

my 180



**Wanting to Give God Your Whole Heart**

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Cover Photo: Shutterstock  
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Cover Concept and Series Logo: Matthew Bown  
Designer: Paula Clemons

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Northwestern Publishing House  
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284

[www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net)

© 2018 Northwestern Publishing House

Published 2018

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-8100-2933-0

ISBN 978-0-8100-2934-7 (e-book)

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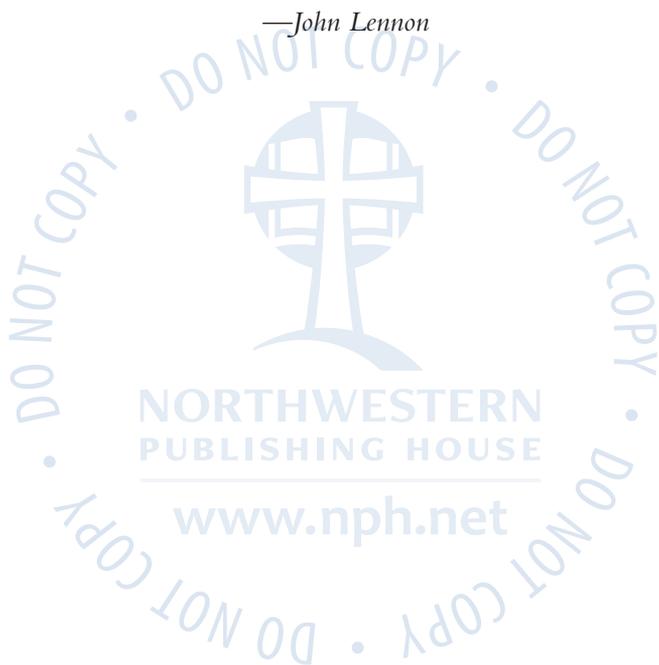


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“It sort of dawned on me that love was the answer. . . .  
It seems like the underlying theme to the universe.”

—*John Lennon*



# Prologue

On a sunny summer day, I happened to take a road trip with Carrie. Our teenage sons were headed to a Christian summer camp to be counselors for a week. I was grateful for Carrie's company. She's a wonderful Christian mother, very selfless and wise. I could learn a lot from Carrie during a three-hour drive.

We talked about our kids, balancing busy schedules, church work, and other blessings of our very full lives. We talked about things we love to do—Carrie is a wonderful musician—and how busy moms can find time to enjoy things they love to do while also serving those around them. I can't speak for Carrie; however, I enjoyed the conversation so immensely that at one point I turned the wrong way out of a rest stop and drove in the wrong direction for a few miles before realizing my error. We had a laugh as I turned the car around. Good company creates a bad sense of direction, I guess.

A few weeks later, I received a call from Carrie's husband, an editor for Northwestern Publishing House, who asked if I'd be willing to take part in an experiment. (Carrie had suggested me to him.) The experiment was to revolve around the topic of "loving God more." The assignment, in a nutshell, was to spend 180 days studying a topic, praying about it, observing those around me, and recording the experience in a journal. Several others were taking part in the project, studying their own topics for 180 days. Project participants would then use their experiences to write a book on their topic. The project had what seemed to me to be a clever name: "My 180."

I was taken aback by the invitation to do this. As a writer in the public relations field, my specialty is writing for other people. I'm essentially a ghost writer. I listen to other people, learn their voice, learn what they want to say, and put words to paper under their byline. I am invisible. So to write something about my own experiences, with my own byline, would be unnerving.

And then there's the topic: love. Let me assure you, nothing in particular qualifies me to teach anyone about love. Yet the more I prayed and

considered this project, the more I wondered if God was calling me to study love precisely because he knew I needed to study love. I'm not one of those people who walks around exuding God's love (although I appreciate people who do). And I'm not one to be particularly considerate of others. I'm more likely to greet my husband with a honey-do list than a hug. Yet I know God created me with emotions. I've been known to throw a pretty good temper tantrum. And I've been known to get caught up in emotional thinking, causing me to take a wrong turn now and then. So studying the greatest of all emotions—love—seemed as though it might be beneficial.

Could I fit the work into my busy life? Well, I'd have to prioritize. After all, isn't that what God commands us to do where love for him is concerned? "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). Maybe I would learn something from this project, and other busy people could benefit from what I learn.

And so I said yes. I forged ahead on this journey, equipped with prayer, the Word, and an accountability partner riding shotgun. This book chronicles how my 180 journey was helpful for learning about myself and chronicles what God showed me through others along the way. Though written in the first person, it's not really a book about me. It's about God working through me, using "My 180" as the vehicle.

You may wish to try a "180" yourself. No matter where you are in your faith life, I believe you can benefit from a 180 journey. You may have a little knowledge of the Bible or a lot, faith that can move mountains or faith the size of a mustard seed. A 180 journey is not about where you begin or even where you end. It's about the journey itself, the God who guides it, and the people you meet or observe along the way. I invite you to take note of what you see as you journey with me, perhaps in preparation to make a 180 journey of your own. (I've included "Travel Tips" specifically for those who wish to embark on their own journey.) If you're simply a backseat rider on my journey, I've included reflection opportunities to help you make the most of our time together.

I pray that God uses my humble story to bless all those who wish to make a similar journey.

# A Love Story

*“Bring back that lovin’ feelin’”*

—The Righteous Brothers

My husband and I are raising three children, all teenagers at the moment. Our life is busy and a bit chaotic. The simple routines we tried to establish for our household when the kids were younger have fallen away in favor of keeping up with each family member’s schedule and commitments. Jon and I tag-team to keep everything going smoothly. As a result, there is little time for Jon and me to spend together as a couple. Try as we might, the relationship we had before kids has taken a backseat to the blessings and busyness of raising kids.

We often joke about what life will be like when the children leave the house. We will spend more time together because there will be no one to interrupt, no games to watch, no school activities to manage. We’ll have to rediscover why we liked each other in the first place. We’re anticipating that new phase in life, excited for the time to reacquaint after years of relationship autopilot.

It’s possible for a relationship with God to be put on autopilot too. I consider myself a devout Christian, and yet I often find myself putting off or hurrying through my Bible study or prayer because “more important things” are in front of me. I know God will always be there, and I have every intention to spend time with him once I get through this busy day, week, month. It’s a dangerous slippery slope.

God wants a loving relationship with his people. He even longs for it. He describes what he is looking for through the prophet Jeremiah: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown” (Jeremiah 2:2). Jeremiah was called to speak these words to the people of Israel, to call them to repentance and back to a loving relationship with God. It was meant to be a beautiful relationship—with both reverence and feeling—like newlyweds who profess their love and feel the excitement of a new beginning. They have committed their lives to each other, excited to explore whatever terrain stretches before them with a faithful companion at their side.

This book is about rediscovering, rekindling, guarding, and keeping that kind of love in the life of a Christian. As the chapters unfold, they reveal the gradual progression I made through the power of the Holy Spirit toward a better understanding of God's love for me and my love for him. God communicated with me through his Word and sacraments. (We'll talk more about those in a bit.) I communicated with him by reading his Word and through prayer. In response to my prayers, and because he knows my needs, God sent specific people into my life at various times to illuminate certain truths about loving him. The stories of those individuals, and what I learned from them, are peppered throughout these chapters.

As you and I journey through these chapters together, I hope you'll see, as I did, that God is the author and perfecter of our faith. He guides the journeys of his people, even as we follow him into lands not yet sown.

## Survey the Landscape

Let's say you're planning a trip to Disneyland. Given the sizeable investment of this trip, you'd likely assemble a file of "all things Disney." You would read reviews and learn everything you can from others who've been there. You'd probably look up the weather patterns for the time of year you intend to travel, so you know how to pack. You would research the best modes of transportation. All this would serve to prepare you and to fuel your excitement for the trip.

I began my 180 journey with a little research to understand the topic I was about to study. Before I committed to a study plan, I simply Googled "love" and related topics. I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for, and it wasn't an exhaustive research project. I simply thought that doing a little research might provide a good list of topics to journal about during my 180 journey.

I Googled things like "most famous love song," "famous love poems," "how many times does the word *love* appear in the Bible?" and "famous quotes about love."

The exercise was kind of fun, and it sparked my creativity. I didn't know exactly how I would use the information—I just thought it might be nice to know what had already been written about the topic of love.

It. Was. A. Lot. Check out the next chapter and you'll see what I mean.

I could let the volume of material and the broad topic intimidate me, or I could forge ahead and figure out how I (and my relationship with God) fit into the chorus of voices and myriad of opinions about love. I decided to forge ahead. As I did so, I felt the same nervous energy I feel on the day I leave for a big vacation.

I reassured myself: *I'm not an expert on love, but it's a great topic. Many have studied it before me. I've assembled enough facts and opinions to know that this is going to be a great trip. It's time to get going.*

### TRAVEL TIPS:

If you are considering a 180 journey of your own:

- **Think about some topics you might want to explore** during a 180 journey. You, like me, might choose "loving God more" as your topic. There are other worthy topics as well, such as "trusting God more" or "praying to God more."
- **Be curious** about your topic!
- **Assemble a little research** to inspire your study plan. I used internet searches, books from my own bookshelf, and observations of people and situations that crossed my path or came to mind as I was preparing for my study.

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# This Thing Called Love

*“But the greatest of these is love.”*

—1 Corinthians 13:13

In 1967, the Beatles were asked to write a song for the Our World Project, which was to be broadcast in 24 countries across five continents. They chose to write a song with a simple message of love and peace that could be understood by all the varied people tuning in across the globe. “All You Need Is Love” made its debut to the largest television audience ever up to that date, an estimated 400 to 700 million people. The word *love* is sung 111 times in the anthem. Google it to read the lyrics or give it a listen.

The Beatles understood something about love—it is perhaps one of the most unifying elements of the human experience. It can be seen, felt, and heard all around us: The look in someone’s eyes. The reassuring touch of a hand. The whisper of the most significant three words in the English language, *I love you*. Throughout time, love has been written about, sung about, and studied intently in an effort to understand it or to commend its power to influence human conditions and actions. “Love is energy of life,” Robert Browning wrote. The word *love* appears 2,191 times in the works of Shakespeare, who is often credited with creating some of the most insightful literature on the subject. And during one of the most tumultuous times in our nation’s history, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

Technically speaking, *love* is both a noun and a verb. We can both love someone (an action) or be in love with someone (a state of being). People are commended for their acts of love even when the feeling of love isn’t there, and the feeling of being in love has been described as the most glorious, most consuming, and most valuable of all emotions: “the star to every wandering bark [sailing ship],” Shakespeare wrote. Ironically, many people in pursuit of the feeling of love as a noun abandon the action of love as a verb.

As I surveyed the landscape, I narrowed my examination of love in the broad human experience to a Christian perspective. Even then, the topic was still enormous. Here are a few broad observations about love and Christianity:

**Love is the central theme of Christianity.** Christians believe that the Bible is essentially a generations-long love story between God and the people he chose to be his own. The Bible's books and chapters all serve to chronicle the promises God made to his people and the ultimate demonstration of his love through his own Son, Jesus Christ. Through the fulfillment of his promises, God reveals himself as a God who loves all people.

- God declared his everlasting love for his people through the Bible's Old Testament prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.
- Love for all people was the compelling reason for Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection as revealed to us in the iconic John 3:16—one of the most well-known verses in the Bible (which, incidentally, is often displayed by zealous Christians via tattoos, banners on highway overpasses, and signs in the crowd at major league ballparks): *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*
- The command “love one another” or “love each other” appears at least 15 times in the Bible, all in the New Testament (New International Version, 2011). It is especially prevalent in the book of John, including John 13:34; 13:35; 15:12; and 15:17.
- The Bible repeatedly says that there is nothing God wants more from us than our love. The “greatest commandment” is first given in Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” That passage is repeated twice in the New Testament—in Matthew 22:35–40 and in Mark 12:28–34.

**Love is an attribute of God,** as described at length in 1 John 4, and it has its own list of attributes, as described in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul declares love to be the greatest of all Christian attributes in 1 Corinthians 13:13 and the

motivating factor behind all Christian actions in 2 Corinthians 5:14.

**Love is the top-ranked search topic** on Bible Gateway, the world's most popular app for accessing the Bible. The word *love* is used 551 times in the New International Version of the Bible (2011)—319 times in the Old Testament and 232 times in the New Testament. The Bible wasn't written in English, yet because the word *love* is used so often on its pages, many novice Bible scholars like me have learned various Greek words for the word *love*. For example, I've been told that the Greek word *phileo* means love in the sense of being friendly—the kind of love that forms from senses and emotion. Then there's the Greek word *agapao*, the form used by the writers of the Bible for more deeply spiritual matters. The *Encyclopedia of the Bible* says that *agapao* is “love founded on admiration, veneration, and esteem. It means to have a preference for, wish well to, regard the welfare of. It is to be full of good will both in thought and deed.”

It's about now that my head begins to hurt. As I survey the landscape on the topic of love, I realize that I've only scratched the surface in terms of understanding its significance in our world. What about the meaning of the word *love* in other languages? for other cultures? for people who lived at other points in history? for me personally?

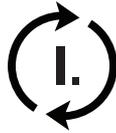
No matter how I look at it, love's impact on the world is astounding. People have done amazing and radical things in the name of love. In the case of Christians, Christ's love for us has compelled ordinary people to become martyrs, missionaries, crusaders (yikes!), emancipators, reformers, nurses, philanthropists, and friends to the friendless. Love is the status, the compelling reason, and the unlimited power source behind everything *truly* Christian that has happened and is happening in this world. For those who aren't necessarily Christian, the idea of love still has power. In fact, it was the unifying power of this simple, four-letter word that the Beatles sought to tap in the summer of 1967 when they wrote “All You Need Is Love.”

Given the enduring presence and role of love in our world, learning more about it seems like a wise endeavor. I'll keep forging ahead.

As I do, there is one niggling thought I can't get out of my head—that passage from Deuteronomy that is called the greatest commandment: *“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”*

God commands us to love him. What does that mean? Why is it called the greatest commandment? Who are some good role models for loving God? How can I learn from them and love God more?





# WHY LOVE GOD MORE?

## Head and Heart

*“Start with why.”*

—Simon Sinek

I did not realize how little I understood God’s love for me, or the meaning of love, until I went through my 180 journey.

It all started with a simple question: *Why?*

Why love God more? What is the motivation to do so? If I could first put my finger on the motivation, I would be able to turn up the love, like a dial. And that would be a good thing, right?

I work in the public relations (PR) profession, which means I basically smooth out relationships for a living. In business, there are usually things that can be done to enhance a relationship, deepen it, and make it mutually beneficial. My job is to search for those strategies and help clients act on those strategies. Usually, the PR plan starts with a simple analysis:

- Who is the audience?
- What do we want the audience to know, think, or do differently?
- Why? What is in it for the audience? How do we create buy-in to manage change?
- What are we going to do to achieve the desired outcome?

That’s a strategic PR plan in a nutshell. It’s used for everything from selling widgets to electing candidates to changing public opinion on social issues. In the course of my career, I have tackled many issues and helped many clients through distressing situations. With a good plan, many target audiences can go from a place of little-to-no information to a place of greater understanding or from uninspired to inspired.

With this project, logically, I saw myself as a target audience that needed to be moved to a better place. When I examined my situation, I found that the *head knowledge* was all there from my years of catechism class. (See sidebar “Here’s What I Know.”) To create change, head knowledge needed to be paired with a *favorable attitude* toward loving God more. To assess my own attitude, I wrote down the questions that swirled around in my head:

- Does it really matter if I love God more?
- Will God notice if I love him more?
- Will my life look different if I love God more?
- I think I love God. Why don’t I *feel* it?
- Does my level of enthusiasm matter to God?
- Even if I lived with great enthusiasm, would it really matter to those around me? God’s will is going to be done with me or without me.

I must admit . . . I felt guilty for asking these questions. They revealed a less-than-favorable attitude toward changing my behavior. How could a person who was raised by Christian parents, sent to Christian schools (at great financial sacrifice on the part of my parents), and an active member in her church be so lukewarm in her attitude about loving God? I knew that I could not expect results for this journey without confronting my attitude. No PR plan is successful unless the target audience develops a favorable attitude toward change. My attitude was indifferent at best—and maybe much worse, as you’ll read a few short chapters later.

Okay. Let’s assume that I *do* want to love God more. (Why would I invest myself in a 180 journey if I *didn’t* want to love him more?) What would success look like? I wrote down some thoughts:

- I want to move from being a Christian with head knowledge about God to being a Christian with a willing heart to act on that knowledge.
- I want to be a person who exudes the love of Christ, so others can see it and give glory to God.
- I want to actually *feel* love for God.

As I prepped for my 180 journey, some of my Christian head knowledge resurfaced and helped me realize that I was not alone in my quest to live a more passionate Christian life. Others have been on this quest before me, and perhaps I could learn something from them. For example,

I've always loved reading stories about Martin Luther and other Christians who lived in and around the time of the Reformation, that period of great change and awakening in the Christian church that took place five hundred years ago. I'm fascinated by the passion and courage these Christians displayed and by the way the world was transformed not only religiously, but also economically, culturally, and politically during this time period. I recalled reading a book a number of years ago—in fact, it's still on my bookshelf—that described how a group of reformers attempted to give Christian living a shot in the arm. I pulled the book off my shelf and jotted down some notes about Philipp Jakob Spener, a German pastor living in Frankfurt almost a century following the Reformation.

At that time, Spener was growing increasingly worried that Lutheran Christians were becoming lukewarm, unfeeling, and consequently less spiritual. Not content with lukewarm, Spener organized his congregation into small groups devoted to prayer and Bible study. The motivation behind Spener's revival work, in his own words, was:

... to establish among Christian individuals a holy and close friendship, that each one learns to recognize the Christianity of the others whereby the fire of love is more and more inflamed among us, from which so much passionate desire arises that everyone may be edified at every opportunity and by their example may excite others next to them to heartfelt earnestness. (*Dreyzehn Theologische Sendschreiben*, 1716, quoted in *Sanctification: Christ in Action* by Harold Senkbeil, page 28.)

“Fire of love” and “passionate desire.” These are the feelings I was missing at the beginning of my 180 journey. Spener's prescription was studying the Bible and following the example of other such “inflamed” Christians. Granted, many Bible-believing theologians in Spener's time asserted that he went too far, that he and theologians like him placed undue emphasis on our feelings toward God and not enough emphasis on *what God has objectively done for us*, irrespective of our feelings. Many knowledgeable Christians today also agree that Spener went too far. Nevertheless, the reformer was confronting what he believed to be the absence of “heartfelt earnestness,” and there is nothing inherently wrong with asking ourselves whether that type of zeal is missing from our Christian living. The apostle Paul writes in the book of Romans, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (12:11).

And later in 2 Corinthians Paul says, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith” (13:5).

My 180 journey would certainly be a vehicle for examining myself—probably more than I ever have in my entire life as a Christian. I was hopeful that the process would ignite what I wanted to feel: “zeal” and “heartfelt earnestness” beyond head knowledge. After all, what God wants is clear: “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*”

Clearly it’s not enough to *know* with my head alone. God wants all of me: heart, soul, strength. I know this command in my head. I want my heart to follow suit. How does that happen?

## YOUR TURN:

- What do you know to be true about God? About his relationship with you?
- How would you describe your attitude toward God?
- What is your answer to the question, Why love God more?
- What do you think “loving God more” would look like in your life?

## Here’s What I Know

If you are new to Christianity or if you have not opened your Bible or catechism in a while (or don’t even know what a catechism is), you may benefit from me taking a little time to share what I know to be true about my relationship with God. I call it *head knowledge* because, by God’s grace, the information is all there in my head, thanks to my Christian parents, pastors, and teachers.

You may not start your journey in exactly the same place mine started, and that does not matter. I simply want you to understand where I began.

First and foremost, I believe that the Bible is God’s Word and presents objective truths about God and his relationship with me. I’ve listed the truths and the Bible references here so that you can review them for yourself.

- God created the world, and when he did so, everything was perfect. (Genesis 1)
- The first human beings, Adam and Eve, were real people who rebelled against God. When they did, they were no longer perfect. Sin and death entered the world and have

since been passed along through the generations to every human being. (Genesis 3)

- Now sin, like a deep chasm, separates humans from one another and from God. He made us to be loving people who rely on him and rejoice in him. Instead, from birth we are self-absorbed, proud people who could hardly care less about God or others. (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 3:23)
- I am in this same predicament. From birth, my every heart's desire has been inclined toward evil, and this separates me from God. Even when I feel like I'm not so bad, that inclination is there. (Genesis 8:21; Psalm 51:5)
- I, like all human beings, need something or someone to make me right with God again. I can't do it myself, no matter how hard I try to be good. (Romans 3:19-24)
- God loves all human beings, and so he came up with a plan: He sent Jesus to make things right between God and all human beings, including me. Jesus did that by taking on the punishment for all the world's wrongdoing in our place. (Psalm 145:9; Luke 19:10; Isaiah 53:5)
- Instead of asking me to earn, even in part, my way into his love and acceptance, God says, *Simply believe that Jesus has already earned it for you.* (Acts 16:30,31)
- I know that God was not obliged to tell me the good news about Jesus. He has told me only because of his grace, his overflowing generosity. (1 Peter 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:16)
- I know that it is only because of his grace, his generous heart, that God keeps me in the faith, keeps me believing in what Jesus has done. (1 Peter 1:5)
- I know that, out of love and thankfulness to my Savior, I will serve God and bring glory to him with my actions. (Colossians 3:17)
- God wants me to share what I know with others. (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 8:39)

### TRAVEL TIPS:

As you consider your own 180 journey:

- **Evaluate your starting point:** What is your relationship with God like right now? What do you *know* to be true about your relationship with God? How do your *actions* reflect what you know? Are there any gaps between what you *know* and how you *act*?
- **Establish your goals:** What might you want to accomplish during a 180 journey? What improvements would you hope to see in your relationship with God?

# Why 180?

*“We should handle it the best way we know how and get on with it. That’s what my mind says, I just wish somebody would explain it to my heart.”*

—M’lynn Eatenton, *Steel Magnolias*

As I prepared for my 180 journey, I was really in tune with anything that fed into what I intended to study. Love songs, love quotes in movies, Bible stories about love—I perked up and listened more intently to all these things. So when I sat in on a Bible study about Esther, I couldn’t help but notice the opening chapter and its relationship to my study topic.

The opening lines of the book of Esther describe a banquet given by King Xerxes, the powerful ruler of the Persian Empire from about 486 to 465 B.C. Anybody who was anyone in Persia at the time was present at this banquet. All the nobles and military leaders came to feast, revel, and undoubtedly dream about their next great conquests. The palace was decked to the nines. Food was plentiful and drinks were flowing. Important leaders in the government mingled, and prominent citizens from the four corners of the land came to pay their respects. King Xerxes was using the occasion to make a statement. “For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty” (Esther 1:4).

A 180-day party! Six months of eating and drinking and reveling! Bible-believing historians surmise that King Xerxes intended this banquet to be the kickoff for an immense military campaign—an unsurpassed display of his wealth and power that would build unwavering loyalty to him. Small rebellions had started to break out across the empire, and Xerxes likely wanted to convey that he held the same wealth and power as his father, Darius I. Xerxes and his advisors must have deemed that 180 days was a sufficient amount of time to display such power. (As it turned out, God had plans of his own. The 180-day revelry set God’s plans in motion for Esther to become queen and to play a prominent role in preserving and protecting the Jewish people.)

One hundred eighty days seems like a ridiculous amount of time to party. Likewise, in today’s society, it seems like a ridiculous amount of time for a Bible study on one topic. In fact, I’m quite sure that a book

with the title *180 Days to a New You* would sit on the shelf and gather dust. The human attention span averages eight seconds. Or 140 characters if you tweet. We only have time for one click or at the very most “three easy steps.” Even the famed 12-step process seems so yesterday. One-minute devotions pop up on our phone apps, and Christian radio in the car keeps us on the straight and narrow even if the day does not allow for 15 minutes alone with God.

Not that there is anything wrong with trying to fit Bible study into the hustle and bustle of a busy life. In fact, the Bible encourages it: “These are the commands. . . . Talk about them . . . when you walk along the road” (Deuteronomy 6:1,7). “Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And professionals often deliver Bible studies and devotions right to my mobile phone, free of charge! What a blessing it is to have God’s Word curated, organized, and sent to us in bite-sized servings to grab-and-go all day long.

The prospect of a 180-day project made it abundantly clear how overreliant I was on these modern tools. I had been fitting God into my life instead of putting God first, yielding to his leadership, and building my life around him. And now I was holding this invitation in my hand: “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*”

What if I spent 180 days studying this concept of putting God first? Feasting on God’s words. Drinking in his Holy Spirit through the Word. Marveling at the beauty around me and the people who come in and out of my circle at various times. Would I experience all the beauty and joy and peace that loving God more has to offer?

I believe God wanted me to rediscover the story of Esther—this little gem in Scripture about a 180-day party designed to ward off rebellion. King Xerxes may have sensed that dissidents were lurking, waiting for the opportunity to weaken his kingdom from the inside. Likewise, I sensed that I needed to take intentional and deliberate steps to confront the rebellion that was brewing in me.

## YOUR TURN:

- Have you ever taken on a self-improvement project of any kind? What was it? How long were you committed to the project?

- Do you think you could study the topic of “loving God more” for a full 180 days?
- What might stand in your way?
- What personal weaknesses might you address with a 180 journey of your own?



# Rebellion

*“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

—Matthew 26:41

I met Rebellion very early on in my 180 journey. I have to hand it to her: She was one of the most persistent of all the friends and acquaintances I observed during this project. She had a habit of dropping in unexpectedly and drawing me into conversations that I really didn't have time to have.

Once in a while, I entertained her. After all, she did bring up some seemingly valid points from time to time. She made me think.

One evening I was reading from the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible's Old Testament. In this section of Scripture, God is speaking through Moses to the Israelites before they finally enter the land God had promised to them generations previously: *“Be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”* (6:12).

As I read, I recalled my *head knowledge* about this part of Israelite history: how God had saved them from a very desperate situation. They had been cruelly, even murderously, enslaved by the Egyptians. God then raised up a leader among them, Moses, to defy the Egyptian pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt toward their freedom (the grand “exit” for which the book of Exodus is named—depicted with critical acclaim in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston as Moses).

I recalled what I am supposed to see in these verses: first, how God protected his people, and second, the parallel to my own life. God rescued both the Israelites and me from desperate situations. He rescued the Israelites from a life sentence of making mud bricks under the hot Egyptian sun. He rescued me from the sin that separates me from God, a death sentence for my soul. (The apostle Paul called us “slaves to sin” in Romans 6:6.) Deuteronomy is a historical narrative about the people of Israel; it is also a reminder for all God's children to revere him and to be thankful for his deliverance. Like the people of Israel, I ought to remember the Lord who brought me out of my predicament.

This is when Rebellion brought her first challenge. She invited herself into my home, stood beside me as I studied, and began asking questions.

“If somebody saves you from a desperate situation and says, ‘Now you have to love me,’ is that real love?”

“It is,” I replied. “If God had not rescued me, I would remain forever separated from him.”

That’s what I learned in catechism class. That’s what the Bible says.

“Seriously? God commands people to love him?” Rebellion queried innocently.

“He loved me first,” I answered, recalling the memory passage from 1 John 4:19. “So I love him back.”

“Seems a bit condescending on God’s part,” Rebellion observed. “He threatens to abandon you, he swoops in to save you, and then he commands you to love him.”

I looked up from my Bible, exasperated. I glanced around at the untidy room, the dishes still undone in the kitchen, the clock with its small arm pointing to the 10. I didn’t have time for Rebellion’s questions. I simply wanted to finish my study, get my housework done, and get to bed.

Rebellion followed my gaze and quickly picked up on my frustration. She surveyed the clutter and then looked at me with one raised eyebrow. In this pose, she reminded me of the Dowager Countess of *Downton Abbey*, trying to appear magnanimous and all the while judging me for today’s unfinished work.

I met her unspoken judgment head-on. “None of this matters,” I said, gesturing to the piles of paperwork and dinner dishes on the kitchen counter. “God loves me and he saved me and that is what is important here. Please let me finish my study.”

“By all means, continue,” Rebellion insisted. She pushed aside some clutter and sat down beside me. A few minutes passed.

“Are you thankful that he saved you?” she probed.

I was annoyed. I was just trying to get my devotion and my housework done before 11 P.M., and she wanted to have a deep theological conversation?

She persisted. “Well? Are you thankful?”

I had to think about that a bit. The fact that I had to think about it pricked my conscience. I knew I should be thankful. Truth was, I did not *feel* very thankful at the moment, and she knew it.

“Oh, I don’t know!” I finally said, incensed. “What does it matter? I know I’m saved; I thank God whenever I think of it, end of story.”

“So you must feel special that you are one of ‘God’s children,’” she continued. She made air quotes with her bony fingers for emphasis.

My mind was filled with a million things to say to her, but as debates went, she had me on the ropes. She was making an emotional appeal and I was armed with facts. I threw a few of the most critical facts her way, including what I knew to be true from my catechism study: Jesus “purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness” (Explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Luther’s Catechism, 1998).

“Why would God do such a thing? Why would he bother with you? So you can serve him?” Rebellion’s eyebrow arched again.

“Yes. It’s a privilege to serve him.”

“Sounds fun,” Rebellion retorted.

“Yes, it is!” I exclaimed. I’m sure I did not sound convincing. I felt compelled to add, “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10).

“You have a funny way of looking ‘delightful.’” She made air quotes again.

After I concluded my devotion, she sat for quite a while and watched me finish up my housework. She must have known I wanted her to leave by the way I was slamming cupboard doors and muttering under my breath. But she didn’t leave. Finally, when I announced I was calling it a day, she stood up and surveyed my work.

“None of this matters,” she whispered in my ear, tossing my earlier words right back at me.

I gestured toward the door. Then I saw my journal sitting on the table next to my Bible. I opened it and wrote, “*Day 1 of My 180. Does God really command me to love him? Do I owe him love for rescuing me? Why does that make me bristle? Lord, help me confront this.*”

I glanced up from the page, and Rebellion was gone.

She visited me often during my 180 journey. It should have been easy to slap her assaults down with head knowledge and not let her get a word in edgewise. I was supposed to “put on the full armor of God” and “extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” who sent her to me (Ephesians 6:11,16). But she said some things that touched a nerve: Am I thankful? Do I feel grateful?

The command rang in my ear: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength.*

God wants all of me. It is not enough to love with the mind but not with the heart and soul. The Bible’s language in that command means “with all your being.” If I love with head knowledge only, I am depriving God of what he asks for. What he *commands*.

## YOUR TURN:

- When it comes to loving God, does Rebellion ever visit you?
- What buttons does Rebellion push for you?
- What do you know about God’s love for you that you can use to steel yourself against Rebellion’s way of thinking?
- What are some ways you can confront Rebellion’s challenges? Might a journal work for you?

## You Don’t Need to Know *Why* to Start

If you’re thinking about doing a 180 journey in an effort to explore “loving God more” (or any topic, really), be assured that you don’t have to have all the answers when you start. That’s why you’re doing the journey!

I did not know the answer to “why love God more?” when I started. What I did know, however, is that I wanted to live a more passionate and emotive Christian life. I wanted to *feel* more love for God and for others around me. And, as David wished in Psalm 51, I wanted to feel the joy of my salvation.

The beauty of a 180 journey is God's Word combined with prayer and an emotional outlet—a journal. These are your primary tools. God's Word is the objective truth that balances the subjective and volatile human emotions explored on the pages of the journal. The journal becomes an important tool for self-reflection over time. And prayer is your way of channeling all your emotions toward God, who will use them for his purposes.

### TRAVEL TIPS:

- **Find a good study Bible.** I used the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, New International Version, that my husband and I received as a wedding gift.
- **Purchase or set up a journal**—either pen and paper or electronic. I used old-fashioned pen and paper because I use a computer a lot during the day and I wanted my 180 time to feel different.
- **Put your tools in a place where you will see them every day** and be reminded of your commitment.

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