

Committed Love

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”

John 14:21

Ann’s gaze drifted from the blaring television to Frank, who sat beside her. He’d forgotten his hearing aids again. No matter—his eyes were fixed on the screen, staring blankly at a movie he’d probably memorized years ago. The room felt stagnant, as though time itself had settled into the upholstery of their matching armchairs.

So, this is retirement?

She had imagined this stage of life differently. She’d dreamed of days spent exploring the world, not of being cocooned in a chair with a stale cup of coffee and a half-finished basket of knitting. Year after year, she’d longed for this freedom—the promise of faraway places beyond the quiet rhythm of suburbia. Now, that promise felt hollow.

Me in my chair and Frank in his. She pressed her elbow against the worn armrest. Is this really my final chapter—a lackluster ending to an otherwise ordinary life?

Her hand drifted to the window. The cool glass tingled beneath her fingertips as she traced the blurred shapes beyond it. The world was out there, beckoning, just beyond her reach.

“I’m done,” she said suddenly, shoving her knitting into the basket and stomping out of the living room. “I can’t live like this. I won’t.”

Frank looked up. “What bee got in your bonnet?”

“This,” she said, waving her hand around the room. “I will not spend what’s left of my life sitting and waiting for death to come.”

“Is that what you think we’re doing?”

“What would you call it?”

The clock ticked loudly in the silence that followed.

“Hear that?” Ann asked. “That’s the seconds of our lives slipping away. I want something more. I need something more.”

“Okay,” Frank drawled. “What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s take a road trip.”

“So we can sit in a car?”

“Then let’s go to an island.”

“So we can sit in a chair on a beach?”

“Fine—let’s go on a river cruise in Europe.”

He grinned. “And sit in a deckchair on a boat.”

“Stop shooting my ideas down.”

“I’m not. I’m just pointing out that sitting seems to be our specialty these days.”

Ann huffed and stormed out. He wasn’t wrong. Their days of skiing, hiking, and swimming were long gone. She briefly reconsidered a dip in the ocean—but her last attempt ended with her being dragged out of the waves and dumped on the sand like a washed-up fish.

That afternoon, she decided to bake cookies. Bait. Nothing lured her grandchildren faster than fresh chocolate chip cookies.

“Hi, Rachel,” she said when her daughter answered the phone. “I baked cookies today. Why don’t you bring the kids over for a visit?”

“Mom, that sounds great, but Kendyl has dance lessons, and Olivia starts gymnastics tonight. I can swing by and grab the cookies, though. The kids will love them. Thanks.”

Ann's heart sank. She set the phone down and began packing up the cookies.

"Hey, what are you doing with all the cookies?" Frank asked, leaning in the doorway.

"Rachel's picking them up."

"Why doesn't she bring the kids over?"

Ann sighed. "They're too busy. They want the cookies, not the company."

"Don't turn into a grumpy old lady," Frank said gently. "They have busy lives. You always knew the days of them climbing into your lap would pass too quickly. Why be angry now that it's happened?"

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it."

"I feel useless," she said softly. "Like I'm just...waiting to die."

Frank stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her. "Remember when we got married, and you asked if I'd still love you when we were old and gray? What did I say?"

"You said you'd love me forever—wrinkles and all."

"I did say that, didn't I?" Frank chuckled. "Guess I forgot about the wrinkles part."

Ann let out a soft, shaky laugh, "You're not backing out now, are you?"

"Never," he said, kissing the top of her head. "We just have to learn how to live in this season."

The kitchen door creaked open, and Rachel peeked in. "Someone mentioned cookies?"

"Come on in, kiddo," Frank said. "Your mom baked, and I'm trying to butter her up to save a few for your dear old dad." He kissed Rachel's cheek.

"There are three on the counter for you," Ann said.

"Just three?"

Rachel laughed, giving her father's stomach a playful poke. "You know you have to watch your weight."

"What's the point of living if I can't enjoy it?" he said, reaching for a cookie.

Ann frowned, watching him. What is the point of living after retirement?

She didn't have a clue.

The following morning, Ann's phone rang.

"I'm going to a new Bible study," Kate said brightly. "Want to come?"

Ann hesitated. She'd enjoy spending time with Kate, but a Bible study? "I'm not cut out for that kind of thing," she said.

"I thought you were looking for something to do," Kate replied. "I really think you'll like this one. Elizabeth's leading it—she has great insight. I've heard her speak a few times, and she's amazing."

Ann sighed. "I'm looking for something more out of life than sitting around a table talking about God."

"Oh, really," Kate's tone turned teasing. "And what have you found so far? Baking cookies? Knitting scarves?"

Ann winced. Kate was right—and it stung. "There just has to be more than this," she murmured.

"Ann," Kate said softly. "I'm your friend, and I love you, but you're sinking into a dark hole."

"And I suppose now you're going to tell me that I need Jesus. Well, don't. I've tried the religion thing, and it doesn't work."

“The religion thing? Seriously? I thought you knew better.”

“All I know,” Ann said, her voice tight, “is that my life’s winding down, and I might as well accept it. Frank and I will just sit in our chairs and wait for the end.”

“There is no reasoning with you today,” Kate said after a pause. “I’ve got to go. But if you change your mind, call me. And remember this—” her voice softened—“it’s not about religion; it’s about relationship.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ann muttered as she ended the call. “I’ve heard that before. Just another cliché—pretty words with no meaning.”

Ann wandered the aisles of the craft store, her footsteps echoing across the hard linoleum floor. Bright baubles and ribbons shimmered under the lights, a kaleidoscope of possibilities. Shoppers clustered together, laughing, sharing ideas, and holding up supplies like trophies with the enthusiasm of treasure hunters. Their chatter buzzed with purpose and energy.

Ann watched them the way an outsider watches a lively party she hasn’t been invited to. Still, desperation pushed her forward.

She paused before a display of trivet kits. The packaging promised *a fun and easy way to brighten your kitchen*. Maybe it would fill an afternoon. She placed one in her cart.

As she stood in line, a woman ahead of her mentioned donating her crafts to help raise money for a local charity. The idea sparked something in Ann—a glimmer of purpose.

Maybe I could do that.

If she made and sold trivets to support Olivia’s gymnastics school, it might fill her time and mean something, too. The thought sent her hurrying back down the aisle. She grabbed four more kits, clutching them like lifelines as she made her way to the checkout.

“What in the world are you doing?” Frank asked, eyeing the mess on the kitchen table. “I turn my back for five minutes, and you’ve turned into Bob Ross.”

Ann was hunched over a trivet, paintbrush trembling in her hand. She turned it this way and that, hoping a new angle might help. The flower she’d tried to paint looked more like a psychedelic pancake. Three other, equally disastrous trivets sat nearby.

“They’re awful, aren’t they?” she groaned.

“If you call them *Nightmare in My Kitchen*, you might be onto something.”

Ann pushed everything away. “How do people sit around doing this stuff?”

Frank leaned against the counter, studying her. “Why don’t you get dressed and come with me this afternoon?”

“To your golf thing?” she asked. “Oh, sure. I’ll drive the cart and wave my pom-poms.”

“Now, don’t get testy,” he said lightly. “I was just trying to cheer you up. But suit yourself.” He shrugged into his thick coat, grabbed his scuffed golf shoes, and headed for the door.

“It’s too cold for golf, anyway,” she called after him.

“It’s never too cold for golf,” he shot back.

She wanted to be angry with him, but was too busy feeling sorry for herself. Her husband was finding new activities with new friends, her daughter and grandchildren were too busy for her, and her best friend had turned into a walking sermon.

She glanced at the messy collection of paints and trivets. Tempted to launch one across the room, she picked up the worst of the bunch. But there was no sense wasting it on a temper tantrum. Instead, she grabbed a brush and dipped it into a pot of blue paint. With bold, angry strokes, she covered the awful flower until only a solid color remained.

She did the same with the others—each one a different hue.

They weren't masterpieces, but they were hers—a small rebellion against the monotony of retirement.

Ann's phone rang, jolting her from a wave of self-pity. She sighed. "Hi, Kate."

"Hi. I'm heading to Bible study again tomorrow morning. Please come with me. I'm really enjoying it."

"I don't think so."

There was a pause on the line. "Tell you what. If you come tomorrow, I'll buy us tickets to the local theater. Dinner and a show—my treat."

Now that sparked Ann's interest. She could endure an hour of Bible talk in exchange for an evening out. "When are you picking me up?"

"I'll be there at nine, and don't worry about bringing a Bible. I've got an extra." Kate's voice held the triumphant lilt of victory as she hung up.

Ann stared at the phone. What had she just agreed to? She nearly called back to cancel. The thought of sitting through a morning with hymn-humming, Bible-thumping ladies made her cringe. Still, she reasoned, if things got unbearable, she could always excuse herself and hide in the restroom.

The next morning, wrapped in a warm jacket, Ann sat on the porch waiting for Kate. South Carolina didn't often give her mornings this crisp, but today her breath floated in soft clouds. She'd always loved cold days—the kind that made the world feel clean and alive. The wind rustled

the branches of the oak in her front yard, and she smiled at the memory of planting it with Frank, its trunk barely as wide as her arm. Now it stood tall and solid, its limbs stretching toward the sky.

Kate waved enthusiastically when she pulled into the yard. Ann rose from the porch, reluctant but resigned, and headed for the car.

“You look like you’re on your way to your own funeral,” Kate teased. “Come on, smile a little. You might actually enjoy yourself.”

Ann shot her a look. “I said I’d go, didn’t I? Let’s just get it over with.”

As Kate backed out of the driveway, Ann noticed her friend’s lips moving. “What are you singing?”

“Not singing,” Kate said softly.

Ann groaned inwardly. Perfect. She’s praying. I knew this was a bad idea.

They pulled up to a large church, its tall glass windows and sturdy brick walls stretching outward like welcoming arms. Ann stared at the sprawling building, wondering how they possibly filled it with people every week.

Kate hopped out of the car, clutching two well-worn Bibles and matching notebooks. “Come on,” she said cheerfully. “Everyone’s already here.”

Ann followed, moving with all the enthusiasm of a condemned prisoner.

After helping herself to a cup of coffee and a Danish, she trailed Kate into a vast auditorium. Rows of plush burgundy chairs curved around a central stage. Sunlight poured through a large skylight, casting a golden glow over a simple cross at center stage. Instead of a crucified Christ, the cross bore an image of Jesus with His arms outstretched—as if inviting the weary and doubtful to draw near.

Ann's gaze lingered. She had never thought of faith as an embrace, but that's exactly what this image suggested—an invitation reaching across time, disappointment, and disbelief.

“Is this where the Bible study is?” she whispered.

Kate nodded. “Yup.”

“I thought we'd be sitting around a table.”

“This is a little different. Just sit back and watch what God's doing.”

Kate handed her a Bible and a notebook. “If you need a pen, I've got an extra.”

“I brought one,” Ann said, pulling it from her purse—though she doubted she'd need it. Still, Kate was trying to help, and the least she could do was pretend to participate.

A tall woman stepped onto the stage, her golden-streaked hair framing a face that glowed with quiet confidence. Her eyes reflected a depth of understanding, as though she'd glimpsed eternity and returned to share what she'd seen.

“Most of you know me,” the woman began, “but for those who are new, my name is Elizabeth Vincent, and I'm a child of God.”

The audience responded in unison, “Hi, Elizabeth.”

That's weird, Ann thought. Maybe I can sneak out before this gets any worse.

Kate nudged her. “Keep an open mind.”

Elizabeth's opening prayer was simple, yet earnest—a plea for hearts to soften, for understanding to take root, and for the Holy Spirit to guide their time together. Ann bowed her head, though her skepticism whispered louder than her curiosity. Still, something about the sincerity in Elizabeth's voice stirred a faint flicker inside her. Could she find answers here? Or was this just another dead end in her search for meaning?

When Elizabeth began to speak, her voice carried warmth and conviction. “Today, I want to talk about love. Last week, we looked at the life of Jesus—but today, we are going to look at your life.”

Ann frowned. My life? That wouldn’t take long. She was just one tired woman among many—nothing worth discussing.

“When I say love,” Elizabeth continued, “most of you think of love between people—your spouse, your children, your friends. But today, we’re adding God into that equation.”

“Oh, boy,” Ann muttered. “Here it comes.”

Elizabeth smiled as if she’d heard her. “How many of you know this verse: ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’”

One or two hands went up. “Oh, I see a few of you know it,” Elizabeth teased. Laughter rippled through the crowd. “Come on, how many recognize it?”

Every hand rose—except Ann’s. She sank lower in her seat.

“That’s what I thought,” Elizabeth said. “But today, I’m not going to talk about God’s love for us. There’s something equally vital we need to consider. Let’s turn to John 14:21.”

Ann flipped through the pages awkwardly, feeling like a student caught unprepared. Kate leaned over and helped her find the passage.

Elizabeth read aloud: “*He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.*”

Ann stared at the words, none of which made sense.

“Write it down,” Kate whispered. “It’s important.”

Ann sighed but opened the notebook and scribbled the verse anyway.

“Now, circle the word manifest,” Elizabeth instructed. “God says He will manifest Himself to those who love him. That means He will reveal himself. As we love Him, He unveils His presence, allowing us to know Him better. And the better we know Him, the more we fall in love with Him. It’s a marvelous miracle.”

Ann’s handwriting grew messy as she tried to keep up. The words didn’t quite click, but she sensed there was something deeper—something she almost wanted to understand.

“Do you want to know Jesus more?” Elizabeth asked, her voice ringing across the room. A few murmured replies followed. “Okay, just a few people want to know Jesus. Let me ask again. Do you want to know Jesus more?”

This time, the answer came strong and unified—yes!

Ann felt her lips part before she realized she’d spoken too. Maybe, just maybe, she did want to know Him. If He was the source of joy she saw in these women’s faces, then perhaps it was worth exploring.

Elizabeth’s voice carried on, but Ann stayed wrapped in the thought that Jesus genuinely wanted her to know Him. A soft rustle finally pulled her back to the moment.

“Let’s break into small groups,” Elizabeth said. “Discuss what you’ve learned today. I’ve printed some questions to guide your conversation, but don’t worry about them too much. Let this sink in—slowly. This is only the beginning of what God wants to show you.

Ann followed Kate into a smaller room, where chairs were arranged in a circle around a table. This, at least, was what she had expected.

Ann settled into her seat and made a nametag. Imitating the other women, she opened her Bible and notebook. A woman about her age greeted her with a smile. “I see we have a new face today. Welcome, Ann. I’m Marie.”

Ann returned the smile hesitantly as the others nodded in warm acknowledgment.

“Let’s pray before we start,” said the woman leading the group. “I never realized until today that to know Jesus more deeply, I first have to truly love Him. We talk so much about God’s love for us that we gloss over the idea of loving Him.”

As the group bowed their heads, Ann hesitated, then slowly followed suit. For the first time in a long while, she wondered if God might be listening.

“So, what did you think?” Kate asked as they walked to the car.

“It wasn’t so bad,” Ann admitted, surprising herself with the honesty in her voice.

Kate grinned. “I saw you writing a few notes. You can keep the notebook.”

“Thanks, but I doubt I’ll need it.”

Kate’s smile softened. “Let’s just see how things go.”

When Kate dropped Ann off, she leaned across the console. “I’m praying for you.”

Ann didn’t quite know how to respond. “Thanks.”

A few hours later, Frank came through the back door, grinning from ear to ear, his old golf shoes in hand—mud, grass, and all.

“Why are you bringing those into my kitchen?” Ann asked, eyeing the mess as he dropped them onto the floor by the sink.

“I have to clean the grass out of the spikes,” he said, shrugging off his coat.

“You can do that in the laundry room. Please remove them.”

Frank glanced over his shoulder, amused but compliant. “Don’t you want to know how my day was?”

“From the looks of you, I’d say you rolled in the grass a few times.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” he called back with a chuckle. “I had a great time. It was cold, though—my back’s aching, but I feel alive.”

Ann stood quietly, letting his words settle. *Feel alive*. She couldn’t say the same—not yet—but for the first time in a long while, she didn’t feel quite so heavy.

In the days that followed, Ann was drawn back to her Bible study notes. One line stood out from the rest—a paraphrased verse she’d underlined: “If you really want to know Me and see Me clearly, then your love for Me must increase.”

The words lingered in her mind. She’d never wanted religion to interfere with her life, yet this felt...different. She couldn’t explain how, only that something inside her had shifted.

“Kate, are you going to Bible study tomorrow?” Ann held the phone, wondering how her friend would react.

“If you are asking to join me, the answer is yes. I’m glad you want to go. And don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten about our night out. I’m looking for a local show that we’ll both enjoy.”

“I’ll be ready in the morning.”

As Ann hung up, she reflected on how her expectations had shifted. Last week, she had felt indifferent about attending the study, but now she was genuinely curious. How had her heart changed so drastically in just one week?

As Ann and Kate walked into the church, they were greeted by a few of the ladies in their group. The warmth of inclusion settled around Ann like a cozy shawl. It felt good to be included. Once again, everyone gathered in the main sanctuary. Ann's skepticism lingered, but she smiled, mirroring the others. Today, she felt more like a participant than the detached observer she had been last week.

Elizabeth stepped on stage, her presence commanding attention. Once again, she opened in prayer. Ann wondered how everyone could pray out loud so easily. It wasn't something she'd be comfortable doing, that was for sure.

Elizabeth took a deep breath before beginning. "Today, I want to continue talking about Jesus revealing Himself to those who love Him. It's a pretty simple concept. As our love for Him grows, our knowledge of Him grows. As our knowledge of Him grows, our love for Him deepens. Pretty amazing, isn't it?"

Ann furrowed her brow, trying to grasp the connection. She followed along as Elizabeth directed them to Philippians 3:8, "*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.*" To gain knowledge of Christ, He must reveal Himself to us. He will do that with those who love Him."

Elizabeth continued, "In the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verse 2, John is called the disciple Jesus loved. Does that mean Jesus didn't love the others? Of course not, but it does imply a unique relationship between Jesus and John. And who wrote Revelation—the book of the Bible that reveals Jesus' plan? It was John. This implies that John had a deep-abiding love for Jesus, so much so that Jesus revealed His plan for the end times to him. Isn't it interesting that for Jesus to reveal Himself, we must first love Him?"

Ann's mind churned. Elizabeth said love was the key to knowing Jesus. It was both profound and perplexing.

"We can surmise that John demonstrated a great love for Jesus," Elizabeth continued. "God rewarded him by revealing Himself and His plan. Do you find this as awesome as I do?"

Heads bobbed, and a chorus of "Amen" broke out.

"Let's break into our groups and continue discussing this. I'll be interested in hearing your thoughts."

As Ann joined her group, she wondered what insights awaited her. Maybe—just maybe, love held the key to understanding the mysteries she had yet to unravel. She followed everyone out of the auditorium.

"What? No questions for us to answer?" Ann quipped as she and Kate entered the smaller room.

"Not today," Marie, the leader from last time, replied. "This will be more of an open-ended discussion."

Once again, they sat with Bibles and notebooks open. Marie began with a short prayer, then opened the floor for discussion. Ann listened quietly until one woman's comment jolted her.

"I keep thinking," the woman said. "Is Jesus the center of my life, or am I just including Him?"

Ann quickly jotted down the thought. There was an insightful truth there—a question that cut to the core. She had never included God in her life, and if she had, she had relegated Him to the margins. One thing was for sure: He certainly wasn't at the center. The discussion continued, but Ann's mind kept circling back to that comment. Then another woman said something about fish. Fish?

She leaned over and peeked at Kate's notes, but the moment had passed, and the conversation had moved on.

On the way home, Ann decided to unravel the mystery of the fish reference. "I hope this doesn't sound strange, but I missed what they said about fish. What do fish have to do with loving Jesus?"

Kate smiled. "It doesn't sound strange at all. I'm glad you asked. It was an important point in our discussion. I can't recite the exact scripture, but it was when Jesus stopped Peter from fishing and asked him three times if he loved Him. We discussed why Peter had returned to fishing after being told to spread the gospel. There he was, fishing again after Jesus had asked him to spread the gospel. So, when Jesus asked if Peter loved Him more than these — referring to the fish, the nets, and the boat — He was implying that Peter's love for Him was not genuine. Did Peter love him more than catching fish?"

"Wait. Peter went back to fishing?"

"Yup. Crazy, isn't it?" Kate shook her head. "By questioning Peter, Jesus pointed out that fishing appeared more important than following what he'd been told to do."

Ann pondered this. "Jesus asked three times. I caught that part. Why three times?"

"I think it was because Peter denied Jesus three times."

"Why'd he do that?"

"You'll have to read it for yourself. It's in all the gospels right after Jesus is arrested."

They pulled into Ann's driveway. "If you have more questions, just give me a call."

"I will," Ann said, stepping out of the car. But deep down, she wondered if she would.

That evening, Ann surprised herself. While Frank sat engrossed in television, she opened the Bible Kate had loaned her and began reading the Gospel of John. The story unfolded before her eyes—the miracles, the teachings, the encounters with Jesus—and she paused when she reached the scripture Elizabeth had begun with. Ann wrote down John 3:16 in her notebook and copied the verse. It was about God’s love. A love so profound that it defied human comprehension. Ann knew she wouldn’t sacrifice her child for someone else, yet God had done precisely that for a bunch of ungrateful, sinful people. And she counted herself among them.

As she read to the end, she realized that the author of this Gospel was the same John they had spoken of earlier. She closed the Bible and placed it on the side table, gazing at the notebook filled with her questions and reflections. She almost wished there had been a question sheet for her to fill in. Almost.

She wanted to dig deeper, but didn’t know how.

“Was it a good book?” Frank asked, glancing over from the couch.

Ann thought about that. “The best I’ve ever read,” she finally said, surprising herself with the depth of her conviction.

The armchair that had felt confining just a few weeks ago now cradled her like a sanctuary. The desire to travel and see more of the world had diminished, replaced by a hunger to know God better. Was she becoming a Bible-thumper? Maybe she was, and it felt good. It felt right.

The days blurred together. Ann found herself drawn deeper into the Gospels. Each chapter revealed more about Jesus. She saw Him as the healer, the teacher, the one who turned water into wine and walked on water. She marveled at how He interacted with people, always compassionate, always with authority.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Ann sat in her armchair, Bible open on her lap. Frank was engrossed in a detective show, but Ann's mind was far away, pondering the words she had read. She was amazed by the parables, conversations, and miracles.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus had said. "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

Ann traced the words with her fingertip. She had hungered for purpose and for meaning. Could Jesus truly satisfy that hunger? She flipped to another verse she had marked.

"I am the light of the world," He declared. "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Ann glanced at the lamp in the corner of the room. Its glow seemed feeble compared to the light Jesus promised. She wanted that light. It was the kind that would illuminate her path, dispelling shadows of doubt and fear.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus had said. "I know my sheep, and my own know me."

Ann thought of her oak tree, the one that had stood sentinel over the neighborhood. Could Jesus be the sentinel over her life, guiding her through anything that came her way?

She closed the Bible and placed it on the side table. The notebook lay open beside it, filled with questions and reflections. She had more to learn and explore, but for now, she felt a sense of peace. It was a quiet assurance that she was on the right path.

She settled back into the armchair and whispered, "Are You there, Jesus?"

And the room seemed to hold its breath as if waiting for an answer.

The following week, Ann stood waiting outside, anticipation fueling her energy. Kate pulled up.

“Are you crazy?” Kate said, seeing her huddled against the cold. “It’s so cold out here, even my car is shivering.”

“I didn’t want to waste time.”

“Is this the same Ann I picked up just a few weeks ago, who was only going because I bribed her?”

“Yes... No. I’m not the same Ann. But don’t think I’ve forgotten about the night out you promised.” She winked.

Kate grinned.

Ann thought about how much she had changed. It happened slowly at first, but had picked up speed. Her circumstances hadn’t shifted, but she felt different. She was different. Today, she couldn’t wait to hear what Elizabeth had to say. And she had a few questions of her own.

The auditorium was hushed as Elizabeth finished her opening prayer. “It’s appropriate that today is Valentine’s Day. What better time to talk about love? I want to read Psalm 91 to you. It is an amazing overview of what life is like for a Christian. First, we must dwell and abide in Christ. That means non-stop, every minute in His presence. As we go about our day, we include Him through conversation with His Holy Spirit. Then, we need to proclaim that God is our refuge. The psalm promises that God will protect and sustain us. As I read, take note of the promises God makes for those who love Him.”

Ann’s pen raced across the page. She discovered that the Psalms were rich with God’s promises and humanity’s need for Him. She loved the closing lines of Psalm 91. God said He would satisfy His children with long life and show them His salvation.

“Is that me, Lord? Am I worthy of your love?” Deep in her heart, she almost heard Him whisper, “*Love me because I first loved you.*” Where had she heard that before?

During the discussion, Ann took out her notebook, filled with the questions she wanted to ask. She started with the most troubling one.

“Doesn’t God punish us for our sins?”

“Have you read the Gospel of John?” Marie said.

“Yes, yes, I have,” Ann replied.

“Then you’ve read John 3:16 about how God sent His son, and if we believe in Him, we have everlasting life.”

“Yes...” Ann sounded less sure of herself.

“Let’s open to John 3:18,” Marie said.

Bibles opened, and pages rustled. Ann found the passage more quickly now that she was becoming familiar with the Bible.

“*Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.*”

“Now go to Romans 8:1,” Marie said. “I’ll read it: ‘*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*’ No condemnation—none. Jesus carried it. Redemption is a gift, freely offered. All that is required is an unwavering belief in Christ and a confession that He is our Lord and Savior.”

Ann didn’t ask any more questions. She was still wrestling with the answer to her first one. Where did she stand? She’d learned so much, but what now?

The ride home was quiet, and Ann was grateful. Kate drove without speaking, her lips moving in a silent rhythm of prayer. Ann knew she was praying for her—for her journey, and for the transformation unfolding within her.

Before Ann stepped out of the car, Kate touched her arm, “Look up Matthew 22:37.”

“Is it important?” Ann asked.

“It probably is. God just brought it to my mind for you.”

“You mean you don’t know what it says?”

“I know the scriptures, but have trouble with chapter and verse designations. I’ll recognize it when I hear it.”

“What do you mean, God brought it to your mind? You mean He spoke to you?”

“Yes—I guess I do. It’s not some booming voice echoing from the clouds, although He could do that if He wanted to. It’s an impression, a thought you know wasn’t there a moment ago.”

“What did you say that scripture was?” Ann scribbled it down and rushed from the car, anxious to find out what it said.

Matthew 22:37 *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*

Ann sat back and noticed her hands trembling as she held the Bible. She read the words over and took a deep breath. It was then that she felt tears streaming down her face. A sob shook her. Before she realized it, she was down on her knees, rocking back and forth. The sobs turned into wracking wails. Her pain was so deep that she didn’t think she could take her next breath. She fell to the floor, face down. It was good that Frank wasn’t home. This would frighten him. It frightened her.

As the emotions subsided, she lifted her eyes and said the words she never thought she'd utter. "Jesus, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me for all the horrible things I've said and done." She sobbed again. "I want to know you. I love you, Lord. Please reveal yourself to me. I want to understand. I want to be like John. I want You to call me the one You love."

Ann didn't know how long she lay there—the crisp morning had melted into the hazy afternoon sunlight streaming through her window. It illuminated the Bible, which had fallen onto the floor. Bits of dust floated aimlessly in the light's stream. She studied them and realized that her life had been just as aimless, having no direction. It would no longer be that way. A firm conviction arose in her. Like Peter, she would leave the fishing to someone else and do what Jesus commanded. Now, all she needed to know was what Jesus wanted her to do with the rest of her life, but she would never forget this Valentine's Day when she found the most profound love of her life.

Frank wandered into the kitchen carrying his dirty golf shoes. "I'm just going through to the laundry room to clean these," he said, noticing Ann's head buried in the Bible.

She jumped up, "Let me do them for you. I'm sure you could use a hot shower. I don't know how you can golf when it's so cold." Ann took the shoes from him, kissed his cheek, and noted his surprised expression. "Go," she shooed him from the room with a sincere smile. She'd just completed the first thing she felt Jesus calling her to do. It felt good.

The final day of the Bible study arrived, and Ann could hardly believe how much her life had changed. Her world had been turned upside down, and she couldn't stop thanking Jesus. When Kate pulled up, Ann dashed to the car.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done,” Ann said.

“For what? Picking you up?” Kate teased.

“You know what I mean. For picking me up, leading me to Jesus, encouraging me, and caring enough to keep pestering me. I’m a child of God!”

Kate reached for her hand. “Amen! Then I understand why He encouraged me to get you something. It’s in the bag behind your seat.”

Ann reached for the bag, surprised by its weight. Tears welled up as she saw what was inside.

“I thought it was time you had your own,” Kate said, her voice wavering with emotion.

Ann lifted the new Bible, running her hand over the soft leather. “How can I thank you?”

“You already have. Seeing you turn to Jesus is a blessing.”

As soon as they got out of the car, Ann pulled Kate into a tearful embrace. “All I need now is for Jesus to show me what He wants me to do with the days I have left on this earth.”

“Now that you’re listening, He will. Oh, and I got us tickets to the Children’s Theater. They’re performing The Ugly Duckling. I thought it would be fun.”

“That feels like my story. I’ve gone from an ugly, self-absorbed person to someone who only wants to serve Christ.”

“He has that effect on people,” Kate said, and they both laughed.

The atmosphere in the auditorium was different. There was a bittersweet flood of emotion because everyone knew this would be the last meeting of the series. Elizabeth prayed, asking for God’s sweet guidance for each woman in the room.

“This may be the last day of this study, but it is the first day of your journey in loving our Savior in a fresh new way. As we express the love He deserves, He reveals Himself on deeper, more intimate levels. We come to know His heart, His joy, and His plans for our lives. Our understanding grows more profound,” she paused.

“But remember, if you want to grow in your relationship with Jesus, you must love Him with every fiber of your being. There can be no other distractions. Look at your life and weed out those things that stand in the way of a deep, abiding love for Jesus. Where are you spending your time? What pulls your mind away from praying and talking with Christ? Simple, seemingly innocent things can become obstacles. They creep in slowly, looking harmless, but they prevent us from developing a more profound knowledge of Jesus.” She closed her Bible and clutched it to her chest.

“Seek, and you will find Him. Love Him, and He will find you.”

Ann sat in the discussion group, wondering where she would go from here. Another study was starting next week, and she would be joining, but she couldn't shake the deep sorrow that this one was coming to an end.

“What should I do now?” she whispered, knowing Jesus would hear her and answer.

“Well, ladies,” Marie began, interrupting her thoughts. “I know you've enjoyed this study as much as I have. No matter how long I study my Bible, there is always something new to learn. I know this is off-topic, but the Holy Spirit is encouraging me to share something with you. I have been ministering at a local nursing home for the past few years and need to step away for a while. I was wondering if any of you would be interested in taking over. I have a lot of information to help you, and I will be happy to accompany you on your first visit. Please pray about it and let me know if you're interested.”

A pressure began building in Ann's chest. She tried to listen as others shared their experiences, but her thoughts were elsewhere. She started a silent dialogue with the Holy Spirit.

"This is what you want me to do? But I'm just a beginner."

"I'll give you the words."

"I can't sing a lick."

"I'll sweeten your voice. Besides, they're mostly hard of hearing anyway."

"What will Frank say?"

"Take him with you."

"What if they ask a question that I can't answer?"

"I'll prepare you."

"I need a good reason to do this?"

"Because I have called you to do it."

Three months later, Ann and Frank carried a karaoke machine into the nursing home's dining room, where residents in wheelchairs were already waiting.

"Good morning, everyone," Ann called as she handed out tambourines and rattles before stepping to the front. "Let's bow our heads."

A prayer of thanksgiving and praise tumbled from her lips as the Holy Spirit gave her the words. When she finished, their voices, shaky yet joyful, echoed her "amen."

"Are we ready to praise Jesus and show Him how much we love Him?" she asked.

Many couldn't respond with more than a soft smile or a brightening in their eyes, but Ann felt the love in the room. It radiated from every soul gathered to sing praises to Jesus—and was met by a Savior eager to reveal more of Himself to the children who love Him.