

PART ONE

AWAKENING

*“Deep beneath the layers of conditioning and
disappointment, something in you knows this isn’t
how it was supposed to be.”*

CHAPTER 1

WHAT WE LOST AND WHAT STILL CALLS US

Do you know that feeling when someone says *I love you* and your body tenses instead of relaxes? When affection feels like a demand and closeness makes you want to flee? When the words that should bring comfort make you want to hide? That's not how it should be, but it's common.

Somewhere between Eden and now, love got twisted. The very thing designed to heal us becomes the thing that hurts us most. The people who say they love us become the ones we fear disappointing. The relationships meant to be our sanctuary become our battlefield.

You weren't born afraid of love; you learned it.

A father's silence taught you that love must be earned. A mother's criticism convinced you that you're never enough. A spouse's withdrawal showed you that even marriage can be a place of profound loneliness. A pastor's sermon called your voice rebellion and your needs selfish.

One by one, these experiences rewrote your understanding of love until the word itself became contaminated with performance, fear, and exhaustion.

But your soul remembers something different. Deep beneath the layers of conditioning and disappointment, something in you knows this isn't how it was supposed to be.

A whisper.

That love shouldn't require you to disappear, intimacy shouldn't demand your silence, and being chosen shouldn't cost you your voice.

That whisper? That's what we lost and it's calling us home.

A Father's Love

"I Just Want to Know He Is Proud of Me"

I hear these words so often in the counseling room. Men and women speak about their fathers, their constant striving wrapped in an unspoken desire: to know their earthly father sees them, loves them, and is proud to call them his child.

My father left when I was fourteen. The circumstances don't matter. I spent years living out what the therapy world calls "enactment:"⁴ trying to prove I was worthy of love, that I would be chosen. This man who had once been part of my life, whom I loved, decided that post-divorce, it was too hard to show up and somewhere deep down, I believed the story: *I must not be worth the effort.*

This was before I knew Jesus.

My attempts to be chosen kept coming up empty. Each one left me with more pain, more shame. Being adults, even parents ourselves, doesn't make us immune to this kind of suffering.

4 Jacobs, T. J. (1986). On countertransference enactments. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 34(2), 289–307.

So often, the story I hear is of a father who was present physically, hardworking, dependable, but emotionally absent. I'm not sure which is more painful: a father not being there at all, or one who is physically present but cold and unreachable. Either way, we rebel, hoping to spark a reaction. We perform, we excel, we showcase our abilities and nothing comes back.

When I moved to America over a decade ago, I decided to give it one more try with my father. I called, told him I was moving, and asked if he would meet with me, just to talk. It had been nearly twenty years since he'd been part of my life, but I wanted to mend the relationship if I could.

He told me he was busy and would call me the next evening, which he did. On that call, he said something I'll never forget:

"I've thought about it, and I don't want a relationship with you."

I was stunned into silence. I hadn't even considered that this might be an active decision. Once again, the old narrative resurfaced: *It must be me. I must be the problem. I'm not lovable after all.*

My husband came into the room and held me. He reminded me of what was true, about my identity, my worth, my value. I grieved the death of this relationship that day, but strangely, I also felt free. Free from the burden of trying to fix it. My father had made his choice.

In that moment of profound loss, I encountered a deeper truth: When our human relationships fail us, room opens for God's love to enter.

But God ...

When we've been wounded by human love, it's hard to believe divine love doesn't require the same striving. But it doesn't.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ..."

(EPHESIANS 2:4-5, ESV).

The truth of that verse broke something open in me. I didn't have to strive to be loved, earn affection, or convince anyone that I was worth the effort.

I already *was* loved. Not for what I'd done, or failed to do, but because God had chosen me, because He is rich in mercy, because love is who He is.

This was the beginning of the shift from doing to being, from hustling to chosen, from striving to rested.

This shift from doing to being begins with receiving.

Receiving the truth that God loves you because of *who* He is, not because of *what* you've done.

Can you receive this truth?

That didn't just heal something old in me; it rewired how I see God. For so long, I believed I needed to achieve or perform to earn His affection. I wanted to be useful, impressive, faithful, holy enough. But in the years since that call, God has gently invited me to stop trying to impress Him and simply be with Him.

I began to ask different questions.

Instead of:

"Am I doing enough?"

I started asking:

"Can I sit with God, even when I have nothing to show?"

And in that stillness, I learned something astonishing:

His love doesn't rise and fall with my performance.

It just is.

Ahava Love

Ahava (אהבה) is more than affection; it is active, sacrificial love. *Ahavah*⁵ is the Hebrew noun for love, related to the verb *ahav*, “to love.” Throughout Scripture, this love is repeatedly expressed through covenantal faithfulness, action, and self-giving reminding us that biblical love is not merely a feeling but a movement. It initiates, it offers, it draws near.

Love, in God’s design, is never passive.

Ahava gives without fear of depletion.

Ahava sees value, both in others and in oneself.

Ahava moves toward, not away.

To live the Ahava Way is to live as one who is deeply loved and therefore free to love others. It is a return to what was lost in the Garden:⁶ relational trust, unhidden belonging, and sacred nearness.

We love, not because we have proven ourselves worthy, but because we have been loved first.

“We love because he first loved us” (1 JOHN 4:19, ESV).

This is where truly living begins, not in proving ourselves, but in receiving what we did not earn.

Accepting Our Fragility—The Doorway to Trust

Love doesn’t demand perfection, it welcomes presence.

We were never asked to be unbreakable, we were invited to be held.

5 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), s.vv. “אהב” and “אהבה”; Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. “אהב.”

6 Genesis 2:8

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 CORINTHIANS 4:7, ESV).

Our bodies are vessels filled with divine life. They are surprisingly robust yet breakable, remarkably resilient yet mortal. Jesus reminds us what true love looks like:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (MATTHEW 22:37, CSB).

The word *agapaō*⁷ means to love; in Jesus’ command, that love is shaped by His self-giving example. To love with all your *heart* is to bring your emotions and desires.

To love with all your *soul* is to bring your whole being: your life, breath, and identity.

To love with all your *mind* is to bring your thoughts, focus, and understanding.

Love is not about perfection, but about bringing your entire, imperfect self to the One who makes you whole.

The reality of our mortality means we are fragile creatures. This is not a flaw; it’s a design feature. A reminder that the strength sustaining us is not our own. When we stop hiding our limitations and instead embrace them as part of God’s invitation, trust becomes possible.

This is the beginning of love. Not proving you are enough, but resting in the One who always is.

In American culture, busyness has become an unofficial badge of honor. When someone asks, *“How are you?”* the most common reply is, *“Busy,”* often followed by a list of activities, achievements, and obligations. This is how we

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, Greek lexical definitions in this section follow Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) (BDAG).

avoid the supposed sin of idleness, and in the process, we make busyness an idol and forget God, the Creator of rhythm and rest (see Genesis 2:2-3).

In this culture, there is no time to pause by the river.

But here's the reality: You don't have to do anything to be loved by God.

Let that settle.

He loved you before you said a word.

Before you got it right.

Before you got it wrong.

To trust Him, we must accept that His love isn't conditional.

This reverses the *religion* we've been taught.

We don't trust God because we're holy; we become holy when we learn to trust God.

When Jesus went down to the water to be baptized by John, a voice from heaven declared, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased*" (MATTHEW 3:17, NIV).

This happened before Jesus began His ministry, before the miracles and the mission.

The Father called Him beloved, simply because He was His.

Right now, in this moment, as you read these words: God loves you.

You are His beloved.

Not because of anything you've done or will do,

but simply because you are His.

Abba Father.

Ahava love.

It's that simple, and we've made it very complex.

What It Means to Love (and Be Loved)

To live the Ahava Way is to make love the baseline.

It means:

Speaking the truth, even when you tremble.

Resting, even when there's more to do.

Saying "no," because you're already loved, not "yes" to earn it.

Letting others see your tears.

Making room for joy again.

This is the love you were created for.

PAUSE BY THE RIVER FOR REFLECTION

- » *What would change in your life if you truly believed you were already loved, before success, failure, or striving?*
 - » *Can you rest in the truth that God's love for you is not earned, but received?*
-

The Ahava Way: Living Loved and Returning to the Source

This is not a worksheet to complete or a standard to reach, it's a rhythm to return to. A way of being honest before God and letting what's true slowly shape how you live. Move through it at your own pace. Showing up here is itself part of the return.

A Acknowledge

Where have you believed that love must be earned?

Do you find yourself striving for approval, recognition, or worth?

As you think about your answers, what emotions begin to emerge? Can you gently name them?

H Hear

What might these emotions be trying to tell you?

A Align

What does God say about you in His Word?

Can you hear the Father speak over your life what He spoke over Jesus: *"This is my beloved [child], in whom I am well pleased?"*

Align your thoughts with the truth that your value is not based on doing, but on being His.

How might your self-perception and your actions change if you let Love be the lens?

✓ Value

Who and what is most important to you? (Use the list of values at the end of the book to guide you.)

Could valuing yourself as beloved become a doorway to other values such as connection, intimacy, and trust?

▲ Act

Pause. Breathe. Talk to God.

Resist the urge to hustle or hide.

Let yourself be loved, right here, as you are.

If love is the purpose, direction, and foundation of our humanity, then what keeps us from resting in it? Here's what I've learned sitting across from hundreds of hurting people: knowing you were created for love and feeling safe enough to receive it are two different things entirely.

Until you face what's keeping you from love, it will always feel like something you have to earn rather than something you get to freely receive.

The enemy of your soul is counting on you never making this connection, but what if today, that changes? What if an awakening is about to give you the key to what has been blocking love?

What if something has been standing guard at the door of your heart convincing you that vulnerability is dangerous, your needs are too much, and your voice might destroy everything?

It whispers lies so convincing they sound like wisdom. It masquerades as protection while slowly suffocating your soul. It's the reason women believe faithfulness means silence and why you might be reading about God's love while a voice in your head argues with every word.

This guardian has a name and it's been shaping your story far longer than you realize.