

LOVING GOD (1)



WHICH WORKS? (2)

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Loving God (1)

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Which Works? (2)
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Welcome to *Loving God (1)*

The most important good work we have been redeemed to do is that of loving God. Loving God does not come naturally to us. Yet He deserves all our love; indeed, He commands it of us.

So we'll need to work at loving God and at showing Him we do. By learning to fear the Lord we will follow His Word to serve Him, and grow in love for Him as we do. Then we can concentrate on increasing in love for God by loving His Presence, Word, salvation, creation, and work.

The good works we do for others will issue from our love for God. Work hard to love the Lord, and loving your neighbor in good works of all kinds will flow naturally.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Why Should We Love God?

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Deuteronomy 6.4, 5

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment.” Matthew 22.37, 38

Of gods and men

In this section of our study on “Which Works?” we will be considering how the Law of God helps us grow in and express our love for God. But we don’t want to take anything for granted, just as God did not want Israel to take anything for granted as they made their way toward the land of promise.

In a lengthy chapter of *The City of God*, Augustine pokes fun at the Roman belief in the plethora of deities that made up their pantheon. The Romans acknowledged a single, overarching god, whom they called Zeus. He was the ruler of all the other gods, and was considered to be sovereign in the affairs of men and empires. He had at his disposal a seemingly endless array of lesser deities whose job it was to do the will of Zeus with respect to his servants, the people of the Roman world. These lesser gods were highly specialized. There was a god for the nose, the mustache, the eyes and eyebrows; a god for the ears, a god for the rain, a god for this, that, and everything else. Augustine chided his Roman readers, wondering why they had so many gods. Wasn’t one sovereign deity enough? And if not, what made him worthy of his post?

More important than this, however, is that Augustine showed that the basic relationship between Roman pagans and the gods they served was one of obeisance and service. They were forever trying to keep on the good side of the gods, because they knew their deities to be fickle, demanding, and capable of bashing people who didn’t offer them the right sacrifices or prominence in their daily prayers. The gods of Rome did not love their servants, and there was no sense in which the pagans of Rome could be said to have *loved* their gods. They barely trusted them. Mostly they tried to placate them in one way or another, or to buy their support against some rival by adding an extra offering along with their request.

The idea of *loving* a god was not part of Roman religion. Indeed, it’s not part of pagan religion generally, where the basic goal of religion is to keep the gods placated and on the side of the worshiper. The same was true of the pagan peoples who occupied the land of Canaan. All they wanted from their gods was a life of security and sufficiency; and to keep their gods happy and producing for them, they went to extraordinary lengths to placate them, including slashing themselves and offering their children in the flames.

It’s hard to love a god who demands so much, whether that god is Baal or Moloch or one’s work or wealth or personal power.

Which makes it all the more important we understand God’s greatest commandment to Israel – and through Jesus, to us – and take up whatever practices will allow us to nurture and express our love for Him.

Why, precisely, ought we to work hard to love God with all our soul and strength?

Creator and Sustainer

We cannot catalog all the reasons why loving God and always seeking to increase in love for Him makes perfect sense. But I want to mention four.

First, God is our Creator. We are not here by chance. We are not merely the highest link in the chain of some

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merely mechanical process that has given rise, over billions of years, to our species. Christians do not accept this view of who we are and where we've come from, and while they don't always agree on the details of our provenance, all believers understand that God is our Creator. He is our Creator in a *general* sense, in that, in the beginning, He created the heavens and the earth and all things (Gen. 1). And He is Creator in the more *specific* sense in that He is ultimately the One responsible for each one of us being conceived and born into life (cf. Ps. 139.13-16).

We live, we love, we delight and enjoy our lives, and we seek to make the most of our opportunities in the life our Creator has given us. He loves us enough to have brought us into this world; it makes sense, therefore, that we should love Him supremely.

Moreover, not only has God made us, but He *sustains* us day by day. All that we are, along with everything else in the vast cosmos, is upheld in its being by the Word of God, even our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 1.3). In Him all things consist and hold together (Col. 1.15-17). The fact that we enjoy new day after new day, and all the goodness and wonder those days contain, is only because God Who loves us keeps, sustains, and provides for us in every aspect of our being. He is for this reason to be wholeheartedly and mightily loved.

Holy Redeemer

God is to be loved because He is holy. His holiness consists of the perfection of all virtues and attributes, including love, goodness, beauty, truth, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and more. Those who truly know God as holy delight to contemplate Him, to look upon His beauty, gaze upon His glory, and rejoice in His Presence. He is everything most to be desired and enjoyed, and He invites to know, love, and enjoy Him at all times, in all we do. Such a God is to be loved for the unfailing virtues and endless delights of which His holiness consists.

And this Creator, this sovereign and holy God, has made it possible for us to know Him, to commune with Him, to enjoy, love, and glorify Him by giving His Son, Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sins. God did not have to redeem us. But His love for us is so great, so constant, and so personal and intimate, that He simply *would not* let us go to eternal destruction, the consequence of our own foolish choices. Instead, He came among us, laid out the path of righteousness into the Presence of God, took away the debt of our sin, and sent His Spirit to dwell in all those who believe in Him for salvation.

Surely these are good reasons for loving God! And they are just the merest sketch of the greatness of God and the enormity of His love for us. As we grow to know God, we should expect our love for Him to increase. And as our love increases, we will never tire of discovering new ways to show this great and loving God how much we love Him.

And, happily, He has shown us precisely how we can fulfill that longing.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to you to love God? Why do you love Him?
2. If it were possible to love God more, to love Him more constantly, and to delight more in loving Him, would you want to do that? Explain.
3. What do you hope to gain from this study of how we as Christians may improve in loving God?

Next steps – Preparation: Spend time in prayer reviewing before the Lord the four reasons given here for why we should love Him. What others come to mind?

2 First, Fear Him

*You, Yourself, are to be feared;
And who may stand in Your presence
When once You are angry? Psalm 76.7*

*Teach me Your way, O LORD;
I will walk in Your truth;
Unite my heart to fear Your name. Psalm 86.11*

Fear? Really?

Believers are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matt. 22.37). This is the first and great commandment, and the foundation from which works of love flow toward our neighbors. As we have seen, God our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, and holy Lord is worthy of all the love we can direct to Him, all the time. Every Christian knows this, and no small part of effective discipleship involves cultivating that frame of mind and disposition of heart which leads to loving obedience to God through Jesus Christ.

We love God because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4.19). We must *learn* to love God, since loving Him does not come naturally to us; but all believers will insist they love God, and they would love to love Him more. But in order to love Him, we must follow His directives, and love Him from within the framework of love *He* has commanded.

And loving God as He would be loved begins in *fearing* Him.

The same God Who commands our love also commands us to fear Him: “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul...” (Deut. 10.12). This is not simply an Old Testament mandate that we may think we can easily dismiss. The Lord Jesus echoed this command in Matthew 10.28: “and do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Paul echoed the same instruction, insisting that the fear of God is that which defines and sustains our quest for holiness and a life of good works (2 Cor. 7.1).

Now we don’t hear much about fearing the Lord these days. In fact, about the last thing many pastors seem to want to tell their people is that they should in any way relate to God on the basis of fear. God is our Father, Jesus is our Friend and Brother, and the Holy Spirit is our Comforter. What’s to fear there?

In large sectors of the believing community today we have concluded that fear is not a proper affection for conducting a relationship with God.

Obviously, if God’s Word is to be trusted, that conviction is wrong.

Why fear?

Let’s do a thought experiment (Einstein did them, and look where it got him!). Let’s imagine you are in your home, in a favorite room in your home, relaxed and at ease, and well-satisfied with yourself. Can you see yourself sitting there in your favorite chair? Lookin’ good.

Now imagine that the ceiling of that room suddenly dissolves, and you see, descending toward you, a light so bright you cannot bear to look at it. Smoke begins to fill the room, but for some reason, you can’t move.

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You're frozen to your chair, as the light continues to descend, and grow brighter, filling the room around you, and the smoke grows thicker and more ominous. The room is beginning to shake violently.

Suddenly, you see what appears to be the outlines of a throne. The light seems to be stationed there, radiant as glowing jasper, too brilliant to gaze upon, and descending closer, ever closer. As your whole body begins to tremble uncontrollably, you hear loud, deep, surrounding voices proclaiming,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!”

How do you respond? Do you say, “Oh hey, Daddy! Come on in! What fun!” Or do you feel more like saying, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Is. 6.3-5)? Or, “And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead” (Rev. 1.17)?

Yeah. Me, too.

Because of the neglect of instruction on the fear of God, most believers do *not* fear the Lord, and, frankly, their lifestyles demonstrate as much. If we feared the Lord, we would be mindful of offending or disappointing Him, or in any way provoking Him to exercise discipline against us. If we feared the Lord, we might tremble for our churches and our country, since we are an increasingly sinful people, and God is a just and all-powerful God.

When the only affection we nurture toward God is love – or what we may think of as love – we aren't likely to obey Him as we should. And when we fail in obeying God, we miss out on the full and abundant life He wants us to enjoy. Fear Him first, then obey Him and love Him. That's the order God Himself commands.

But why should believers fear God? Apart from the fact, as we have seen, that we are *commanded* to fear God, we should consider the very nature of God. As Asaph points out in Psalm 76, God is powerful to overcome all adversaries (v. 3). He is majestic beyond all description (v. 4); wrathful toward those who oppose Him (vv. 5, 6; cf. Rom. 1.18-20); and able to subdue and punish those who arouse His anger (vv. 7-9). The writer of Hebrews reminds us that, as our loving heavenly Father, it pleases God to discipline His children from time to time, and, since no discipline is ever pleasant, we should regard the very prospect of discipline with a certain amount of fear (Heb. 12.7-11). If we do not fear the discipline of the Lord, we will be more inclined to indulge those behaviors that provoke God's discipline against us.

More than awe

Sometimes people want to reduce the fear of God to a kind of reverential awe. That's a component, to be sure. But the fear God commands is more than simple awe, although it includes that. The fear of God is a healthy dread of what our powerful, majestic, and holy God might do to demonstrate His indignation and impatience with recalcitrant sinners such as we.

But besides the fact of God's *commandment* to fear Him, as well as His *worthiness* to be feared, there are the many *benefits* that accrue to those who nurture and sustain a healthy fear of God. Nurturing the fear of the Lord opens wide doors of opportunity to enjoy full and abundant life in ways that, apart from the fear of the Lord, we can never fully know. When all the affections of our heart are united in the fear of God, then we will know joy, compassion, love, and peace in ever-increasing measure.

To be sure, in fearing God we do not leave off loving Him. These are two sides of the same coin. Our love for God can only grow as we nurture fear of Him, because the wonder and enormity of His everyday grace becomes even more starkly evident against the backdrop of our own unworthiness, and of what we deserve at the hands of our holy and just God.

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You will only love God, truly love Him, when you fear Him as well; for these two seemingly opposite affections create a healthy tension in the soul, where righteousness and abundant life can flourish unto good works of love.

For reflection

1. Why do you think the fear of God is neglected in churches today?
2. Is there something about us, about the kind of beings we are, that *needs* to fear God? Explain.
3. How can fearing God help us grow in love for Him?

Next steps – Preparation: Seek the Lord in prayer. Praise and thank Him, until joy rises within you; then ask the Lord to help you fear Him as you should.

3 Loving God's Presence

*As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God? Psalm 42.1, 2*

The divine prerogative

Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” (Jn. 21.15-17) When Peter confirmed – with evident shame – that He loved Jesus, Jesus told Him to “Feed My sheep” (v. 18). If Peter truly loved Jesus, He would demonstrate that love by doing what Jesus commanded.

An important principle for loving God emerges in this story: We are not free to love God on our own terms. We're neither clever, consistent, nor constant enough to love God however we think is best. If we love God on our terms only, we are doing little more than satisfying some impulse that arises from within us. Such love may make us feel better, but it costs us nothing. Jesus told Peter that the love He required of him, that self-denying pastoral care of His sheep, would cost him his life. As, indeed, it did.

Only God is able to show us how to love Him; and loving Him means, as He shows us, loving His Presence. Like Peter, rushing to get ashore to see Jesus, they who truly love God will long for and seek His Presence.

Longing for God

The sons of Korah were gatekeepers in the temple, that glorious place where the people of God came to be in His Presence (1 Chron. 26.1-19). Their work entailed letting people into the Presence of God. We can imagine that, as they saw eager worshipers going past them, and heard singing from within the temple, their own longing to be with the Lord would have been kindled, their expectation of His Presence heightened, and their desire for the Lord made even stronger. Certainly, this is what they expressed in Psalm 42.

We know that we love the Lord when we long for Him like a thirsting deer, when our soul longs for the refreshment only He can provide, and we can scarcely wait for the next opportunity to come before Him. The anticipation of being with God, day by day and throughout the day, fills us with holy excitement, and renews us in hope.

Waiting on God

Once in God's Presence, we're not looking at our watches. We wait for Him to make His Presence known. We wait on the Lord, offering our souls for His inspection, declaring our love for and trust in Him, seeking mercy and grace to help in our time of need; calling on the Lord to show us His ways, and lingering over His Word as He does; calling on Him to grant us more of His salvation as we promise to wait on Him “all the day” (Ps. 25.1-5).

Why would we soon depart the Presence of our heavenly Father? The company of our Savior and King? No wonder David, in seeking the Lord's face and desiring to know His ways and goodness, counseled us to wait on the Lord, gazing on His beauty, and meditating in His Presence (Ps. 27.8-14, 4).

Enjoying the Lord

As we wait on the Lord, He brings us into His joy.

God wants us to delight in Him (Ps. 37.4). He has made being in His Presence an experience of unspeakable

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joy (Ps. 16.11). As we gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, and contemplate the glory that radiates from the face of our Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 4.6), we know true joy, lasting peace, and unbounded hope. The more this becomes our experience in the Presence of God, the more we will long for these times, and wait patiently before Him to bring us into His joy.

Waiting on God is not burdensome, because it yields holy spiritual pleasures such as cannot be described, and which can go with us throughout the day.

Abiding in God's Presence

For our God is with us wherever we go (Ps. 139.7-12). Jesus promised to be with us always (Matt. 28.20). He has also seated us with Him in heavenly places, that we might at all times abide in His Presence, seeking Him, delighting in Him, hearing Him, wondering at His glory, and serving Him in all we do (1 Jn. 2.24-27).

We love God when we seek the filling of His Spirit, the vision of His Son, glimpses of His glory from creation (Ps. 19.1-4), and the hope of our calling in Him (Eph. 5.18-21; 1.15-23). We cry like Moses, "If Your Presence does not go *with us*, do not bring us up from here" (Ex. 33.15). As the Presence of God goes with us, and we abide in Him throughout the day, we dwell in His rest and draw on His power to live as His witnesses to the world (Ex. 33.14; Acts 1.8).

Celebrating God's Presence

Our love for God, by which we long for His Presence, wait on and abide joyfully in Him, and live in continuous communion with Him, leads us to celebrate His Presence in worship, witness, and good works. Like rivers of living water, the Spirit pours out celebrations of the pleasures of God in all our words and deeds (Jn. 7.37-39).

God calls His people to love Him by loving His Presence. We see this from the earliest days of His Law, when God gave careful instruction to the people of Israel concerning the tabernacle, the priests and their garments, the offerings and sacrifices by which they would commune together, and the days of worship and celebration He prescribed. The Law shows us God as calling His people to His Presence, preparing them for His Presence, meeting with them to receive, renew, and bless them, and sending them forth from His Presence to live according to all the counsel of His Law.

Being in the Presence of God is the essence of how we love Him, just as it is the essence of how He loves us: "And the LORD, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed" (Deut. 31.8); "and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age" (Matt. 28.20); "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16.7, 13, 14).

God loves us so much that He gives us His Presence always. Let us each day, first thing each day, like Peter, casting himself into the sea, cast ourselves at Jesus, that we may know His Presence with us, and we may rest in Him.

For reflection

1. What opportunities throughout the day do you have for entering the Presence of the Lord?
2. How would you encourage a fellow believer to nurture greater longing for the Lord's Presence?
3. How does the Law of God show us that God wants His people to be in His Presence?

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Next steps – Transformation: Begin your day in the Presence of the Lord, waiting on Him with praise and thanks. Then abide in His Presence throughout the day, celebrating His Presence with you in prayer, singing, and witness.

4 Loving God's Word

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” Deuteronomy 6.6-9

And Moses commanded them, saying: “At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess.” Deuteronomy 31.10-13

These words and all the Word

We love God by loving His Presence, and resorting there often. We enter God's Presence and can grow in love for Him, by loving His Word. What Moses taught concerning the Law of God – the entire corpus of his writings, Genesis through Deuteronomy – the rest of Scripture echoes concerning the whole of God's Word.

Scripture describes what it means to love God's Word. God calls us to *feed* on His Word (Job. 23.12); to find it the *joy and rejoicing of our hearts* (Jer. 15.16); to *delight in and love* the Law and testimonies and statutes and precepts and rules of God (Ps. 119), to *meditate* in it day and night (Ps. 1), to be *sanctified* by the Word of truth (Jn. 17.17); to *learn all the counsel* of God (Acts 20.27); to *seek the profit* for good works it holds (2 Tim. 3.15-17); to *meet and know Jesus* in every section and passage (Jn. 5.39; Lk. 24.27); to *delight in the sweetness and learn from the bitterness* of Scripture (Rev. 10.8-10); to *be transformed* by the Word (2 Cor. 3.12-18); and to have the Word of God dwelling in us richly, that we may learn, obey, and teach it joyfully (Col. 3.16; Heb. 5.12-14).

Developing this kind of relationship with Scripture is work. Good work. It takes time, demands effort and attention, and requires that we be willing to change; but the rewards such a relationship provides make it well worth the effort. Foundational to all the works God has prepared for us as His redeemed and saved people is the good work of seeking the Lord in His Word. We love God when we love His Word, and as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling *in* His Word and *by* His Spirit (Phil. 2.12, 13; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

But what goes into the work of loving God's Word? Obviously, merely owning a Bible is hardly any evidence that we love God. It's a good place to start, however, at developing those disciplines that will enable us to increase in loving God as He intends.

Let's look briefly at five different kinds of good work we can do in loving God and His Word.

Reading God's Word

Loving God's Word begins with reading it. We should think of our reading of God's Word like Job did – that it was more important to him than his daily food. Developing the daily discipline of reading God's Word is that key to nurturing love for God. Set aside the time. Adopt a reading plan. Be faithful and diligent to read from the Word every day, and your love for God will grow continuously.

Further, be sure you read *all* of God's Word, and that you read it over and over again. We can never plumb the depths of Scripture, and there will always be something fresh and new to discover, as well as things familiar to review. Read daily, and read it all; it's all about Jesus and His love for you.

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Meditating on God's Word

Meditation is slow, contemplative reading. In meditation we focus on a small portion of Scripture within the larger section of our reading. We ponder the themes and messages of the portion, asking questions about each word, looking to the Spirit to direct us to other parts of Scripture, to shed more light on the focus of our meditation. In meditation we pray the Scriptures back to God, rehearsing our insights, raising questions for clarification, and sharing our conclusions and applications with our heavenly Father.

Meditation can be greatly enhanced by journaling, even if it's just making marginal notes in your Bible. The discipline of writing keeps you slowed down in reading and reinforces important observations and insights that, because you have written them down, you can review again and again.

Studying

In studying Scripture we search and dig for deeper meanings; make important connections with other portions of Scripture; and tease out specific applications for daily living. We try to see how the passage we're studying fits into the overall context of the book in which it appears, the time when it was written, and the overarching narrative of Scripture as a whole.

In studying Scripture we will ask more probing questions, consult others (such as teachers and writers), and connect what we're learning from this portion of Scripture with similar lessons elsewhere. We might bring in a wide range of tools to aid us, such as study guides, Bible dictionaries, commentaries and devotional guides, and a thorough concordance. The more we study Scripture, the more what we learn will sink into our souls; and the more we'll realize just how much more of Scripture there is to learn.

Memorizing God's Word

Memorizing Scripture can help to set the Word more firmly in our soul, so that it's ready in our minds, shaping our affections, and establishing right priorities for our lives. The key to memorizing Scripture is simple: repetition, repetition, repetition.

Write out the verse you want to remember, and recite it aloud frequently, each time adding a little more of the verse to your memory, until you have the whole of it, word perfect. Rehearse the verses you've memorized when a few moments in your day allow it, and you'll keep them fresh and ready to help guide, encourage, or prompt you for whatever the Spirit wants.

Sharing God's Word

We should all be teachers of the Word of God, as we have seen. This begins by sharing with others what we're learning – new insights from our reading, lessons from our study, applications we're working to master, and new verses we're memorizing. The more we share Scripture, the more Scripture takes deep root in our soul, where it works with God's Spirit to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ.

All this reading, meditating, studying, memorizing, and sharing of God's Word is designed to help us apply and live the Word obediently, trusting God to grow and equip us for ministry, as we let His Word do its living and powerful work in our lives (Heb. 4.12).

We love God by being often in His Presence, and we can be in His Presence by being daily and regularly and ever-more-deeply in His Word. If we love God, we will love His Word.

For reflection

1. What can you do to improve your time in God's Word?
2. Why does it make sense that if we love God we will love His Word?
3. How would you help a new believer get started in loving God by loving His Word?

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Next steps – Transformation: Review your relationship with God’s Word. Make improvements in each of the five areas mentioned in this article. Give thanks and praise daily for God and His Word.

5 Loving God's Salvation

*What shall I render to the LORD
For all His benefits toward me?
I will take up the cup of salvation,
And call upon the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD
Now in the presence of all His people.* Psalm 116.12-14

*My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness
And Your salvation all the day,
For I do not know their limits.* Psalm 71.15

The gift of salvation

Common courtesy demands that, when someone gives you a gift, you should express your appreciation. When someone who *loves* you and is *devoted* to you gives you a gift, you should not only express your gratitude but reciprocate your love by making good use of the gift, thereby honoring the giver.

The greatest gift any of us can receive is the gift of salvation. "It is the gift of God," Paul explains (Eph. 2.8, 9). The gift of salvation comes to us from God, Who loves the world so much that He gave His only-begotten Son to live, die, and rise from the dead that all who believe in Him might be saved (Jn. 3.16).

God gives the gift of salvation for a purpose. He desires that we should know full and abundant life in Jesus Christ (Jn. 10.10). He wants us to grow in the righteousness of Jesus, that we might live in peace and joy throughout our earthly lives and forever with Him in the new heavens and new earth. This is how God is glorified in our lives, and how others are drawn to Him and the gift of salvation.

The gift of salvation is a gift that keeps on giving. We can never reach to the full limits or realize all the abundant promise and life that salvation brings to us. Ours is a *great* salvation (Heb. 2.3). And the way to *increase* in our salvation is through good works (Eph. 2.10), beginning with those good works that help us increase in love for God.

We love God as we seek His Presence and delight in His Word. But we also love God as we love the gift of salvation He has given, and seek to increase in it, that we may realize as much as possible of what God intends in giving us this incredible gift.

How do we love the salvation of God, and thus increase in loving Him Who gives us this great gift?

Enjoying God's salvation

The psalmist saw the salvation of God as a thing greatly to delight in. He understood what the Law of God taught, that those whom God has saved will gather frequently and regularly to celebrate their status as the chosen and redeemed of the Lord. And they will become so immersed in, devoted to, and suffused with the salvation God has given them, that they would increase in righteousness and know fullness of peace and joy.

Salvation is like a toast which friends share to honor their Host, partake of His blessings, and become filled with His Spirit and life. The world sees the salvation of God as oppressive, confining, and devoid of fun. Those who have received this gift know otherwise. We rejoice in our salvation, and we gather to celebrate the possession of it and to honor and rejoice in Him Who gives it to us. The more we delight in our salvation and seek to increase in the joy of it, the more our love for God will increase.

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Working out our salvation

Salvation comes to us complete in Jesus Christ. But we must work out our salvation so that we increase in the joy and power of it day by day (Phil. 2.12). The people of Israel were given a land abounding with milk and honey; but they had to work the land, work at community life, and work to increase in love for God in order to realize the full potential of the gift God had given them. The Law of God was their guide for working out their salvation, just as it is the primary guidebook for us.

We do not work *for* our salvation, but if we do not *work it out*, salvation will always remain a stunted flower, waiting to be cultivated and to bloom. In God's Presence, and by His Word and Spirit, they who love God and rejoice in His salvation will make the time and invest the effort necessary to realize *more* of the full and abundant life that is theirs in Jesus. Working out our salvation is daily work, hard work, spiritual work, but glorious work, for it yields the fruit of increased righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Studying our salvation

Part of working out our salvation is to devote ourselves to increased understanding of the scope and promise of that great gift. Being saved does not mean merely that we go to heaven when we die. The work of salvation Jesus has accomplished for us makes all things new in our lives, and sets us on a path to restore the reconciled world to the goodness, beauty, and truth that glorifies God (2 Cor. 5.17-21), beginning right where we live.

Before we can work out our salvation we need to understand how this great gift applies to all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. How must I love my neighbor? What is justice? How can the salvation of the Lord beautify and enhance the goodness of my world? The Law of God and all the rest of God's Word are our primary source for understanding the richness, power, and promise of our great salvation.

Proclaiming our salvation

The joy of receiving a gift can make us want to tell others about the gift we have received. This is proof both of the value of the gift and the love we bear for the one who gave it.

So it is with our salvation. We honor and love the Giver of our salvation as we share that salvation with others, telling them about the gift and urging them to receive it for themselves. If we never talk about our salvation, people might wonder whether it really matters much to us. God Himself might wonder that; so because we love Him and this great gift He has given, we proclaim and share it with others.

As we can never fully grasp the enormity of our salvation, we ought always to have something new and exciting to share about it, to encourage those who also have this gift, and to proclaim to those who do not.

Celebrating our salvation

The worship of God is about celebrating Him Who has given us the gift of salvation (cf. Rev. 4, 5). In our daily times with the Lord, delighting in His Word, we who have been saved will offer praise and thanks and rejoicing in His Presence. When we gather as a community to worship, that praise should grow to a great chorus of love expressed in prayers, singing, giving, hearing God's Word, and communing with Him.

All this seems natural enough – enjoying our salvation, growing in it, studying its scope and promise, sharing and celebrating the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. When we love the salvation of God in works such as these, we show God that we love Him, and we fan the flames of that love for God, so that our love for Him grows hotter and more fervent, day by day.

For reflection

1. Why is working out our salvation a *good* work?

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2. How does the Word of God help us in loving our salvation?
3. How can you become more consistent in sharing and proclaiming the gift of salvation?

Next steps – Preparation: In prayer, review how you came to a saving knowledge of Christ. Thank God for everyone who was involved. Praise Him for the gift of salvation, and ask Him to give you one person to share that gift with today.

6 Loving God's Creation

The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness... Psalm 24.1

*The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's;
But the earth He has given to the children of men.* Psalm 115.16

A contradiction?

Believers in Jesus Christ have been saved to do good works (Eph. 2.8-10). We are to be zealous for good works, and to be ready to do and maintain good works as part of our lived witness for Christ (Tit. 2.14; 3.1, 8, 14; Acts 1.8). The question arises, to which this study is dedicated: "Which Works?" We have seen that, following the example of Jesus, we are called to do works of love for God and for our neighbor, following the direction of God's Word, beginning in His Law.

In this part of our study we're considering those works that enable us to show love for God, and to increase in love for Him. Loving the Presence of God, and His Word and salvation, are fundamental to growing in love for Him Who has called us to His Kingdom and glory, and given us His Word and salvation. Here we want to consider one further way of loving God: We love God when we love His creation.

At first glance, the texts we've selected for this installment may seem contradictory. The earth is the Lord's; but the earth has been given to the children of men. They are actually complementary rather than contradictory.

The earth is the Lord's because He made it, and He upholds it by His Word of power (Gen. 1.1; Jn. 1.1-3; Heb. 1.3). The vast cosmos in all its parts, including the earth, only continues to exist, and all its patterns and interactions to continue, because Jesus Christ holds it all together (Col. 1.16, 17). The cosmos belongs to Jesus Christ, and it is His to do with as He pleases.

Happily, it pleases Him to entrust the earth to the children of men. We have been placed as stewards over the creation (Gen. 1.26-28). By looking to Jesus and being transformed into His image, we may take up the works that enable us to bring all of creation under His feet, so that creation in all its parts might realize the full fruitfulness of the reconciliation Jesus has accomplished for it (Heb. 2.5-9; 2 Cor. 5.17-21).

All who love God and His Presence, Word, and salvation, will take up the work of restoring the reconciled creation for the glory of God. And this will take the form of our loving God by loving the creation He has entrusted to us. We can think of this in terms of five specific good works.

Enjoy creation

First, God intends us to *enjoy* the creation. He has made the world beautiful, diverse, delightful, and full of wonders to provide an environment in which we might thrive as His servants. The creation does not exist merely for us to use, consume, abuse, and abandon. We love God when we marvel at the amazing displays of wisdom, beauty, and power that fill the creation, and as we reflect on how these declare the glory of God for our consideration (Ps. 19.1-4).

Delighting in the creation comes naturally to us: a spring shower, a summer's day at the beach, the many and varied forms of food, the colors of fall, the sublimity of a winter snow storm, the breathtaking beauty of a sunset or a soaring eagle, the sweet and diverse melodies of song birds: All these are to be enjoyed by us as God's stewards; and, as we enjoy them, we give thanks to God Who surrounds us with so much delight.

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Study creation

Creation is one of the most obvious of God's works; thus, as we grow in enjoying it, we will want to *study* it more intimately (Ps. 111.2). Adam showed the way in this by teaching us the value of naming the creatures. Each bird, wildflower, insect, cloud pattern, body of water, and so forth has a name; and the names of creatures tell us something about them. We show God that we love Him and are grateful for the delight with which He surrounds us, as we learn the names of His creatures, and give Him specific thanks and praise for each one.

But learning names is just the beginning. From here we may take up any number of deeper studies designed to allow us to probe the wonders and mysteries of creation more deeply. Books, online courses, apps for your phone, and many other resources are available to help you grow in love for God's creation. As you do, you show our Father that you love Him for giving us the earth and entrusting it to our understanding and care.

Cultivate creation

We love God by *cultivating and caring* for His creation (Ps. 8.6). This is what it means to exercise dominion over the creatures of the earth (Gen. 1.26-28; Ps. 8). We do not abuse the creation; rather, we apply ourselves to the kind of stewardship and works that enable each of the earth's creature to realize its purpose and role in the divine economy. The Law of God, together with other passages of Scripture, teaches us to be wise in how we care for creation, lest we abuse this great gift of God (cf. Deut. 22.9).

Large issues of environmental stewardship come into question here, but we cannot explore them in this space. Each of us can do something to nurture the creation, if only in how we take care of our yard, keep a garden and share its blessings, or tend to house plants and pets. We cultivate God's creation when we learn about its many foods and discover new, wholesome, and delicious ways to prepare them. We love God as we receive the gift of creation He entrusts to each one of us, and apply ourselves through various good works to cultivate the creation for maximum fecundity.

Conserve creation

We love God when we follow His guidelines for how we should work to *conserve* the creation. The Law of God teaches us to think carefully about how we use the resources of creation (cf. Deut. 22.6, 7; Deut. 20.19, 20). We must not allow our lust to cause us to put the creation at risk. In the Law of God, the land was to enjoy a sabbath rest every seven years, so that the soil could replenish itself. Farmers today understand the importance of crop rotation and of replenishing their soil in various ways. Conservation movements and societies afford many opportunities for Christians to show their love for God by working to conserve the gift of creation.

Share creation

Finally, we show God that we love Him when we share His creation with others, by pointing out the glory that God has concealed in everyday creatures (Ps. 19.1-4; Prov. 25.2; Hab. 2.14; Ps. 148). Some of the best of English poetry has shown us the power of celebrating creation to the glory of God. The more we enjoy and study creation, and are careful to cultivate and conserve it, the readier we will be for the good work of helping others to appreciate God's creation, and to see His glory in it as well.

Loving God by loving His creation offers daily opportunities for doing good works that show the glory of God and benefit ourselves and others. A wide variety of good works awaits us as we commit ourselves to loving God by enjoying, studying, cultivating, caring for, and conserving those aspects of creation He has entrusted to us.

For reflection

1. Which aspects of the creation has God entrusted to you?
2. What could you do to increase your understanding and enjoyment of the creation entrusted to you?

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3. How could loving God's creation help you to be more consistent as a witness for Christ?

Next steps – Transformation: Make a list of every aspect of creation that comes into your purview today. Thank God for it; delight in each aspect; and consider ways of growing in your understanding of creation.

7 Loving God's Work

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. Ephesians 1.11, 12

A lesson from parenting

All parents know the importance of taking delight in the works of their children. Refrigerators, desktops, and walls in homes everywhere are decorated with paintings, hand-made cards, and pictures of children doing something not very special, except to those who love them.

This way of loving our children continues as long as they grow up in our homes. We cheer at their games, applaud at their recitals, snap pictures at their graduations, showoff their school pictures, and celebrate as many of their good works as we can.

Children know that we love them when we love their works and show that we do. And here is a lesson for us who desire to increase in love for God: We show God that we love Him, and we increase in love for God, when we love the works of God.

The works of God can be variously summarized. For our purposes, we will mention six: God's work of creation, providence, redemption, restoration, consummation, and glorification. We love God by enjoying and studying these works; resting cheerfully in them; and celebrating them in prayer, worship, and witness. The more we love the works of God, the more our love for Him increases and becomes evident in every aspect of our lives.

Let's take a closer look at God's works and at how we may grow in loving Him by loving His works.

The works of God

Paul says that God "works all things according to the counsel of His will." Look around you. Everything you see is an expression of one or more aspects of the works of God. His work of *creation* makes possible the existence of the universe and everything in it. Apart from the Word of God, "nothing was made that has been made" (Jn. 1.3, my translation), and nothing continues to be made that He does not bring to pass.

God's original work of creation took six days. We refer to His ongoing work of keeping the world He loves as *providence*. Providence is the sovereign rule of God by which He upholds the cosmos and everything in it by His powerful Word, and makes all things find their meaning, purpose, and use in our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 1.3; Col. 1.16, 17). The secular world obscures the work of God by attributing the workings of the cosmos to one or another impersonal physical law; but these "laws", as Jonathan Edwards pointed out, are merely the descriptions of how God continuously, lovingly, consistently, and faithfully works to keep the universe in place for our good and His glory.

Redemption is that work God accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which all who believe in Jesus are delivered out of darkness into light, from guilt to forgiveness, and from death to eternal life and glory. God's work of redemption in us continues from the new birth through a life-long process of sanctification, by which the Word and Spirit of God increasingly transform us into the image of Jesus Christ (Jn. 17.17; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). We are called to *work out* our salvation, and we must apply ourselves diligently to this work. But it is God, at work within us, who actually accomplishes the progress we make in becoming more like Jesus (Phil. 2.12, 13).

God's work of *restoration* is that which He does in and through His people to bring the knowledge of His

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glory to light in every aspect of life – all our relationships, roles, responsibilities, culture, and even the most everyday and common activities of our lives (Hab. 2.14; Matt. 5.13-16; 1 Cor. 10.31). By this work, carried out in and through His Word and Spirit, God restores to Himself and for His glory the world that Jesus has redeemed and reconciled to the Father (2 Cor. 5.17-21). Jesus talked of this work of restoration, together with the work of redemption, as His “plundering” the world, wresting it from the rule of Satan and restoring it to the rule of God and His Kingdom.

God’s work of *consummation* occurs throughout the course of history, as He drives all events toward their conclusion, when all nations and people will be judged before the Lord, and this present, “last days” age will come to an end. Then the heavens and earth will be dissolved, the redeemed in Christ will be united in Him, and those who rejected the gracious offer of God will go to eternal aloneness and misery.

Then follows God’s great work of *glorification*, when, in the new heavens and new earth, in our new and glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15; Rev. 20, 21), we will dwell worshipfully and joyfully in the Presence of our God and Savior forever, without sorrow, tears, or death.

God accomplishes all these great works according to the counsel of His will. And since what we can know of His will is revealed to us in His Word, the Bible, the more we learn of God’s works, the more we will be able to love the works of God and the God Who does so many and such wondrous works.

Loving God’s works

The place to begin in loving God’s works is to learn more about them (Ps. 111.2). The Word of God provides explanations of each of God’s works so that, as we *delight* in the works of God and *study* them day by day, we will understand them better, appreciate the greatness and majesty of their variety and scope, and love our God Who works these wondrous works increasingly.

The more we realize the scope and power of God’s works, the more we will *rest* in them, not trying to save ourselves by any works, but resting in the finished work of Jesus; refusing to become anxious but giving thanks in everything (Phil. 4.6, 7); humbling ourselves and casting all our burdens on Him (1 Pet. 5.6, 7); bringing all our needs to the Father in prayer (Matt. 6.25-32); and basking in His peace and joy, as He works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8.28).

The peace and joy that come from resting in God’s works will lead us to *celebrate* His works with praise and thanksgiving, in personal and corporate worship, in our times of mutual encouragement and witness. When the refrigerator of our soul is covered to overflowing with the works of God, our love for Him will grow and be visible, to the praise of His glorious grace.

If we love God, we will love His works. The more we work at loving His works, the more our love for Him will increase, and with it, the greater will be our peace and joy in Him.

For reflection or discussion

1. How do you experience the works of God each day?
2. What are some steps you could take to increase in love for God’s works?
3. How should you expect to benefit from growing in love for God’s works?

Next steps – Transformation: In prayer, consider all the works of God you can expect to encounter in the day ahead. Praise and thank Him for them. Pay careful attention, then praise and thank Him more abundantly at day’s end for those works you observed..

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why must we fear God if we would truly love Him?
2. What can you do to gain more time in the Presence of God?
3. How would someone know if you loved God's Word? If you loved His salvation?
4. What will you do to increase in love for God and His works?
5. How would you explain to an unbelieving friend what it means to love God?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.