

Awaken The Dawn

One night, at a critical time in my life, God spoke to me in the most profound way about our ministry. It was early 2017, and the night before, I had made the huge announcement that we were hosting four days of 24/7 prayer and worship at the National Mall in the fall of that year. I shared our plan to set up 50 tents for 50 states and invite thousands of musicians and singers to lead us in around-the-clock worship and prayer. The announcement was broadcast live from a church in Washington, D.C., and was viewed not just across the U.S. but around the world.

The paperwork for the permits had been signed, so it was official. We were planning to do something that had never been done—something that came with an incredibly high price tag—and we were committing to do this in front of tens of thousands of people.

In all honesty, after making this announcement, I started to panic.

As I lay in bed that night, I could feel the weight of what we had just committed to. I felt exposed and vulnerable. I had literally signed my name on the dotted line of what God had asked me to do, and now I was at His mercy. It was a test of my faith on a grand scale. I even had some close friends and leaders questioning the plan. Others had sacrificed for this too, and we needed God to come through and provide.

In the middle of the night, after having gone to bed with these thoughts buzzing in my mind, I was jolted awake. I went from a deep sleep to wide awake with my heart racing in a second.

I heard an audible voice.

It sounded like my natural father's voice, and He said only

one word: my name, "David." In one of my most profound moments of insecurity, God spoke identity to my heart by simply calling my name in the middle of the night. That's all He said. That's all I needed to hear.

Ironically, I was scheduled to speak the next morning at our church, Awakening Community Church, about the Father's love. I had the whole message prepared. But as I stood up before the church that morning, I broke down in tears. God spoke the one thing I needed to hear more than anything else, and it was not strategy; it was affection.

Identity Crisis Solved

This is the only time I've heard God speak with my natural ears. Most people I know have never heard God speak audibly. But whether or not you hear His voice out loud, the fact is this: If you are in Christ, the Father loves you as He loves His own Son, Jesus (John 17:23). This defines your identity.

When it comes down to it, we are all in a frenzy to find our identities, and mostly we are looking in all the wrong places and making all the wrong choices. We find our identities in the places we get a sense of self-worth, and the multitude of things that are fueling most people's sense of identity—sexuality, careers, power and position, the list goes on—are falling short. Many people are experiencing an identity crisis at their cores because they just don't feel successful or fulfilled. Jesus answers the crisis. Hosting Jesus' presence is largely about discovering Jesus' personality, and this leads to His shaping our identities.

I'm convinced the encounter I had with the Father that night was not just for me. I believe He was establishing a culture for this movement of worship, prayer and gospel proclamation in our cities and college campuses. I believe that all our extravagant songs, prayers and proclamations are meant to pour out from a river that is flowing on the inside of us. That

river is flowing because we have discovered that the one seated on the throne in heaven is a Father who is smiling at each of us individually and personally. Knowing this will wash away all our shame. This revelation is the answer to our identity crisis.

Loved Like Jesus

I believe answers to the most existential questions of life are found in a statement from Jesus in John 17. It is particularly important because it is one of the few places in the Scriptures where we see God talking to God about us. Jesus is praying to the Father right before going to the cross, and you and I are the topic of the conversation. Jesus says in John 17:23 (NIV), "I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Jesus says that God the Father loves us in the same way and to the same degree that He loves Jesus. There is literally nothing more powerful than the love God has for God, which is the love the Father has for Jesus. If it were not in red letters, it would be impossible to believe God feels the same way about us as He does about Jesus. But it is true, and it is the defining reality of our lives.

John said that we love God "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As we are pursuing Jesus, every one of us has the urgent need in the depths of our beings to know that we are enjoyed by God, even in our weaknesses and despite our failures. We need a regular reintroduction to the goodness of God. The struggle to believe this is one of the most important battles you'll face in your life, no matter how long you have been a follower of Jesus.

We are trying to love Him, but God flips the script and says, "This is not so much about your learning to love Me but about your learning to first receive My love for you."

When we look up at God, it is not His power and sovereignty that shock us most profoundly. The greatest surprise and wonder of God is that we look up and see that He has a smile on His face as He looks at us.

In the midst of His fearful, glorious presence, there is a smiling Father.

Embrace His Affection

Our natural thinking does not expect or embrace God's affections on this level. We naturally reject it. We expect to hear a rebuke as the main topic of conversation when we are approaching God. However, if you are hearing only rebukes in your heart after you've turned to Jesus, you are not hearing accurately yet.

Repentance is absolutely required, but repentance is not pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and fixing yourself. It is turning from the sin that is bringing nothing but death and giving yourself to Jesus alone. It is total and complete surrender.

This is the core truth: God likes you, and He passionately desires you, even in your weakness. Today is the day to return home like that prodigal who finally came to his senses. When that son in Luke 15 who had squandered his father's money and lived a reckless life finally decided to return to the father's house, do you know how the father responded?

Jesus said that while his son was still a long way off, the father saw him, ran to him and kissed him. He ran. This is a picture of our loving God—He is the God who runs to you.

Even before He created humans, He was love. He has been defined as love for billions of years, and the love of God is what flowed among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has always been love; therefore, He must be a plurality—three persons and yet one. God didn't become a loving Father after

He created us; He has always been a Father with a family within His being. We were actually created to be participants in this love flowing within God's person, and it is intensely personal. You are breathing because God wants to share Himself.

The reality is that we are dealing with a generation of people who are wrestling with an orphan mindset, perhaps more than any previous generation has, at least in America. When you have an orphan mindset, you invariably hurt other people because you are trying to protect yourself. God wants to heal your heart so you can actually love others without self-preservation. That is why the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of adoption:

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15, ESV).

Becoming Love

In His final words before going to the cross, Jesus said this: "I made known to them [all who believe in Jesus] your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:26).

I really want you to catch the magnitude of this. Jesus asked the Father to cause us to love Him like the Father loves Him. How does God feel about God? How does the Father feel about Jesus? There is no end to that shoreless ocean. We are invited into this kind of love. It's no wonder God intends to fill the earth with singing.

The Cross Has Spoken

You may be wondering, How can God love us so much in the midst of our brokenness and in light of our sin and failure? First, it is His character to love. He is more merciful than any of us. Having said that, there is one profound reason we can have

this relationship of love and enjoyment: the cross of Christ.

On the cross Jesus not only died in our place; He took our shame, punishment, sin and brokenness. He took it all. It is finished. All who have surrendered their lives to Jesus and trust in Him are as holy as Jesus is because of what He accomplished at Calvary.

We don't have to be good enough to receive God's love—we can't be. The cross silences human pride. It is the ultimate expression of love and justice. Because of Jesus' death and Resurrection, you and I are now in the family of God as His children forever. God had the final word in Jesus' work on the cross.

The Kiss of the Word

There is one practical key that is perhaps the most important of all to receiving the love of Christ. It is expressed in the Song of Solomon.

The Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs in some Bible translations, is an eight-chapter love song written by David's son Solomon. Many people skip this poetic book because of all its pomegranates and palm trees. But at its core it is a picture of love between a man and his wife. Marriage is probably the greatest analogy Scripture gives to show us what God's relationship with His people looks like. Paul said marriage speaks of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). This is why seeing Jesus as the eternal bridegroom helps us better understand God's love for us.

In the first chapter of the Song of Solomon, the bride says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine" (v. 2, emphasis added). The Song of Solomon is an allegory of Christ's relationship with the church, and it's important to understand that this verse is not in any way referring to a physical relationship with Jesus. It is analogous to the Word of God touching our hearts

when it is communicated by the Holy Spirit.

The Word is a kiss from God on your heart. Allowing the Holy Spirit to touch your heart with the Word of God is the greatest tool for growing in love. That's when you discover that Jesus' love is "better than wine." Wine speaks of the pleasures of the world, not all of which are sinful. God's love communicated to your heart is better than any pleasure the world could offer us. It is the highest form of pleasure. That is why David, the great theologian of joy, said, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11, ESV).

How do we receive God's kiss on our hearts? This happens when we take the time to meditate on the Bible and use the Word to engage in a conversation with Jesus. This is called praying the Bible, and this is how it works.

Find key verses that speak of God's heart and what He has done through Jesus. Study them so that you don't miss the context. But just as importantly, turn them into a conversation with God directly. Ask God questions about the verse. Pray each phrase back to Him. Use your own language to express what the verse is saying back to God in a dialogue. You may even want to sing it. Commit out loud to obey anything the text says to do. Write in a journal what God is revealing to your heart from the passage. Do this regularly. The Holy Spirit thrives in communicating God's affections to you, and if you pray His Word, He will reveal Himself more and more to you over time.

Seemingly small encounters with God really matter; they are real, and they do change us. The greatest supernatural event that is taking place is not tents that host God's presence being set up around the world; it is that broken people are discovering who God is and are beginning to love God the way God loves God. Jesus, You have won us over. We are freely Yours forever.

David Bradshaw is the founder of Awaken the Dawn, a national organization mobilizing a new Jesus movement in America with a call to worship, prayer and evangelism. He and his wife, Ashley, live in Fredericksburg, Maryland, with their five children.

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