

BECAUSE HE LOVED US... 1ST

by Karen Holford

Perhaps God's most important reason for giving us the gift of marriage was to give us a tangible way to experience His incredible love for us. All the love in the universe starts in God's heart. God is love, and all our love comes from Him. When we truly experience His love for us, we can truly learn what it means to love each other.

My husband and I work with couples, and we have noticed that the amount of love they experience in their human relationship is closely related to the amount of love each person experiences from God. So we have explored ways to help people experience more of God's love so that their marriages and families can be transformed.

Here are some ideas to help you experience more of God's love for yourself, which will allow you to share His love with your spouse.

EXPERIENCING GOD'S LOVE FOR YOURSELF

You are the most important channel of God's love into the life of your spouse or your child. What an awesome and wonderful responsibility! God wants to use *you* to show your family how much He loves each one of them! But first, He wants to show you how much He loves you. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19, NIV).

My love-line: Draw a timeline of your life. Along the line, describe the different times in your life when you especially experienced God's love. Perhaps someone cared for you in a generous and unexpected way. Maybe God answered your prayers in a way that touched your heart. Maybe

you read a scripture passage that helped you understand how much God loved you. Include as many examples as possible to build up a lifelong story of God's love for you.

Psalm study: Read Psalm 103 or 145 and list all the aspects of God's love that have been woven into these verses. Then match each aspect to an experience in your own life. For example, Psalm 103:8 speaks of God's patience, so think of a specific time when God was patient with you.

Absorbing God's love: Sit in a comfortable chair and wrap yourself in something that feels warm and comforting. Sit quietly and breathe slowly. As you inhale deeply, remind yourself how much God loves you. Then exhale slowly. If a thought pops into your head that challenges the idea that God loves you completely and deeply, say, "I know the truth, and the truth is that God loves me." Let the experience of God's love soak into your heart like sunshine on a summer's day. Imagine yourself all curled up in God's lap, your head on His chest, listening to His heart beating with love for you. Imagine Him gently stroking your hair until you feel soothed and at peace.

Love-journaling: Create a "God's Love Journal" and write down each time you notice any evidence of God's love for you. Write down at least three things each day. Reread this journal whenever you need a reminder of God's love.

Secret love plans: Do at least one thing—however small—each day to show God's love to someone else. As you think, pray, and carry out your special plan, your heart will come closer to God's loving



heart for the people around you, and you'll become more aware of His loving heart for you.

Love letter from God: Read “The Father’s Love Letter” (www.fathersloveletter.com), a beautiful letter from God to you, paraphrased from many different Bible verses and available in many languages. Read it as often as you can, focusing on one of the phrases that speaks to you of God’s love. Rewrite the letter, personalizing it with your spouse’s name, and give the letter to him or her to keep in the Bible.

WHENEVER YOUR HEART FEELS LOW ON LOVE, COME AND DRINK DEEPLY.

Love-hunt: Go through your home and gather a bowl of things that remind you of God’s love. I’ve collected dozens of hearts that remind me of different aspects of God’s love. I look at the hearts and choose the one that best expresses the kind of love I need from God at that moment. Sometimes I place that heart on my desk or in my purse to remind me of God’s love for me.

Discover what helps you to experience God’s love in the best way possible. Whenever your heart feels low on love, come and drink deeply, again and again, until your heart overflows with His love. When we’re topped up with God’s love, we’ll have plenty of love to share with others. When our hearts feel empty of love, we will often feel full of other

emotions—fear, hurt, anger, resentment, guilt, pain—which can easily spill out onto the people closest to us, preventing them from experiencing the fullness of God’s love in their own lives.

HELPING EACH OTHER EXPERIENCE MORE OF GOD’S LOVE

Explore 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Break down each phrase and reword it as a positive attribute (for example, “love keeps no record of wrongs” could be rewritten as “love is forgiving”). Then draw a line for each love quality, marking it on a scale of 1-10 (1 being very low in that quality and 10 being very high).

1	5	10

For example, rate your patience with your spouse on a scale of 1-10. Then think of what you can do to raise your patience score to the next number on the scale. Prayerfully ask God to help you be more patient with your spouse. Examine your own heart to uncover the attitudes, values, and misbeliefs you have that prevent you from being as patient as you want to be with your spouse. You could even say to your spouse, “I recognize that I’m not as patient as I’d like to be. I want to be more patient with you. Help me to understand the effect my impatience is having on you. Please forgive me for my impatience. Please pray for me that my patience will grow. And please help me to find ways to show my love for you through my growing patience.”

Love list. Make a list of 20 instances when your spouse helped you to feel especially loved. If this is difficult, ask God to bring these times back into your memory. When you have 20, look at them and see if there are any common threads. Was it a kind word, a helpful action, a thoughtful gift, a warm touch, or a special time together? Or was it when your spouse made you laugh, showed you respect, inspired you, comforted you, or encouraged you? Review your lists together so that you can each learn the best ways to show love to your spouse. Or make a list of three things that would help each of you to feel especially loved right now. Word these things as polite requests rather than complaints or nags, and give your spouse the freedom to choose how to fulfill your request. "I'd really feel loved if I came home one day and didn't have to make dinner." Or, "I'd feel especially loved if we could work together on tidying our garage."

Love letters. You might already be familiar with the ACTS model for prayer (A = Adoration, C = Confession, T = Thanksgiving, S = Supplication). This format can also be used to shape an encouraging love letter to your spouse:

A – Appreciate specific things your husband or wife has done or is doing. Praise your spouse for the way he or she has used wisdom, love, and spiritual gifts to bless you and other people. Tell your spouse how much you admire the way he or

she is parenting your children. It is important for us to be built up and encouraged by those who love us. Jesus praised Nathaniel for his faith and Mary for her act of pouring perfume on His feet.

C – Confess one or two specific things you have done that may have hurt your spouse or prevented him or her from experiencing the fullness of love from God and from you. Include at least one promise that you'll try to do something different that will help your spouse feel more of your love.

T – Thank your spouse for at least three specific times when he or she helped you to feel especially loved. When you know what helps each of you to feel especially loved, you may be encouraged to do it more often.

S – End with a short prayer of supplication, mentioning positive and specific prayer requests for your spouse. Ask God to bless your marriage and family, to enrich your spouse's personal relationship with God, and to bless his or her unique ministry and mission. Conclude by telling your spouse about something you love about him or her, and share a dream you have for your relationship.

Talk about God's love. Use some of the discussion starters below to help you talk more with your spouse about God's love:

- What does God's love look like to you?
- Which verses in the Bible best express God's love for you?
 - Describe three different times when you felt especially loved by God.
 - What do I do that helps you feel especially loved by God?
 - When are you most likely to feel low on God's love, and what can I do to help you feel topped up again?
 - What can we do together to help each other experience more of God's love? What difference might that make in our marriage?
 - Today I felt most loved by God when . . .

Finally, we can look at each other through God's loving eyes and ask ourselves, "I wonder how God wants to use me today to show His amazing love to my spouse?" The more we show God's love to our spouse, the more likely it is that we'll experience God's love through him or her, too.



KAREN HOLFORD is a family therapist and freelance writer living in Scotland, where her husband, Bernie, is the president of the Scottish Mission. Together they have been exploring what God's love means in their own lives, in their marriage, in their family, in their church, and in their community. It's an endless and wondrous journey of discovery that they hope will last for eternity.