



CHOOSING
LOVE
IN A BROKEN
WORLD

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DEAR READER...

I'M GLAD YOU are here. Before we go any further, there's something I want you to know.

Right now, in this moment, you are already loved.

The greatest love you will ever experience will not be found in another person but in the God who placed the stars in the sky, who brings the sun up every morning, who gave you life and who was prepared to give up everything so you could know him. He loves you endlessly, completely and just as you are. You can do nothing to make him love you more and nothing to make him love you less. No matter what happens in your life, whether you marry or don't, whether you have children or don't, no relationship will ever matter more than your relationship with the God who carries your name on his heart. If you can really grasp that, I have a feeling that the rest of this book will feel like common sense.

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If you were hoping for advice on when to date, how to date or even if you should date at all, it's only fair to tell you now that we're going to talk more about love and marriage than we are about dating. I realise that might seem like a strange choice. Surely you need to figure out dating before you start to think about love and marriage? You don't need to think about what might happen in the future until you get there, right?

Think about how often we start preparing for the future long before it happens. If you want to be an Olympic athlete, you start training when you are just a child. If you want to be a great musician, you spend hours and hours practising. Often before you are ready, you start to choose subjects at school that will help you with the career you might be interested in. The person we marry or the decision whether to get married at all will have a huge impact on our lives, yet we do very little to prepare ourselves. To me that doesn't make a lot of sense.

The reason we are not going to focus on dating is simple. It's not because I'm trying to avoid the subject; I know that those conversations are important. It's because I think it makes sense to decide where you are going before you decide how to get there. The kind of love you want to end up with will impact if, when and who you date along the way. My prayer is that, in God's design for relationships, you will catch a glimpse of a love that so many people before you have missed. This love is so beautiful that it is worth working towards.

DEAR READER...

We live in a world where instant happiness seems more important than something better that is further down the road. What is easy often appears more desirable than what is good. If you believe the messages that will come at you from most movies, TV shows and adverts, and maybe even from some of your friends, you will be fooled into settling for love that is just a shadow of the real thing. To live in the twenty-first century and pursue the kind of love God describes in the Bible takes enormous courage.

We're going to look at lots of things together, including why other people matter so much to us, what it actually means to love someone (this one might be a bit surprising!), what you might want to look for in someone you are eventually going to marry and why sex was God's idea all along. Through it all, I hope you will see that God is on your side. He created you, he understands you and he knows what you need even better than you do. The problem is that unless we allow him to teach us how to love and be loved, we will always settle for less. The love God wants for you, even when it takes courage, is better than anything you'll find on your own.

Starting with chapter two, you will notice that each chapter ends with three short sections: *Questions*, *Think about* and *Digging deeper*. You don't have to use these sections but you might find they help you think through what you have read.

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Questions

If you will be working through this book with a parent or youth leader, or even a friend, it would be great to discuss these together. (If you are planning to discuss it with a parent, get them to read the letter at the back of the book first.) I know it can take courage to be honest about some of these subjects but if you get used to talking openly now, you'll find it so much easier to talk about any bigger issues that might come up later.

Even if you are reading the book on your own, the discussion questions can be used to help you reflect on each chapter.

Either way, you may also find it helpful as you read each chapter to have a journal handy, where you can write down questions you have, things you have learned or even decisions you have made about your own approach to relationships. These subjects are important and you might want to come back to them again at a later stage.

Think about

Each chapter finishes with the same three questions:

- Was there anything in this chapter that you found difficult to understand? If so, what was it?
- What did you learn from this chapter that you hadn't thought about before?
- Can you think of one question you have after reading this chapter?

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These are designed to help you explore anything you have been thinking about that was not covered in the discussion questions.

Digging deeper

If you feel you want to go into the subject of the chapter in more detail, or have questions that haven't been answered, the Bible passages mentioned will give you a place to start.

One last thing: before you start reading, why not pray that God would help you understand the things he is trying to teach you and show you what it looks like to love people the way he does? That's a prayer he is longing to answer!

Let's get started!

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

HAVE YOU EVER noticed how much our lives are affected by the people around us? As babies, we turn instinctively towards the sound of a familiar voice. When we start a new school, the first thing we want to do is find a friend. The kind of home we grow up in and the friendships we develop have a huge impact on the person we become. Whether we like it or not, we are often identified by the people in our lives. At different stages in life we might be known as someone's daughter or someone's sister or someone's wife or someone's mum or even someone's friend, in the same way that those people can be known by their relationship to us. Why is it that the families we are part of and the friends we make have so much power to shape us, for good or bad?

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The answer is so important that we have to go back to the very beginning to find it – not just to the beginning of your story or my story but to the beginning of the story of the world itself. Back to the emptiness of a yet-to-be-created world, when nothing existed but God.

Then, God spoke into the darkness.

At his command, darkness was invaded by light and silence was replaced with the roar of oceans. Mountains rose up out of dry ground. Plants and flowers burst into a thousand colours. He spoke again and there was sunshine and moonlight and starry skies. Then came elephants and whales and hummingbirds and tadpoles, called out of nothing simply by the sound of his voice. God looked at what he had made and it was good. Yet, even with all this beauty and colour and life, there was something missing.

God spoke again: ‘Let us make mankind in our image’ (Genesis 1:26).

Like a potter turning an ordinary piece of clay into a priceless work of art, he took the dust of the earth itself and began to create something very different from what had gone before. Gently, he formed bones and muscles and skin. A heart that could beat and lungs that would fill with air. Arms and legs and fingers and toes. A face with eyes that would see him and a mouth that was ready to smile.

Then, like a kiss of blessing, he bent and breathed his creation into life.

In that moment, filled with the breath of God, mankind was born. Human beings were like God in a way that

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nothing else in creation could ever be. Deep within them, placed there by God himself, was an ability to think and feel and love in a way that the rest of creation could not.

Like him, they had the ability to create. They could take the gifts that God had given them and turn them into something beautiful. Colour and music and words and rhythm would become paintings and songs and stories and dance. Seeds would be planted and harvested, homes would be built, and children would be taught and nurtured and loved.

Like him they were created to be active. (Notice how often God is described as *doing* something.) He always intended his people to have lives that were full of purpose, working in the world he had made, protecting it and preserving it, and enjoying the good things that he had poured extravagantly into it. He wanted his people to live lives that painted a picture of his heart.

Like him (and this is where the answer to our question begins) they were made for relationships. Did you notice that, when God talked about creating mankind, he said, 'Let *us* make mankind in *our* image' (my italics)? You see, before there were people, God already existed in a relationship. Somehow, before the beginning of time, in a way we find impossible to fully understand, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were already there. They were all involved in the creation of the world, they each depended on each other and they were *all God*.

If you find that confusing, you are not alone. I do too! In fact, it's been baffling even the smartest people since the

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beginning of time. Whether we understand it or not, the important thing is that it tells us something about God. We were made by a God who knows what it is to love. Actually, the Bible tells us that God doesn't just *understand* love; he *is* love.

The fact that relationships have always been at the heart of God explains why they matter so much to us. We were never created to journey through life alone. We were made to live in families and communities, to have friends and neighbours. When God looked at the very first man, he knew immediately that it was not good for him to be alone. It just didn't work. From the very beginning, people have needed other people.

The problems began when the same people who had walked with God in the Garden of Eden chose to set aside his design for life and make up their own rules. The beautiful reflection of God that had once burned so brightly was pushed down and buried under a mountain of bad choices and broken hearts. Without him, something broke inside them and that changed everything, even the way they looked at each other.

The bad news is that every single relationship, whether it is between parents and children, between husbands and wives or in friendships, has been affected by our decision to do things our own way. Even though we need each other as much as ever, we have forgotten how to love like he does.

The brokenness inside every one of us means relationships that were designed for our good can actually cause us pain.