Kolar
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*Because of you we are growing into the
wives and mothers God planned for us to be.
We are grateful for your love and support and
all the joy you bring in our walk with Jesus together.*

—CK, AH, CG



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Your Purpose and Potential



It is significant that God's first recorded interactions with husband and wife took place in a garden (Genesis 2-3). Unlike the dense, sprawling wilderness he created, the garden reflected his deliberate, skilled cultivation of nature for beauty and enjoyment's sake, for resting in the cool of the evening together with him.

Gardens require interactivity, cooperation on the part of God, who provides the seeds and nourishes them, and his gardeners, who tend and cultivate them. God's creation serves as a vivid classroom for his ways.

Adam and Eve were given open range within the lovely dwelling place, but one thing God commanded they must not do: consume fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or else they would die. Satan came to plant doubt about their good-willed Father.

But they did not need much more enticement. They took the fruit and ate it, terrible seeds, flesh, and all, bringing the wages of disobedience on themselves, on creation, and on every generation after them.

Even before God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, they expelled him from their hearts. This rejection of God's good will was a rejection of his love and intimacy with him. The human story for thousands of years has been the long slog of regaining that Paradise lost.

Pouring yourself into a study like *Your Newborn Promise Project* and reaping the benefits of drawing closer to God, you will realize the great tragedy of the Fall. As described in Hosea and elsewhere in the Old Testament, God likens his people's break with him to adultery—the devastation not only of a physical bond, but above all a spiritual one.

When the time was just right, God sent his Son to rescue and reconcile humanity on the very personal, individual level (Romans 5). Jesus never mentioned the Fall in his ministry but addressed the conditions it created and announced the remedy: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Those who believed in Jesus would start on a new path, born of the Spirit. This gift, God's grace, is the good news of Jesus, his Gospel:

'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!'

Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit' (John 3:4-6).

The life, death, and rebirth cycle of a garden beautifully illustrates the spiritual potential a new phase in life holds for you and your family. The arrival of a child can be a watershed event for husband and wife. God brings your newborn into the world already primed to know and to grow in him. As you become parents, you also enter a new phase in your marriage and personal development.

Beautifully—supernaturally—God offers this confluence of tran-

sitions to bring you all closer to him. The Newborn Promise Project is designed to spiritually assess and plan for this exciting new season,

Your newborn
promise project is
to spiritually assess
and plan for this
watershed season.

to permit God to heal and transform you in the most beneficial way, and to be firmly established in a life-saving faith (1 Peter 5:10).

God's Word and the experiences of believers throughout the ages will be our guides, as we exercise our fundamental spiritual abilities to *love, remember, seek, question, and persevere*. We will explore how the Bible urges these actions, again and again, for our everlasting benefit.

Following three marriage and parenting applications of these abilities, you'll use them in related exercises to Learn, Absorb, Praise, and Connect (Psalm 86:11-13). God uses these pathways for spiritual formation and development in children and parents alike:

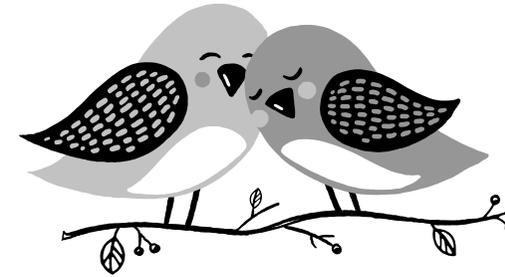
Learn – Growing in knowledge of God and your purpose with him.

Absorb – Assimilating facts of God into your heart and meeting with him there.

Praise – Remembering God in everything you do with gratitude and reverence.

Connect – Strengthening ties within your family and community to grow love.

Spiritual life with God is remarkably logical and cohesive, just like the rest of his creation. And so we introduce each chapter with a Newborn Fact of Life for you to prepare for the intertwining of your faith with your child's to form a bond not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12, John 17:21). Our prayer is that you embrace God's personal plan for you in the challenging and miraculous days ahead.



Love

Because we are created in God's image, love creates a spiritual bond, not a physical one. Marriages and families are primarily spiritual unions of love. The Bible depicts love best. Let's look closely at what God says about love.

Newborn Fact of Life



Your child is made in God's image for love.
You will help grow it.

God pours eternity into developing hearts. He plants seeds of longing and love for him as life takes shape in the hidden place. Before we even see the light of day, God knows us through and through. Spiritual life begins in earnest with life itself (Ecclesiastes 3:11, Psalm 139).

As God plants in the heart, he also scatters his boundless miracles throughout creation and time to draw us near (Romans 1:20). Once born and growing, children can believe in God as easily as they breathe. They come in his image to a world made especially for them.

He casts the starry night with fireflies dancing to the hum of cicadas. Only God could do that! He made the consoling puppy licks that bring a smile and soothe a scraped knee. He abides in the unconditional arms that cuddle on Grandma's porch swing. Jesus loves me, *this I know*.

Sharing such miracles of life with a child is one of parenting's greatest pleasures. All of the adult ho-hum familiarity with this world falls away when the first elusive bubble escapes a giggling grasp—an

unguarded, precious moment gathered up into eternity like so many more to come.

Magical moments like these in early childhood help us experience God's love in subtle and grand gestures all around. And with hearts already primed to know him, loving God in return can be as natural as the awe inspired by a rainbow. We were made to love him.

Thérèse of Lisieux related her experience caring for two young girls, the oldest being six. "It was a real delight to see how they believed all I told them," she recalls in *The Story of a Soul*. "Those innocent souls were like soft wax on which any imprint could be stamped—of evil, alas, as well as good," she writes. "Many, many souls would become most holy if they had been properly guided from the very start."¹

What is proper guidance for young souls in the reality we live in today? How do parents help children grow in their natural affinity for God, and how do parents keep from being the cause of any alienation from him?

The truth is, only God can draw a child to him (John 6:44, Ephesians 1). He does so, generally, through his miraculous creation, and personally, through special revelation and his Word. As such, parents need only to join in what God has already started.

But he charges us to join in intentionally, prayerfully, and with all the wits and wisdom that only God can give.

The job of fostering a child's love for God and others takes more forethought, insight, and practice, than any other aspect of parenting. We have to trust that when we fail, and we will, that God will help us make amends. Our hearts will be quickened and wrenched along the way. Mistakes will be made. They are part of our learning and growing. God will make us into gardeners and shape our souls while we tend so thoughtfully to our child's.

"Many, many souls
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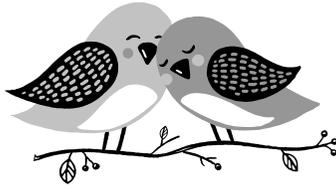
—Thérèse of Lisieux

"I know God needs no help to carry out his work of sanctification," Thérèse of Lisieux concludes. "He lets a skilled gardener rear rare and delicate plants. He has given him the necessary knowledge, but he fertilizes them himself. That is exactly how he wishes to be helped in cultivating souls."²

In nurturing your child's rare and delicate soul, consider the task not one of making a good person, but one of encouraging a soul who loves God. Outward acts of obedience and service will naturally flow from that kind of love, one guided by the faith of a child.



What Loving Can Do in Marriage & Family



*“Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.”*

—SONG OF SONGS 8:6-7

Romantic relationships are so widely depicted in art, literature, music, and movies, that it’s hard to imagine not being influenced by them. They show us the many ways people fall in love, express love, make love, argue about or embrace love, and then manage to have a happy ending.

“I am always in hope of making a discovery there,” painter Vincent Van Gogh wrote in a letter, “to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibration of kindred tones.”³ As beautiful as

his art and words are, Van Gogh never achieved his goal.

In fact, love eludes any artist’s attempt to give it full justice, to convey the mysterious bond that it forges and that drives humankind in all worthy pursuits. That is because love creates a spiritual bond, not a physical one. Marriage is fundamentally a spiritual union, dominated largely by the unseen world. And so the spiritual health of the marriage determines the love of the growing family.

The greatest masterwork to ever depict this kind of love, along with the beauty and the mess that humanity makes of it, is the Holy Bible. It’s fair to say that the most widely quoted words about love are found in it. The description of love that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 13 brings to mind admirable qualities of a person you would like to meet or marry. This love “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” We all want to know this love.

The passage resonates so much with Christians and non-Christians alike that portions of it are often recited at weddings and worked into vows—because we really want the words to be true of the person we marry. Then, like so many other good intentions declared at new beginnings, the pledge of ardor tends to fade into pretty words without much force in the trenches of daily family life. Wouldn’t we like that to be different?

The possibility is there. Because Paul’s words describe God’s perfect love, which he freely offers to us. With God, Jesus said, all things are possible (Mark 10:27). Such love can be lived out, in the fullness of its promise, with God’s trustworthy help. But we must start with *God* as our love’s aim.

It’s important from the beginning to step back, gaze up, and mentally embrace God’s love as our starting point in marriage and family. Each of us, as individuals, need to be reminded of who we are because of God’s love. With this intake of grace, we can more truly reflect in our home *who* we are and *how* we are. We operate from an abundance rather than a dry well. Then, growing spiritually as individuals and as a married couple in the reality of God’s love, we will naturally embrace spiritual parenting for our child.

To give our family this solid foundation, we must look closely at what God says about love. The most important command the Lord

gave his chosen people was to love him. Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37-38). Then he taught what that means: how to love him, all the benefits of doing it, and the consequences of not doing it. Jesus affirmed this greatest commandment, and then he demonstrated the lengths to which God’s own love will go.

Never before—and never since—in all of literature or lore has a god commanded such love from his creatures, much less created them for that very experience. And never has a god of any other religion demonstrated what love looks like, nor promised immediate and eternal rewards for this voluntary act.

This great God of love did not create humankind because he was lonely but because he loves (Genesis 1:26, Jeremiah 31:3, John 1:1-4, Acts 17:24-28, among many others). In his very Being—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—God’s unlimited love pours forth, and his desire is for his creation to respond and exude it, to enjoy this love that is better than life itself (Psalm 63:3).

In God’s creation, all roads in life must be charted by and lead to love. God’s gift of love is the answer for every evil and ill. Are you having trouble in your marriage? The answer is love. Do your in-laws drive you crazy? The answer is love. Are you overwhelmed at times by your circumstances? The answer is bittersweet love.

God’s love is the power that endures and prevails. It sustains creation, bringing up the sun each day on a miraculous planet filled with an infinite variety of life. It reaches down to an inner place we didn’t know we had and exerts its own strength in our being (Ephesians 3:16-18). With overwhelming evidence, Love, in reality, never fails.

Even as love is a blazing fire wielding a mighty flame, it is an endless spring that revives the soul and douses life’s deadly foes. Here are just a few everyday ways love can exert its power within you:

Love douses pride. Of all the propensities humans have, pride is the least attractive and the most spiritually dangerous. We all have a fair measure of pride, even as we dislike being around people who display it. “The proud hate pride—in others,” Benjamin Franklin observed.⁴ Today’s hierarchical workplace is ripe for posturing for posi-

tion and hoarding authority. But in our most intimate relationships we must especially resist pride.

Pride fuels revenge. It takes credit where credit isn’t due. Pride leads to power struggles and war—in the home and among nations. Pride ignores the God who made an unfathomable universe and humbled himself as a servant to it. Pride demands to be served.

Love, on the other hand, “does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). When we feel a swell of pride, whether it nurses a bruised ego or a sense of superiority, our antidote for the poison is love. Let even a slight recognition of your own pride be a nudge for you to pivot toward love instead. You will notice an immediate difference.

Love douses selfishness. In work, play, and relationships, there is a fine line between selfishness and self-preservation. Let’s face it: We live in a “me first” world. If you don’t look out for yourself, who will, right?

But as we grow in love, *selflessness* grows with it. Love helps us develop a new economy. The inner dialog might go like this: “Oh, you want to sleep in tomorrow? I really want to sleep in. But I want you to feel rested. Okay, you can sleep in, and I’ll wake up with the baby.” Over time, the jockeying to take care of our own needs becomes unnecessary because the members of a family are looking out for each other first.

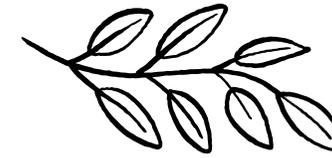
Love douses indifference. We are bombarded with things to wring our hands over. If we were emotionally involved in all the issues we read or hear about, we would probably lose our minds. Immediate family life has enough problems of its own. Often a first line of defense against conflict around us is to wall off our heart.

But by responding to the world’s and our family’s problems with love rather than a seeming indifference, we fuel our life-giving reservoirs of hope and faith. God’s love reinforces our heart, and gives us firm confidence to protect, hope, trust, and persevere. We can refuel with God’s love every time we pray. Praying for others allies us with God in his even greater love and purpose for them. Praying is caring—loving—in action and it begets more love.

Applying It in Marriage and Family Life

You already have committed to love and the lasting ties of marriage. Now we will exercise three biblical perspectives on loving that will be highly beneficial for your role as a spouse and new parent. In the following sections, you will:

- **Examine the human anatomy.** Get a clear window on the human make-up, the unseen parts that make you *you* and that serve as the seat of love.
- **Set your heart on devotion.** Expect your love to grow into a soul-pleasing intimacy within your family and with God.
- **Know love's greatest strength.** In this world we certainly all have trouble. Embrace the path of Jesus to overcome and transcend it.



1. Examine the Human Anatomy

“One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’

‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’

—MARK 12:28-31



Loving God wholly with all my heart, mind, strength, and soul—my whole being—is the basis of my faith and is foundational for loving my spouse and raising our new child.

Some of the first words children learn are *eyes, ears, mouth, and nose*. They learn more details about human anatomy as early as elementary school, studying the parts of the body and what they do. And now, moms and dads can see their baby grow inside over the course of a pregnancy. It's an amazing, humbling sight!

Yet for all the scientific advances, formal education, and prenatal

planning, the fundamental fact of human make-up goes largely ignored: We are primarily spiritual beings, ruled by our unseen, non-physical lives. What's more, we live in a predominantly spiritual world ruled by unseen forces (Ephesians 6:12). Something else is at work, as any child knows by instinct.

Everyone, from their first heartbeat, has a spirit that develops for better or worse over time. Jesus always drew his audience, so habitually focused on the externals, back to this spiritual fact of life. He said, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24).

In Jewish and Christian tradition, the terms spirit, heart, and soul are used to describe this unseen life with God. You might need to reclaim the meanings of these terms because they have been diluted and distorted over time. True meanings matter, however, because philosophies, parenting styles, and daily choices grow out of them.

In *Renovation of the Heart*, respected Christian author and philosophy professor Dallas Willard makes helpful distinctions:

Will is the *power* given by God to decide, act, and create.

Heart is the will's *location* as core to a person's being.

Spirit is the will's *essence* as nonphysical, unseen.

The will interplays with and is affected by all the other aspects of a human being—the *mind* (thoughts and feelings), *body*, and *social ties*—which collectively compose our entire being, the soul.⁵ The beliefs and decisions of the will direct a person's life. It's what makes you *you*. But it is not the strongest component of your being, yet. You only begin to realize its potential and power when God is one with you there. And that requires your permission.

Christians of all backgrounds—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—hold that the first step of faith is when a person decides to believe in God. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the

mouth one confesses and is saved" (Romans 10:9-10, ESV). Through baptism, a person publicly dies to the old self and rises with the new self through the body of Christ. This is how one is born of water and the Spirit. It signifies a rebirth of promise now dedicated to a forgiven life that grows more like him.

The heart then becomes a home for the Holy Spirit, the Helper, who inspires the believer to declare, "not my will but yours, Lord" (Luke 22:42, John 14:15-23). This life with God can start in the very earliest years, as infants and toddlers grow up in an atmosphere of faith among their families, experiencing contentment as physical needs are met, developing a bond of trust with parents, and receiving acceptance from their loving eyes and words. Far from being a component to break, a child's will is the power God gave to become the unique individual he planned long ago, with God at the guiding center of it.

People who choose to exclude God from their hearts will plan and make decisions based on external circumstances, and so their hearts will be at the mercy of them. Their contentment then hinges on externals—earning a promotion at work, getting their body into shape, or going on exciting vacations. Then, they think, they will feel good about themselves and offer a happy life for their children.

But reliance on external factors can only take a soul so far. Promotions sometimes don't happen. Our bodies are never exactly what we want them to be. Vacations disappoint. The heated passions of romance fade under the day in, day out realities of life inside a marriage. The chores of being a new parent become physically and emotionally overwhelming. The underlying problems always surface. Tension builds as husband and wife negotiate for their share of time and money to meet their own needs. They can evolve into adversaries.

Most couples will unwittingly find themselves at this very place more than once. We all get distracted and challenged in life—materially, physically, and spiritually. Our reflex is to react with actions and words aimed at self-preservation. Priorities get out of whack.

Only belief in God and dwelling with him at our core, as originally intended, returns our being to its beneficially functioning order from

the inside, out. When a will is one with God in the heart, all other aspects of a life—mind, body, and social interactions—transform over time, as the whole soul becomes more like him. Relationships transform, too.

The lifeblood of this God-centered, unseen life is not belief, however. It is love.

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). No amount of spiritual depth or breadth can overcome a lack of love.

It was in the midst of a harassed and helpless generation, completely at the mercy of external circumstances, that Jesus showed the way of selfless love, or *agape*, commanded by God (Matthew 9:35-36). For more than twenty centuries his worldwide revolution, this “Christ in me,” has moved hearts to aspire and persevere to fulfill it. Is it any wonder we symbolize love with a heart?

As children dwell in families that understand their true human anatomy and their design for Jesus at the core, they stand a better chance of assimilating feelings of self-worth and love. They will still experience difficulties and detours in matters of love. But they will have a steady source—Christ’s seal of love over their hearts, and the hearts of their mothers and fathers. In time, you become the most intimate and reliable of neighbors, right in your very own home.

Build & Grow

Learn

- Look up Mark 12:28-31 and write out the passage. Underline each separate command about love. Reflect on each command, why do you think God has chosen these specific areas for us as “the most important?”

Absorb

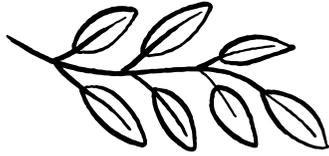
- Reflect on your story about inviting Jesus into your heart. Are there any external matters that have less influence on you now?

Praise

- Identify a recent occasion when your spouse was loving in one of the ways commanded in Mark 12:28-31. Share with your spouse what you recall and give God your appreciation for the faithfulness.

Connect

- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 gives us love’s impressive resume. Commit with your spouse to memorizing these verses. Make it easier and more fun by quizzing one another, writing them on note cards, using a Bible memorization app, or just adding a couple of lines a week. Hiding these truths in your hearts as a couple is sure to enrich your marriage.



2. Set Your Heart on Devotion

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

— JOHN 15:9-12



Love for God and family starts with willful commitment, and it grows through good times and bad, under God’s loving care.



The pattern of the world is to find someone attractive to you, fall in love, have a passionate romance, host a wonderful wedding, and then enjoy those first few days because after that the honeymoon is over. Couples who have been married for a while likely will agree that the first year can be one of the hardest.

Part of the challenge for newly married couples today is the lack of preparation for such a major life change. We are largely left to our own devices in finding a spouse and deciding on marriage. We use visible and visceral cues, like a dating service profile, a friend’s advice, or physical chemistry, in deciding whether to pursue commitment.

When the spark is there, we conclude it must be love.

“Today, people living in the Western world are supposed to marry for love. Considerable emphasis is placed on romance and human emotion,” writes Hebrew and Bible expert Marvin R. Wilson. “The challenge each new couple always faces is how to mold this premarital feeling of romance into mature love.”

For men and women of Bible times, Wilson continues, “Love was more a commitment than a feeling. It was seen foremost as a pledge rather than an emotional high. It was a person’s good word to stick with someone, to make the relationship work,” and then love deepened over time in marriage, with the backing and support of an extended family and the entire community.⁶

The pledge to stick with it, absent the emotional or physical high, was possible because marriages were pre-arranged and reinforced by the community. That’s not something we want to go back to today. But within that structure, the expectation was that love would grow over the course of a life experienced together. The fabric of ancient Jewish society depended on it. Couples who feared and loved God made it so, as Marvin notes, following the example of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24:67).⁷

The relationship with God takes a similar path of commitment first. A new believer commits to submitting to God’s will and to following God’s commandments. Such a commitment is not usually accompanied by an emotional high, but a sober recognition of our sinful, helpless state, and the promise from God that he will transform us as we walk with him. Then, with thousands of tiny steps in time and experiences with God, our love for him grows. It’s our expectation. Our intimacy with God depends on it.

We can expect love to grow because creation is set up this way by God. Humans are dynamic spiritual beings who hunger for growth or they sink into complacency, despondency, or depression. That’s why some born again Christians who had an emotionally charged conversion end up like the seed in shallow soil described by Jesus (Mark 4). They experienced the initial joy, but didn’t understand the importance of devotion and growth in their relationship with God, and didn’t cultivate the deeper roots that would help them endure hardship. The

same is true in marriage and family.

We also can expect love to grow when we realize the meager share of it that we offer to begin with. Not because we are misers but because we haven't lived through enough yet. Far from chipping away at love's strength in a new marriage, difficulties in the first years are opportunities to exercise and expand love. We can expect love in marriages and families to grow because God, the source of love, has an unlimited amount to give to us if we will just receive it.

You witness the consequences when husband and wife are not devoted to one another in good times and bad, in sickness and health. To them, marriage was love's climax, not its starting point. They didn't foster roots. Each spouse must be able to endure challenging seasons in a marriage and devote time for the love of a family to grow. How sad to see that potential wither, go to waste, and then to see the impact of that failure multiplied in children's lives and subsequent generations.

Growing love is never an accident (Ephesians 4:16). It is the result of a heart's bent, and a willful decision to choose love and oneness over hate and division. If people "fall out of love" it is because they choose to out of pride, selfishness, or indifference. It can be a painfully easy choice or drift. The enemy, Satan and his legions, will give plenty of support for that bent.

On the other hand, if you devote yourself to choosing love and fostering its growth, then God and all the forces of Heaven are aligned to help you. Miraculously, simply praying for your love to grow, opens up the potential to make it so (Philippians 1:9, 1Thessalonians 3:12).

But even the most loving marriages and parent-child relationships can experience rough times that the greatest devotion cannot fix. Don't go through such times alone. God designed humans to be interdependent. He equips Christian counselors who can help you recognize unhealthy issues or unloving patterns to which you might be totally blind. The process will cost time and emotion, but the healing God gives will change the direction of your life. After all, if God can love someone like us, so unmindful of him and undeserving, then truly anything is possible.

In the 1800s, Scottish reverend John Watson observed:

Love is the first and the last and the strongest bond in experience. It conquers distance, outlives all changes, bears the strain of the most diverse opinions. What a proof of Jesus' divine insight that he did not make his Church a school—whether the Temple or the porch—but a family; did not demand in his farewell that his disciples should think alike but that they should feel alike.⁸

A parent's heart filled with God's love will muster its power in the most difficult times, and a child will notice. All the while, God will grow the family's love, devotion, and gratitude for him, too.

Build & Grow

Learn

- Review Romans 12:9-12, choose one verse and describe how you can practically apply this to benefit your marriage and family.

Absorb

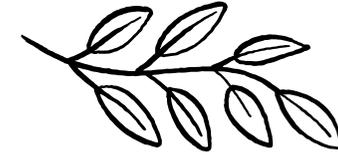
- If you remain devoted to your spouse and child, the passing years allow time for deep roots to develop. Describe another area of your life where you invested significant time or energy and experienced a tangible result.

Praise

- Reflect on a recent situation in your marriage when God blessed you with hope, patience, or an answered prayer. Write out a note of gratitude to God. (Keeping an ongoing journal of prayers and praises to God is a valuable tool for drawing closer to him, developing your prayer life, and growing your faith.)

Connect

- Don't leave your vows behind at the altar. Write them out together as a couple and place them someplace visible in your home. They can serve as a daily reminder as you strive to fill your marriage and home with love. As your children grow, they will see you live out your vows and someday choose them as their own.



3. Know Love's Greatest Strength

*“Greater love has no one than this:
to lay down one's life for one's friends.”*

—JOHN 15:13



When you devote yourself to loving God, he uses your acts of service and sacrifice to unlock your self-absorption and transform you. Service and sacrifice are profoundly spiritual acts using emotional and physical energy to magnify love and bond us in marriage and family.

When we were single and childless, we were constantly told by friends who had kids: “You have no idea how much everything changes!” Although we got tired of hearing that, and sometimes resented it, the truth was we really had no idea. And we couldn't have.

Getting married and having children is like stepping across two major thresholds that expose you to a whole new spiritual landscape of unimaginable depths and contours. You love more deeply and feel joy more deeply than you ever had before. You also hurt more deeply. For the first time in a long time, you realize how helpless you really are. You learn the limits of your control.

You also realize the tight hold that your own desires have on you, and that maybe, as C.S. Lewis suggested, our biggest struggle isn't to love God, but to love others as well as we love ourselves.⁹ Do we extend

the forgiveness and mercy and grace to others that we desire for ourselves? God offers a way for us.

Just as his physical laws manage outcomes in the physical world, so it is with life in the spiritual world. A profoundly mysterious truth of God's order is that service and sacrifice not only magnify love, but they also multiply it. People love the things they pour their emotional and physical energy into—whether a plant, a pet, a house, or a job. That's why even a person far from God can love others well. Service and sacrifice for another's good, such as the comfort of a child, reward one and all. This law is at work even while doing the lowliest tasks for others, such as changing a diaper, cooking a meal, or washing someone's tired feet. Jesus says we are blessed when we follow his example (John 13:1-17).

Serving others is very often rejuvenating. Hearts naturally swell. Ask men and women who serve and sacrifice in the military what motivates them, and they will often say "love of country." The longer they serve their country, the more they usually love it and their hard fought freedom. Few things are more poignant than seeing an aged veteran weep at a memorial.

In a speech at West Point in 1962, General Douglas MacArthur observed:

The soldier, above all other men, is required to practice the greatest act of religious training—sacrifice. In battle and in the face of danger and death, he discloses those divine attributes, which his Maker gave when he created man in his own image. No physical courage and no brute instinct can take the place of the Divine help which alone can sustain him.¹⁰

The same is true with fathers and mothers. God uses service and sacrifice in the pathways of marriage and parenthood to unlock our prison of self-absorption. Such daily acts can be as small as putting down what we're doing and giving our child or spouse our full attention. And they can be as large as keeping hopeful vigil by a sickbed. Such acts of steady devotion serve God's plan of transformation in you. The result is a growing oneness with God and family members, just as Jesus prayed: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us" (John 17:20-21).

This unity of God is in fact the communion of Love.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus is answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?" But as always, his luminous story hits a multitude of cylinders with an unexpected twist. We are all thinking the neighbor is the man in the ditch, and we are there to help him. But rather than answering who a neighbor is, Jesus describes what a neighbor does. He asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

Ultimately the neighbor, the Samaritan, is Jesus. We know the lengths to which his love will go. We also see a basic spiritual truth at work that the personal cost of service and sacrifice is a supreme form of love, the best possible neighbor. And God himself demonstrates it for us in the highest. This is how, in a marriage and family, you can love more deeply and feel joy more deeply than you ever have before: You have plenty of immediate opportunities for service and sacrifice.

"You could never have felt the joy, nor had the faintest idea of what your love was, if that sacrifice had been denied you," Fulton J. Sheen writes. "But if your love were absent, then the sacrifice would have been a pain, vexation, and annoyance.

The truth gradually emerges that our highest happiness consists in the feeling that another's good is purchased by our sacrifice; that the reason why pain is bitter is because we have no one to love and for whom we might suffer. Love is the only force in the world which can make pain bearable, and it makes it more than bearable by transforming it into the joy of sacrifice.¹¹

When you devote yourself to loving God, your faithful friends service and sacrifice will do their work in your soul and your family. You can experience in marriage and parenting a love like God's that never fails.

Build & Grow

Learn

- Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must

deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25). Where do you see the message of sacrifice and service within this Scripture?

Absorb

- During the first years of marriage and building a new family, your spiritual life can take a hit before you realize it. Service and sacrifice can be a strain, so you must continually be refreshed. Just as you care for your body, establish a healthy spiritual diet to nourish your inner life. Your plan could include early morning walks alone, reading inspirational books, or listening to beautiful music.

Your plan might also call for avoiding specific activities that cloud your soul, like certain kinds of entertainment, reading material, or topics of conversation. With thoughtful care for your family’s spiritual nourishment looking ahead, you will notice a difference in your overall wellbeing and relationships.

Praise

- In what ways, big and small, do you see your spouse lovingly sacrifice for and serve you? Write it out and then share with your spouse how these acts make you feel about him or her.

Connect

- Having or adopting a child will consume a new mom and dad. It is during this time that you give others a great opportunity to show their love and serve you. Don’t feel guilty! Gladly accept their help. Your stores of gratitude will fuel your service for future new parents when you are in a calmer season.

Plan Ahead

List three meaningful points from LOVE:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Write a LOVE gift for your child:

Write a letter to your future or young child expressing your hopes for the kind of parent you will be, making a commitment to nourish your child with unconditional love, and asking for forgiveness for mistakes you will make along the way. Going back and reading it at various stages in your child’s life will remind you about your hopes and keep you on course. When the time is right, you can pass on this family heirloom to your child.

LOVE early childhood board book connections:
Jesus Shows Me and Your Core

YOUR
newborn
promise
PROJECT

“If people take this to heart they will have saved thousands of dollars they would have spent in counseling for themselves and for their kids. I’m not joking. This is really powerful. It is like going on a soul journey with Jesus.”

—Matt Warner, Campus Pastor,
Cornerstone Fellowship, Danville, CA



While working together to create Christian books for very young children, Callie Grant, Audra Haney, and Charissa Kolar discovered the great need for new parents, too. *Your Newborn Promise Project* is the culmination of their work involving a team of parents, educators, and pastors to support couples during this huge life transition. The Primer fills a crucial gap between Christian pre-marital counseling and the early days of parenting, to make the most of family faith-building in this divinely appointed season-of-life change. It complements *Your Newborn Promise Project Group Study* and *Your Newborn Promise True Story Videos*.

Religion/Christian Life/Family


Graham
Blanchard
Building Up Families In Christian Faith

