

Only by Love

By Juanita Kretschmar

"Only by love is love awakened." The speaker of the third day of our E-Van-gelism ministry's Ten Days of Prayer continued talking, but my mind paused at that thought. *That* is the explanation for any love I have now for studying God's word, and for praying.

My earlier recollections include times of inner impatience when, as a child, I waited for my mother to finish ready from the worship book so my sisters and I could go out the door to school. Hearing easily-memorized Bible stories was a way of life; following family and church rules, scarcely ever questioned. I expected Jesus to come—soon. I was obedient. Later, when my own home was established and our first child arrived, my first thought as I held her was to teach her the song, "Jesus Loves Me." As our family grew, reading daily Bible stories to the children was automatic.

But a personal crisis arose. After a car wreck and resulting violent headache, I was unable to sleep. It was weeks before the source of the problem was discovered and corrected. By this time my nervous system was in shambles. A doctor stated that within two months I would need to be institutionalized because he felt I was headed for a complete nervous breakdown. He said my condition was irreversible. I felt hopeless.

No fear I had experienced earlier in life compared to the fear I then had of losing my sanity. With the doctor's statement reverberating in my mind, I withdrew from all church activities, would not leave my home, and popped a thermometer in my mouth frequently—hoping for a treatable, physical ailment to resolve my despair. No one knew my troubled thoughts.

I had no private devotional life. Many years before, time had been spent reading the Sabbath School lessons every day. I was certain I knew all the Bible stories. Long since I had felt no need for more of the same.

Days passed. Restful sleep would not come. Allergic reactions to the medications precluded their use. One morning, long before dawn, I was pacing the floor, wondering what would happen next. Passing a row of bookshelves, I impulsively pulled a book—at random—from a shelf. I opened it and began reading. The writer, Ellen White, was telling of a personal experience, a time when her nervous energy was depleted. There seemed to be no human solution. I understood that at that time she had prayed about every five minutes—and had been restored.

That day, cautiously, I accepted my husband's invitation to accompany him in the car while he did an errand. It had been days since I had left the house, fearful of being in a public place when the doctor's verdict might suddenly come true. But, on the strength of the ray of hope from the paragraphs read early that morning, I went to the car. I kept my head down, watching the hands move on my watch. I prayed silently for God to keep me sane—for just five minutes. After five minutes I prayed again, for another five minutes of sanity, and then for another. As we drove along, my husband called my attention to something outside the car window. When I looked back at my watch, more than five minutes had passed. I trembled, feeling I'd been without God's protection. Quickly, I asked God for another five minutes.

The every-five-minute prayer continued throughout that day. Looking back on the experience, the situation seems pitiful, if not downright amusing. At the time it was frighteningly serious.

Next, I accompanied my pastor-husband as he visited a “shut-in.” She was delighted to see us, and soon was telling how God had lengthened her life, after she had been told she would die. From her Bible she read to us the Creator’s promise that she had claimed as her own. As I looked at the passage in Isaiah 40:28-31, the words, “*He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength,*” seemed to speak directly to me. Hope took over. If God could help that woman, I believed that He would overrule in my case, too.

With my change of attitude, and with prayer every few minutes, slowly my strength returned. The ability to sleep returned as well. By God’s grace, instead of confinement by the end of the two-month period, I had resumed all my earlier home and church responsibilities.

But I still did not pursue any regular, personal Bible study or devotional time. My husband was the preacher; he gave the Bible studies. I was occupied with raising my family, working with the Dorcas, helping with church music, and finally running a clinic for the poor in Brazil, where we had been called to serve as missionaries.

It was in that country that I was confronted with a new phenomenon. People all over the area of our mission were having dreams or visions relating to the nearness of the return of Jesus. The stories, from widely separated and often isolated regions, all seemed to follow the same pattern. Reports came from colporteurs, medical launch workers, pastors, and Bible workers. In almost every case someone had been directed in a dream to one of our churches or church members, so they could be prepared for the *soon* return of Jesus. The directions given, as people related them, generally came from, “a tall being, dressed in long, shiny-white clothing.”

Years passed as I chronicled the ever-more-frequent stories for loved ones and friends “back home” in the United States. But a growing sense of uneasiness came over me. That uneasiness became even more acute when two men in the city where we were living (who did not know one another and had nothing to do with our church), had identical dreams the same night—about the need to prepare for Christ’s *soon* coming. The men appeared before breakfast, at the door of a pastor who lived in the same apartment building in which we lived. The pastor’s wife told me of these early-morning visitors who had been directed to their home. The reality of what we had both heard all our lives (and become inoculated against by its very *unfulfillment*)—stunned us.

The pastor’s wife verbalized her concern. “*You don’t suppose Christ really is coming back soon, do you? Because if he is, I’m scared.*” All I could do was drop my head and mumble, “*I am, too.*”

That was my perplexity: I didn’t know why I should be afraid. I had been a “good girl” all my life. I was obedient. Not only was I a faithful church member, but I was a hard-working wife of a conference president. I was even a missionary, helping the poor and the sick. What more could I do? Why my uneasiness? I could remember singing the song, “Are You Ready for Jesus to Come?” many times, and looking heavenward at the thought expressed—“Can you look up and say, ‘This is my Lord?’” Yet I knew inside myself that His coming really wasn’t important to me.

Long ago, during weeks of prayer in college, I had observed the guest speakers carefully, I decided that people who were really happy “being good” were people who had been really bad. They seemed to have a joy when speaking of God or Christ which escaped me. I’d kept these thoughts to myself, but now I wanted that joy about His coming. It wasn’t there, and my uneasiness continued. Other than the mumbled acknowledgement of an uneasy fear, I saw no point in sharing my feelings with anyone.

Just before returning to the United States, my non-Bible-study lifestyle changed. While experiencing enforced rest in the hospital during recovery from a miscarriage, I was loaned audio tapes by a fellow missionary. The tapes were sermons by an Adventist preacher who told answers to prayer received by claiming various Bible promises. At first I found his messages simply entertaining. Then I decided to open the Bible and look at those verses. Soon I began searching for Bible promises that seemed to fulfill what I wanted. I would read God the verse, tell Him I understood he promise was for me right then, and tank Him for giving it to me—assuming that since He had promised, he gift really *was* mine. And God met me right where I was.

I began going to Him in prayer, taking Him every little need or question of my life. As I claimed His guidance and blessing, answers came almost instantly. Now I was devouring the Bible and concordance, looking for more and more promises to fit more and more needs. Nothing seemed impossible to be answered. God was like a bigger-than-life Santa Claus, just waiting for me to ask.

Soon after returning to the United States, my husband I began ministering to a couple whose marriage was in trouble. The husband was no longer living with his family; a divorce was imminent. After I taught the wife how to claim Bible promises, we asked God to fulfill the words of Isaiah 42:16, along with many other promises. I was sure God would bring her husband home. Didn’t God always answer my prayers?

Weeks later, still no lasting change was made, except in the life of the wife. One night, as we prayed together on the phone, I heard her say, *“God, if he never comes home, please save them both anyway.”* This was quite a contrast to be heard from the mouth of someone who shortly before desired harm for the other woman in her husband’s life.

Months had passed since we had begun praying. I wondered why God delayed. Alone one evening, I prayed silently while vacuuming the living room. *“God, is there another promise we should be claiming? Why aren’t you doing something? What if he (the husband) doesn’t go home after all? Have I misled his wife? She really believes in our prayers for him. Have I been wrong to encourage her? What is the promise we should be claiming?”*

Suddenly, a thought impressed itself into my consciousness. *“You should go talk to her husband!”*

I dismissed the idea almost instantly. My husband is a very effective minister. He was in continual contact with the man. My role was not with the sinners, but with the saints—in community service work, clinic work, and choirs, with youth, and now in prayer. How would I know what to say to him? Besides, this was not a case like David’s, when Nathan had told him, *“Thou art the man!”* This man had told my husband at their first visit that he knew what he was doing is wrong. What could I say to him that had not been said already—and quite effectively? So I responded, *“How would I know what to say?”*

Instantly another thought came to my mind: *“Ask for the Holy Spirit!”*

That was out of the question. In my teens, I had heard a preacher say something about the Holy Spirit that seemed to me a warning. I'd understood him to imply that when people receive the Holy Spirit, they could be asking for trouble. At that time I had made the decision never to ask for the Holy Spirit in a personal way—although many times since then I had been in meetings where we had asked God to be present with His Spirit.

I had seen the promise of Luke 11:13 while searching for Bible promises during previous months. I *knew* that if I asked God for that promise, and thanked him for it—accepting the gift—I would receive it. But I also was aware that some people who said they had “received the Holy Spirit” frequently spoke unintelligibly. I did not want to encourage that. None of my close friends talked freely of having received the gift of the Holy Spirit. I did not wish to be the person who did—thinking I might then receive some manifestation that would result in disapproval by my church or my husband, and cast a question on our reputation. I felt that asking for the Holy Spirit would cause me to lose everything important in my life. So instead I prayed silently, *“God, just tell me what other promise I should be claiming.”*

I continued praying for that broken family. Again the thought impressed itself in my mind, *“You go talk to the husband.”* My response was the same, *“But I don’t know what to say to him.”* Again the thought came, *“Ask for the Holy Spirit.”*

Finally, I put away my vacuum cleaner, took my Bible, and went into my bedroom to prayer. I felt I was risking everything that was important in my life: the approval of my church, my husband, our reputation. But I loved that broken family and wanted desperately to help them, and especially to help that man who was a sinner. So I placed my open Bible on the bed, and knelt beside it, putting my hand on the text in Luke 11:13. My prayer, basically, was as follows:

“Dear God, You say right here, ‘If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?’

“God, I am asking for the Holy Spirit so I will know what to say when I go to visit (the husband). You said that when I ask, I receive, so I thank you. I believe I have received Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

I paused. Nothing happened. So I prayed again. Again, nothing happened. In the previous weeks and months, I had learned that one doesn’t stop asking after the first prayer. So I read God His promise again, and told Him I really *did* want the Holy Spirit, and would accept that gift.

That brief prayer was repeated for perhaps 30 minutes, possibly longer. Finally, I was aware of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

In my mind’s eye I could see the silhouette of three crosses on a distant hill. I saw no Person, but I was well aware of that center cross. At the same moment, the thought came to my mind, *“Your temper is sin, to be confessed as sin, and forgiven.”*

I was stunned. It was true, I had a bad temper, and had even had temper tantrums at times when I was displeased during the early years of our marriage. But now it was under control. There were no more doors being slammed until the plaster fell, rarely tears from sheer answer. I had never claimed to be perfect, but over the years I had felt that since the temper was inherited, it was really excusable—it was the way I was. Now, however, I was to call even my mature control of that temper “sin” (my boiling inside only when upset). Quickly I turned in my Bible to a promise I had heard my husband use many

times as he worked with different people who were sinners. I then read 1 John 1:9 and confessed to God that even my “controlled” temper was sin against Him. I accepted and thanked Him for His promise of forgiveness and cleansing, because of Jesus Christ—who was on that cross for *me*.

A moment after I thanked God and accepted His forgiveness, another thought came into my mind: *“Your spirit of criticism is sin, to be confessed as sin, and to be forgiven.”*

Incredible! I had had a “discerning spirit” for years. But into my mind that evening came recollections of the times I had inwardly criticized hypocrisy in others. Even during ministers’ meetings. I would judge the “Amen’s” of workers to the prayers of visiting Union or General Conference people as louder and more fervent than when a lowly intern, for example, was praying. And I recalled my criticism against the treasurer in one conference we had worked. It had seemed obvious to me that he had handled money unfairly in a specific instance relating to us. (I had murmured how “they always find money for what *they* want.”) The thought came to my mind how the sight of a dear one’s weight problem continually provoked my condemnation. That evening I realized—in the presence of the Holy Spirit at the cross—that my spirit of criticism was more repulsive in God’s sight than someone else’s supposed apple-polishing, unfair monetary decision, or struggle with excess pounds. In fact, I realized *my sins* had sent Him to the cross.

Almost in shock, I again claimed the promise of 1 John 1:9, calling the criticism—the very spirit of criticism—sin. I accepted, and thanked God for His forgiveness.

As quickly as I thanked Him, another thought came clearly to me: *“Your impatient tone of voice with your children, the unkind look on your face in the morning (when you have a headache after you have been up late claiming promises with someone the evening before) —this is sin, to be confessed as sin and forgiven.”*

I quickly called these sins also, and accepted forgiveness. Then I asked God, *“Please, just forgive it all. I’m the sinner. Forgive me.”* Now there were no excuses or justified reasons that I had used before for my attitudes and actions. I felt as though I were standing nude before the judgment bar of God. I thanked God for forgiveness and waited for the next issue to come up. Nothing came to mind. I prayed again, *“Please, Lord, tell me what else I need to confess. I don’t want any more sin. I have been so blind, so busy straightening everyone else out, so busy praying for everyone else. I’ve been the sinner all along. I thank you Jesus for all Your forgiveness; I accept it and thank You for it. Please tell me if there is anything else, because I want to be forgiven of **everything**.”*

Nothing more came to my mind. Finally, I opened my eyes, looking down at the Bible opened to 1 John 1:9. I had never before noticed a verse on the opposite page which now seemed to jump out in front of me. It said, *“And this is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life.”* 1 John 2:25.

I couldn’t believe it. He would want *me*? I got up off my knees and walked over to the window of my bedroom. I looked out and up into the heavens, thinking, *“God, I want to see You. What kind of God are You, anyway? You have waited so long, so courteously, until I gave You my attention—until I listened. I want to meet You. I want to know You.”*

I felt it was for my sins specifically He had gone to the cross. I was the sinner—self-righteous and hypocritical. Yet He loved me and wanted me with Him in heaven. Now He was telling me in 1 John 2:25 that I had eternal life. I got back on my knees to thank Him for such a gift and to weep at such love. It

was as though for the first time my eyes were opened, and I was free of the need for pretense; free of a façade. I had no idea I had been carrying a burden all my life, yet now I knew I was free. I was embarrassed in His presence—for not even seeing the portion of the verse of Luke 11:13 where it speaks of the Holy Spirit being the *good* gift of the Father. I had been so afraid I would lose everything if I accepted the Holy Spirit, when in reality He was giving me everything I didn't even know I needed or could have.

The inner peace was amazing. The following morning, after asking God for His Holy Spirit once more, I began apologizing to the family members I knew I had hurt by my attitude and words. Then I went to see the woman's husband for whom we'd been praying. I told him of my experience the previous evening, how I had found that I was the sinner whom God was waiting to help. As I shared with him the joy and peace I had found in specific confession of sins and acceptance of Christ's forgiveness and cleansing, the man told me he didn't know a person could really be happy "being good." But he said that he would give anything to have the peace of mind I obviously had found.

More than 20 years have passed since that experience. In time, the man was reunited with his wife, and many changed lives—with many baptisms—followed their joint ministry. Besides freeing me from the power of an ugly temper and all that follows it, Jesus has placed within me an unquenchable sense of urgency about His soon coming—and a desire to tell others of His love and mercy. He enables me to follow the counsel I listened to my husband share in sermons many times, but somehow, before this experience, never *really* heard: *The first thing to do in the morning, as you come to consciousness, is to let God know that you choose Him, that you want His control of your mind and life, that you want to be possessed by His Holy Spirit. Do not look at any magazine, book, or newspaper, or listen to the radio or answer the phone until you have spent time reading His word. Do not leave His presence until a passage of Scripture has impressed itself upon your mind as being a revelation of Him for that day.*

Frequently since that time, God has convicted me of attitudes and behaviors that are sin—to be confessed, turned away from. And sin's power is continually broken at the cross. Mercifully, He is always there, assuring me of his love. The more I learn of Him as a Person, the more I realize how desperately I need the continual, deep peace that comes from being in His presence. I ask Him to awaken me for an encounter with Him each morning. I really want it. And He answers that prayer.

Oh yes, the speaker at the meeting had said, "*Only by love is love awakened.*" That's true. Because it was *His* enormous, patient, sacrificing, forgiving love that woke my love for Him. I praise Him.