



LOVING JESUS
A 30-DAY GUIDE
WITHOUT LIMITS

COMPLETELY *Loved*

Recognizing God's Passionate Pursuit of Us

SHANNON ETHRIDGE

Best-selling author of the Every Woman's Battle series



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Italics in Scripture quotations indicate the author's added emphasis.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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AN INVITATION INTO THE HEART OF GOD

I'm thrilled you're holding this little book in your hands! You're about to see God in a whole new way, recognizing aspects of His character that perhaps you've never considered before, even if you've been in relationship with Him for years.

Here's how it works: this book is the first of four devotional companions to the lead book in the series, *Completely His*. If you've not read that yet, I encourage you to do so for a look at how God is wooing and pursuing you as His spiritual bride. But if you choose to read this one first, you'll still be enriched by this devotional—and the three other devotionals in the Loving Jesus Without Limits series. That's because each one is designed to help you dive into God's Word for yourself, taking you to a deeper level of commitment to your heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Because when it comes to God's goodness and passionate love for us, why just take someone else's word for it? Why not hear God speak directly to you from the extraordinary love letter He wrote to each of us centuries ago?

Imagine how different life could be when you experience thirty days of heart-to-heart time with God through this book, and then thirty more days in the second devotional, and so on, learning more and more about:

- how far God has gone to pursue us
(which is the message of the devotional you are holding),
- how God can use you mightily in spite of your shortcomings
(the message in *Completely Forgiven: Responding to God's Transforming Grace*),
- how God lavishes both His presence and His presents upon us
(explored in *Completely Blessed: Discovering God's Extraordinary Gifts*)

- how our love for God cannot be contained, but can be shared naturally
(examined in *Completely Irresistible: Drawing Others to God's Extravagant Love*).

I pray that as you read God's Word and go through each devotional, He will reveal Himself to you in new and magnificent ways. He wants to court you personally, building up your confidence in His character so that you'll be inspired to commit your life and love to Him without reservation and without limits—becoming completely His and enjoying a more intimate relationship with Him.

Isn't *intimate* a wonderful word? I've always loved the word *intimacy*. In fact, I love to break the word down into syllables. Look what happens when you do that:

❧ IN-TO-ME-SEE ❧

Isn't that revealing? Doesn't that make the essence of the word come alive in a new way? How we long to see the beauty in another person's heart! How we also long for someone to see the beauty in our own hearts and to value and cherish us because of what they see! Indeed, genuine intimacy is one of the deepest desires of man and woman.

But have you ever thought about why we crave intimacy?

It's because we're made in God's image, and He craves intimacy with us.

Isn't that incredible? With His supernatural eyesight, God has no problem seeing into your heart, but have you ever considered how He longs for you to see directly into His?

That's why He gave us His Word—to show us His heart for the world, His passion for His people, His longing for our worship, and His desire to be in an incredibly intimate relationship with us.

Unfortunately, we often miss these sentiments when we read the Bible. We're too focused on the forefront of the story—the human characters' situations, actions, and reactions—rather than the background of the story, where God reveals Himself.

What if, as we read the Bible, we understood that the people involved are

merely God's supporting characters and that God plays the lead role in every story? We just have to look past the people and circumstances to recognize what He is doing, why, and what His actions tell us about His character. As we do, we begin to know Him more intimately, which leads us to love Him more deeply.

So that's what we'll be doing for the next thirty days: reading about several Old Testament characters and considering where God is in the story—what He is doing, why, and what that means for us. Then, through introspective questions in a section called “Holding His Hand,” we'll translate this new knowledge into a deeper personal level of love and trust.

This may be a new way of reading the Bible for you. If so, I must warn you that it's addicting! And I believe that's what God desires—for us to become addicted to hearing Him speak to us every day.

I'm certain that He didn't give us this extravagant love letter to teach us about some saints and sinners who died long ago. His hope, I believe, is that through reading it, we will learn more about Him. And the more we learn about Him, the more we'll want to learn.

So are you ready to let these devotionals springboard you into a more fulfilling life of passion, purpose, and genuine intimacy with Jesus Christ?

If so, let's begin.



COMPLETELY
Loved BY...
OUR CREATOR

Daily reading: Genesis 1:1–2:25

Key passage: Then God said, “Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves. They will be masters over all life—the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the livestock, wild animals, and small animals.”

So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them....

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was excellent in every way. (Genesis 1:26–27, 31)

Could you imagine God having His own television show on the Home & Garden Television (HGTV) network?

Talk about divine design! God doesn't just coordinate colors, textures, and patterns; He formulates them from His own vivid imagination. He designed such architectural masterpieces as the Grand Canyon, the Rocky Mountains, and Niagara Falls. He planted the most bountiful of gardens, such as the one you just read about in the second chapter of Genesis, fashioning the seeds, soil, rain, and sunshine with His own hand. Not even the most artistic of landscape or interior designers can hold a candle to what our God can do.

As I write this, I'm sitting in a window seat with a cool breeze flowing through the screen. Multiple layers of clouds glide overhead as if they are performing some graceful, slow-motion ballet against an azure blue background. I've been reflecting on the past twenty-four hours of my life and how this Creator of ours has touched me. I watched the sun rise and set yesterday and was mesmerized by many events in between.

On my morning walk I witnessed several bright red cardinals fluttering from branch to branch in the dense forest. I wondered how many pine needles and leaves could be counted on this one-hundred-acre plot of land, but imagining that number made my brain hurt. How remarkable that God can number every hair on each of our heads! What a mathematical mind our Creator has!

When I got home, my son removed a Band-Aid from his no-longer-tender foot and said, "Mom, I think it's cool how God made skin! It just heals all by itself!" Later that afternoon, my daughter and I made thumbprint cookies, and I was reminded that although billions of humans have walked the earth, no two fingerprints have ever been alike. Last night, I visited a new mom in the hospital and got to hold her little seven-pound miracle in my arms. The older I get, the more I stand in awe of certain aspects of creation—and of the incredible Creator who forms and fashions all things.

Just think: of all His magnificent creations—the brilliant sun, moon, and stars; the vast oceans; the fascinating planets; the exotic animals; and more—the one that most resembles God Himself is humankind—*you and me*. God made us *in His image*; we are as true a reflection of His character and nature as possible. Search the universe, and nothing will say "God" more than the creation known as man and woman.

Adam and Eve were the first to know this distinction, and the last to experience the fullness of being image bearers of God before sin clouded this glorious relationship. Even though we'll never walk with God on this side of heaven without sin tainting the relationship somehow, walking in relationship with Him is exactly what we were created to do. He created us for this purpose—to represent and be in relationship with our Creator God.

We find passion and joy in walking with the One who designed every part of us. He designed our minds, so He knows how to put us at ease. He created our bodies, so He knows how to strengthen us. He formed our hearts, so He knows how to thrill and delight us. He molded our spirits, so He knows our innermost desires; and only He can satisfy those desires.

Dear sister, do you agree with God that His creation is excellent in every way? What is your assessment of His handiwork when you look in the mirror? Do you see yourself as fearfully and wonderfully made by a masterful artist, as the pinnacle of His creative efforts? Do you believe God looks upon you with great satisfaction?

I hope so, because it's true. You are more precious to Him than the silver, gold, or diamonds He formed in the depths of the earth. When He sent His only Son to die on the cross, it wasn't to save the whales or the rain forests, but to save *you*. He loves you completely because you aren't just anyone; you are His special creation.

HOLDING HIS HAND

Do I believe that when God formed me, He was pleased with His handiwork?

What does today's passage teach me about my Creator?

What might God want to teach me about myself?

Creator God,

Help me to recognize Your beauty and wonder evident throughout all of creation —from the tiniest DNA molecule to the galaxies far beyond our awareness. But most of all, help me to recognize Your beauty and wonder when I look at myself.



COMPLETELY
Loved BY...
OUR WITNESS

Daily reading: Genesis 16; 21:1–21

Key passage: Thereafter, Hagar referred to the LORD, who had spoken to her, as “the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have seen the One who sees me!” (Genesis 16:13)

I imagine walking in Hagar’s sandals for a while. You’re a slave girl who had no choice but to offer not only your services but also your body to your mistress’s husband. Now you are pregnant with his child, yet his wife treats you so harshly you must run away. You are caught in quite the dilemma.

For Hagar, wandering in the desert was the lesser of the two evils. That is, until an angel appeared with a special message for her, a message that could have ticked her off. He told Hagar to return to her mistress and submit to her authority and that the child she was carrying would be “a wild one...against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live at odds with the rest of his brothers” (Genesis 16:12).

Would you accept such a prophecy without an argument? I doubt I could swallow this message without reciting 101 reasons why the angel should let me find more comfortable living arrangements and begging him to bless me with a more happy-go-lucky child.

Yet Scripture doesn't indicate that Hagar put up much of a fight. Her response indicates that she was at peace with her situation, regardless of how difficult it must have been. Why? Because she looked past her situation to recognize that *God actually saw her*. Her Maker knew her plight and was a witness to her life. That seemed to satisfy her; it was enough for her to simply know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God saw her and her circumstances.

Something about the human condition causes us to crave being noticed by another. If you don't believe me, consider these questions:

- Do you remember how important it was to you that your mom or dad come to the game, the play, or the performance, simply because you wanted someone to watch you?
- Were you ever a wallflower at a high-school dance, desperate for someone to invite you onto the dance floor as proof that you'd been noticed?
- Have you ever been the tiniest bit jealous of the famous Hollywood celebrity who seems to have millions of witnesses to her glamorous life?
- Have you ever gone above and beyond on a project, hoping that your professor or boss would notice your unique gifts and talents?
- Have you ever sat by the phone or walked to the mailbox, hoping that someone thought enough of you to call or write?
- Have you ever gone all out to clean your house or make a special meal, hoping that your friends or family would take special notice?

The overwhelming desire to be noticed runs deep in many of us. I believe the longing to get married someday that most of us experience is often rooted in this desire. In the movie *Shall We Dance?* Beverly Clark (played by actress Susan Sarandon) explains her theory on why people get married in the first place:

We need a witness to our lives. There's a billion people on the planet.... I mean, what does any one life really mean? But in a

marriage, you're promising to care about *everything*. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things—*all* of it, *all* the time, *every* day. You're saying, "Your life will *not* go unnoticed because *I* will notice it. Your life will *not* go unwitnessed because *I* will be your witness."

While it is wonderful to have a spouse, family, or friends to witness the peaks and valleys in our lives, we often feel unnoticed in spite of the intimacy we share with others, even those who live underneath the same roof. We don't share many of our thoughts and feelings with another living soul, not because we don't want to share them, but because it's not possible for someone to witness every single aspect of another's life.

Yet there *is* one who knows my every thought, who notices every desire of my heart, and who witnesses every single moment in my life—the good, the bad, and the ugliest of moments. Even though 99 percent of these moments are rather uneventful, God truly cares about each one of them and still loves me completely.

He sees not only every part of me, but He sees you, too. Your life is not going unnoticed. God is a witness to every aspect of your every day, and He is your biggest cheerleader through every circumstance. Others may witness certain scenes, but only God sits throughout the entire production of your life, from beginning to end. Make this performance count. Remember: life is not a dress rehearsal. It's your only shot at absolutely delighting your audience of One.

HOLDING HIS HAND

Have I ever wondered if the God of the universe truly sees me? Why or why not? How does this make me feel?

When have I ever felt desperate to know that God recognizes my plight?
What was the reason?

Do I believe that God is an active witness to every aspect of my life? What
does this belief say about me?

Dear God,

*I may not understand why it feels so important to be noticed
at times, but I thank You that nothing in my life goes unno-
ticed by You. Even though You witness my finest and worst
moments, You never stop cheering me on, and for that I am
eternally grateful.*



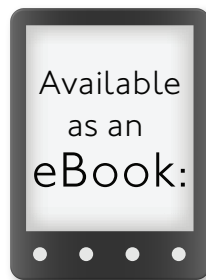
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