

THE BELOVED CHARTER

By Trevor Hudson

BELOVED OF GOD

Jesus, the Beloved of God, reveals the truth of our own belovedness. Notice how this repeatedly occurs in his gospel encounters: sharing a meal with those rejected and marginalized, responding to the desperate cry of a blind beggar by the roadside, requesting the company of an unscrupulous tax collector, refusing to condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery (see, for example, Matthew 9:10; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 19:1-10; John 7:53-8:11). In each encounter, Jesus communicates through his words and deeds the message: You are beloved. Indeed, his entire public ministry enfleshes the astonishing words spoken shortly before his death: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (John 15:9).

In these and other gospel encounters we glimpse in Jesus' tender compassion the Father's ever present love streaming toward you and me. No matter what we have done, how disastrously we have failed or into what distant country we have wandered, God wants us to know that we are loved. Archbishop Desmond Tutu captures this good news vividly:

"We don't need to prove ourselves to God. We don't have to do anything at all, to be acceptable to him. That is what Jesus came to say, and for that he got killed. He came to say, "Hey, you don't have to earn God's love. It is not a matter for human achievement. You exist because God loves you already. You are a child of divine love." [3]"

Explore this mystery-laden truth carefully. Jesus, uniquely the Beloved Son, attests to your and my infinite value as a child of God. From all eternity it has been God's purpose that everyone discover their belovedness in the Beloved, for this is truly who we are: beloved children of the Most High. In exuberant theological language, the apostle Paul celebrates the wonder of this gospel conviction when he writes that the Holy One "destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved"

(Ephesians 1:5-6).

In their reflections about the identity quest, well-known Christ-followers from diverse backgrounds affirm the truth of our belovedness. Asked if he could summarize the essence of his beliefs after a lifetime of theological exploration, theologian Karl Barth answered with the words of a childhood hymn: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." [4] Responding to a journalist friend's request that he write a book especially crafted for the secular-minded, Henri Nouwen stated: "Fred, all I want to say to you is 'You are the Beloved,' and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being—'You are the Beloved.'" [5]

Does the truth of your belovedness reverberate through your being? For many years, the mystery of my belovedness remained primarily an intellectual conviction. From the pages of the Bible I would gratefully affirm that I was beloved of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ. One of my earliest Scripture memory verses confirmed this truth of faith: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

By contrast, my everyday behavior, my constant looking toward others for approval, kept reminding me that this biblical truth still needed to bridge that massive crevasse between head and heart. Too often my behavior denied my belief. Theory needed to be translated into the language of the heart.

More than twenty years of pastoral ministry in diverse settings has convinced me that numerous people lack a deeply felt confidence of their belovedness. I remember conducting a weekend preaching mission in a congregation widely known for its liveliness and charismatic expression. Using the biblical passage of Jesus' baptism as the focus for my message, I shared simply the good news of our belovedness. As the service ended I offered an opportunity for those unsure of their belovedness to come forward. To my surprise almost half of those present, many of them churchgoers of long standing, walked toward the altar for personal counsel and prayer.

The reasons underlying this struggle to experience inwardly our belovedness can sometimes be uncovered. Explanations may range from distant memories of childhood abuse and conditional acceptance or present-day voices that constantly undermine and ridicule, to dehumanizing socioeconomic realities that mock the gospel's proclamation about every human creature being a cherished child of God. Tragedy can also make it very hard for us to believe that we are loved by God.

The ringing testimony of Christ-followers from all walks of life, however, affirms that these negative memories, voices and conditions can be disempowered from expressing the final word on who we are. Three practical and interrelated exercises help in the process whereby we appropriate our belovedness more deeply.

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Throughout the Scriptures, there are numerous verses that underline the fact of our belovedness. When joined together to form what I like to call "a personal beloved charter," they can induce us to see ourselves through the eyes of the Holy One and to feel about ourselves the way God feels. With hearts and minds we begin to grasp that every one of us represents God's unfolding creation; that the Holy One is continuously attentive to what we are experiencing; and that there are eternal purposes that God has for our lives. Carefully creating such a charter, committing it to memory through regular repetition, in the faith that the Spirit of God is whispering these words in our hidden depths, is one way of recovering the truth of who we are. To give you some idea of what a beloved charter could look like, here is one I have formulated in recent years:

Trevor, you are my beloved child in whom I delight. You did not choose Me but I chose you. You are my friend. I formed your inward parts and knitted you together in your mother's womb. You are fearfully and wonderfully made, made a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honor. You have been created in Christ Jesus for good works which I have already prepared to be your way of life. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through

the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. I know all your longings; your sighing is not hidden from Me. Nothing will ever be able to separate you from my love in Christ Jesus, your Lord. Abide in my love.

Allowing words and images like these to percolate within indicates our willingness to let God be God in our lives, affects the way we see ourselves and alerts our hearts to the divine Whisper telling us who we are—not that we will always be able wholeheartedly to receive the truth of our belovedness. Listening to our personal beloved charter may surface strong feelings of resistance, ranging from boredom and dull familiarity to sheer disbelief.

This resistance should not surprise us. It is an integral part of any growing, intimate relationship. Noticing these interior indicators of resistance, befriending them without judgment and exploring their possible sources with a trusted spiritual companion can often pave the way for our beloved charter to reach hitherto untouched depths of our inner beings.

I am awed at times by how the Spirit presses home the message of a beloved charter into our hearts. I once counseled at length a woman and mother of three small children. Drained by the constant demands of motherhood and housekeeping, and her husband's frequent absence, she was struggling with feelings of worthlessness and inferiority. She felt (to use her own descriptive phrase) "like the handle of the broom I use to sweep the floors." Together we spoke about the importance of seeing ourselves through the eyes of the Divine Lover, and I suggested that she create a beloved charter which she could paste on her bathroom mirror.

Two weeks later, we met again at the church office. I sensed a quiet joy and a renewed commitment to her everyday tasks. I enquired about her source of obvious new vitality. She showed me the charter that she had put together and then recounted the contents of a vivid dream:

Two days after I began praying with my Beloved Charter, I had a powerful dream. I dreamt that I was a lifeless paper doll lying discarded in a rubbish bin. Suddenly a strong hand reached down—it seemed like the hand of Christ—and lifted me upwards. As I was raised from the bin I slowly began to come alive.

When I woke up I knew that God was resurrecting me into a completely new way of life.

Holy Experiment

THE BELOVED CHARTER

Experiment with the creation of your own beloved charter. Look up those verses that are expressive for you of the way God values our lives. Write these verses down at random. When your list is complete, arrange your verses into a meaningful personal charter. It need not be lengthy—five or six sentences are sufficient. With time, it may change and develop as different verses attract your attention. For the next month, on a daily basis, set aside about ten minutes to be alone. Picture the risen Christ sitting alongside you, speaking these words to you. Bid the indwelling Spirit to press home the message of your own belovedness. Notice your own inner responses and share them with the Holy One.

Hudson, Trevor. *Discovering Our Spiritual Identity* (Renovare Resources) (pp. 27-31). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

SAMPLE BELOVED CHARTER

(From North Wake Church)

_____, *I am the good shepherd. I have laid down my life for you! I love you and have freed you from your sins by my own blood. Don't be afraid, for I have redeemed you.* _____, *I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; When you think, "My foot slips," my steadfast love holds you up. When the cares of your heart are many, my comforts cheer your soul.* _____, *I long to be gracious to you; therefore I will rise up to show you compassion. I rejoice over you with gladness; I will quiet you by my love; I will exult over you with loud singing.*

See what kind of love the Father has lavished upon you, _____, that you should be called a child of God; and so you are! As the Father has loved

me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

VERSES USED

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ~Rev. 1.4-6

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ~Jn. 15:9

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; ~Is. 43.1-2

When I thought, "My foot slips," your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. ~Ps. 94.18-19

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.' ~Jn. 10.11

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. ~Zeph. 3:17

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ~Jn. 15:9

See what kind of love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. ~1 Jn. 3.1

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! ~Is. 30:18