

A FREE CHAPTER

Why This Book

The Introduction to *Lanterns of Love: Seeing God in All Things*

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INTRODUCTION

Why This Book

> *"There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."*
>
> Thomas Merton

Something about being human can feel strangely incomplete.

Even when life is going well, when we have people who love us, meaningful work, accomplishments we once dreamed of, and moments of genuine happiness, there can remain a quiet sense that something is missing. Sometimes it feels like loneliness. Sometimes restlessness, disappointment, or the exhausting pressure to become someone better. Other times, it is simply a question we cannot quite put into words.

Is this really all there is?

We spend much of our lives trying to answer that question, often without realizing it. We search for meaning in what we accomplish, security in what we possess, belonging in what others think of us, and worth in how well we measure up. Even our spiritual lives can become another place where we strive to be better, love more, believe correctly, and somehow become the people we think we are supposed to be.

And yet, even when we succeed, the longing doesn't always disappear.

What if that longing isn't evidence that something is wrong with us? What if it is pointing toward something we have forgotten?

Something about who we are, why we are here, and what it actually means to be alive.

I have come to believe that the deepest transformation of our lives may not begin with becoming someone different, but with remembering something essential about who we already are.

I wrote this book for anyone who has become good at carrying responsibility while feeling increasingly distant from themselves. Perhaps you are navigating loss or change, trying to earn a sense of worth through what you provide, or longing for more joy, connection, and freedom in a life that looks full from the outside. You may have a settled faith, difficult questions, or uncertainty about what you believe. My hope is that these pages offer companionship and practical ways to remember who you are, receive the love already reaching you, and bring more of your voice, courage, and creativity into the life you have.

Above all, I hope these pages help you recognize something that may have been difficult to see: that you are already deeply loved, that your life carries a unique expression of God's glory, and that becoming more aware of this love can change how you experience yourself, encounter others, and participate in the world around you.

The image that has helped me understand this most clearly is a lantern.

The Light We Carry

Before we ever made light, we lived by it. The sun rose, and we woke. It fell, and the world grew dark. Light was not something we created or earned. It was something we received.

Perhaps that is part of what makes the image of a lantern so meaningful to me. A lantern does not create the flame it carries. It gives the flame a place to burn, protects it from the wind, and allows its light to reach into the darkness around it.

The flame is not the lantern. The flame is the reason the lantern exists.

I have come to see something of ourselves in that simple image. There is a light within each of us that we did not create and do not have to earn. I believe it is the love of God, present within us and expressed in a way that is particular to who we are. We do not all carry that light in the same way. Our personalities, experiences, relationships, and the lives we have lived give its expression a shape that belongs uniquely to us.

Yet we can spend much of our lives believing that the light is something we must find, achieve, or become worthy enough to receive. We search for it in approval, accomplishment, belonging, or the hope that becoming a better version of ourselves will finally make us enough.

What if the light has been there all along?

Not because we have lived perfectly or become everything we hoped to be, but because the love of God was never something we had to manufacture. It was present before we knew how to recognize it, and it remains even when our fears, wounds, and familiar ways of protecting ourselves make it difficult to see.

Perhaps the invitation is not to create a light that is missing, but to become more aware of the one we have always carried, to learn what obscures it, and to allow more of its warmth and radiance to reach the world around us.

What Happens to the Glass

There are seasons when the love of God feels close and unmistakable, and others when we struggle to recognize it at all. We may know, somewhere within ourselves, that we are loved and still move through life feeling afraid, unworthy, disconnected, or alone. If the light has been present all along, why can it become so difficult to see?

I think of the glass surrounding a lantern. Its purpose is to protect the flame while allowing the light to pass through. But over time, soot can gather on its surface. The flame continues burning, even as less of its light becomes visible.

Something similar can happen in our lives. We experience disappointment, loss, rejection, and uncertainty. We learn ways to protect ourselves, sometimes long before we understand what we are protecting ourselves from. We develop expectations about who we must become to be loved, what we need to control to feel safe, and which parts of ourselves are better kept hidden. Many of these responses begin as attempts to navigate a world we do not yet know how to understand.

Over time, what once helped us survive can begin to shape how we see everything. Our fears become expectations. Our experiences become stories about who we are. And those stories can become so familiar that we no longer recognize them as interpretations. We experience them as reality.

This is the distinction on which much of this book rests: the flame has not disappeared. It has become obscured. We mistake the darkness around us for darkness within us. We do not need to manufacture the light. We need to clear what has gathered between us and what is already there.

As the glass becomes clearer, we begin recognizing what our fear and familiar assumptions have made difficult to see. We notice the love reaching us through another person, the generosity within an ordinary gift, the creativity taking shape through our hands, and the dignity of someone we had reduced to a judgment. Within my faith, I understand these encounters as ways God's presence becomes recognizable. This is what I mean by seeing God in all things: learning to recognize and respond to God's presence throughout the life we actually inhabit.

That includes the places where life hurts. Seeing God does not require calling cruelty good, treating suffering as a lesson, or remaining near someone who harms us. Sometimes recognizing what is sacred means protecting a person, naming an injustice, or refusing to participate in harm. Sometimes it means receiving beauty or allowing someone to sit beside us in grief.

The question running beneath this book is: *Where is God's love becoming visible here, and how can I participate in it?*

To see God in all things is to become increasingly aware that the love of God is present within us and around us: in every person, in creation, and in the ordinary and even painful moments of our lives. It begins with remembering that each of us carries the flame of God's love within our soul, and that we are never alone. It is not a special vision reserved for a few, but a way of seeing that grows clearer as the glass of fear, old stories, and self-protection is gently cleared. By the end of this book, my hope is that seeing God in all things will no longer feel like an idea you agree with, but a way of seeing you can practice.

Across these pages, we will explore that recognition within ourselves, in our encounters with other people, and throughout the ordinary world we share.

A Path Still Being Walked

I should tell you something before we go any further. I am not writing as someone who has figured out how to love perfectly, moved beyond fear or disappointment, or arrived at the end of this journey. I am still walking it, sometimes with clarity and gratitude, other times struggling to remember the very things I am writing about.

Much of what you will encounter in these pages grew out of moments when the life I thought I understood began to fall apart. Through loss, disappointment, and the unraveling of things I had worked hard to build, I began discovering that love was not something I could earn or achieve. It was something I needed to learn to receive.

Often, that love reached me through other people. Friends who stayed, people who listened, unexpected kindness, and moments when someone simply sat beside me without trying to explain what had happened. Those experiences helped me recognize that God's love was not confined to the places I had expected to find it. It was meeting me in the ordinary, the painful, and the unexpected.

My experiences will appear throughout this book, but they are not meant to become a formula for yours. I share them because I have found that something deeply personal can also reveal something we recognize in one another. Our circumstances may be different, but the longing to be known, the fear of not being enough, and the desire to love and be loved can connect us across those differences.

There are also limits to what is mine to tell. My children, the mother of my children, and other people I love are part of my story, but their experiences belong to them. Where they appear in these pages, I have tried to remain responsible for my own perspective, describing what I felt,

believed, feared, chose, and learned rather than assigning meaning to their lives. The honesty in this book is meant to cost me. It is not meant to cost them.

I hope you will hear these stories as you would from someone sitting beside you, not someone standing in front of you with all the answers. I am still learning what it means to receive love and allow it to shape the way I live. And if you are walking through a season of deep pain, I hope you will remember that this journey need not be walked alone. Some of the clearest expressions of God's love in my life came through people who refused to let me face everything by myself.

The Many Ways Love Finds Us

I was about eight years old when I experienced something I would spend much of my life trying to understand.

It happened in a small Lutheran church in Long Beach, California. I can still picture the sanctuary, the stained-glass windows casting light across the room, the golden candles burning near the altar, and the tall brass organ pipes rising behind the congregation. On Sunday mornings, the sound of old hymns filled the space as a small gathering of people lifted their voices together.

I remember one particular morning when something about that experience reached me in a way I could not explain. As the congregation sang, I felt deeply connected to God and to the people around me, yet somehow completely myself. God did not feel distant or abstract. There was something of God in the beauty of the room, in the music, in the voices surrounding me, and in the experience of so many different people becoming, for a few moments, something beautifully unified.

I did not have the language for what I was experiencing. I only knew that it was real, that it was beautiful, and that something about it felt profoundly true.

Looking back, what moves me most is that no one had to lose themselves for that harmony to exist. Every person had a voice. Each voice was distinct, yet together they created something none could have produced alone. I experienced something of the love of God that was deeply personal and, at the same time, larger than any one of us.

That moment has stayed with me throughout my life. Through ministry, marriage, fatherhood, divorce, success, failure, relationships, and seasons of searching, I have continued returning to the same questions. Who are we, really? What does it mean to know God? And what becomes possible when love is no longer simply something we believe in, but something we experience and embody in the way we live?

Along the way, I have encountered wisdom through people and traditions I never expected to learn from. My Christian faith has shaped the foundation of how I understand God and love, but I have also been deeply influenced by perspectives beyond the tradition in which I was raised. Beneath that openness is a conviction that has become increasingly important to me: all truth is God's truth, wherever it is found.

That does not mean every teaching is equally true or that all traditions are saying the same thing. It means I want to remain open to recognizing truth wherever it appears, and humble enough to acknowledge that my understanding of God will always be smaller than the reality of God.

During one of the hardest seasons of my life, that openness became especially meaningful. Two friends, one rooted in Christianity and the other in a spiritual understanding of consciousness, helped me encounter love in ways I had not fully recognized before. Neither offered me a complete explanation of life. They offered their presence, their perspectives, and a kind of love that helped me begin to see differently. In many ways, the heart of this book was being lived in my life long before I ever thought to write it.

During a retreat, experiences and questions I had carried for years began finding a common shape. I found myself returning to the image of a lantern and wondering whether it could help express something I had encountered repeatedly but struggled to put into words.

Much of what I have learned came through people, teachers, traditions, and experiences I would never have chosen. I do not claim that wisdom as entirely my own. I have received it, questioned it, lived with it, and sometimes discovered how little I understood it when life asked me to put it into practice.

You do not need to agree with every conclusion I draw. Bring your questions and your own experiences. Notice what resonates, examine what does not, and remain open to discovering something I may not have seen myself. My hope is that these pages will help you recognize love more clearly and become increasingly willing to let it shape the way you live.

The Journey Ahead

This book moves through five parts, each building on the one before it. Together, they follow a journey from remembering who we are to expressing that identity in the lives we share. Beneath every chapter is the same invitation: recognize yourself as someone deeply loved, bearing something of God's glory, and discover what becomes possible when you live from that reality.

Remember the Light begins with what is already given. We explore our worth beneath the verdicts we learned, the love that reaches us before we recognize it, and what it means to hold truth and warmth together. Through the life of Jesus, we consider how being known and loved can become the ground from which a person freely gives.

What Obscures the Light turns toward what makes this difficult to remember. We listen to the body's protective responses, the information within our emotions, and the stories that become familiar enough to sound like who we are. Understanding these movements helps us meet ourselves with compassion while taking responsibility for how we respond.

Waking Up explores how that understanding becomes available in everyday life. We practice returning to the present, loosening our grip on outcomes, and establishing small rhythms that support another way of living. Play, creativity, and inward listening help us discover desires and capacities we may have kept quiet while trying to remain safe, useful, or acceptable.

Clearing the Glass addresses what happens when we forget. We learn to recognize familiar patterns returning, welcome reminders from people we trust, and practice choosing our response when a moment becomes difficult. What we have discovered becomes something we can use in a conversation, a decision, or the pause before sending a message.

Living the Light carries the journey outward. We look beyond our conclusions about other people, face suffering and harm honestly, discern healthy boundaries, and consider what we can freely offer. The final chapter invites you to choose a concrete beginning within the life you have today.

Receive, reflect, radiate describes the invitation running through these parts. We receive the love reaching us, allow something of that love to be reflected through our particular lives, and let it radiate toward others. A movement I encountered through RJ Spina's teachings has helped me put that invitation into practice: **awareness, attention, and action**. We recognize what is happening, give deliberate attention to what matters, and choose an action that expresses what we have understood. Throughout the book, we will return to that simple movement.

Each chapter offers a small practice to help bring these ideas into ordinary life. Some invite reflection, while others ask for a conversation, a moment of attention, or a choice that gives love a more tangible expression. The appendix gathers these practices so you can return to them when they are helpful. There is no need to complete every exercise or measure your progress against someone else's experience. Take what serves you, adapt it to your circumstances, and allow the rest to wait.

This journey also unfolds through our relationships. We cannot always recognize the assumptions shaping our lives from within them. Sometimes another person helps us see what we have missed, offering honesty with care or reminding us of our worth when we have forgotten it. As we become more willing to receive that kind of presence, we may also become more able to offer it. We help one another remember, not by having all the answers, but by learning to meet each other with greater attention, truth, and love.

The Invitation

I invite you to bring your whole life into these pages: your questions, your hopes, your disappointments, the parts of yourself you understand, and the parts you are still learning to recognize. You do not need to arrive with certainty or become someone different before beginning.

Think again of the lantern. The flame does not have to prove itself worthy of giving light. It simply burns. What changes is how freely that light can pass through the glass and reach what surrounds it.

I believe something similar is possible in us. As we begin recognizing the love already reaching us, we may discover that some of the things we have spent our lives searching for have been closer than we imagined. And as we become more aware of the fears, expectations, and habits that shape our responses, we may find greater freedom to choose how that love takes form.

So perhaps the place to begin is not by asking what kind of person you must become to be worthy of love, but by wondering what might change if you began living as someone who already is.

That is the invitation of this book. To receive the love that is given, reflect it through the particular life you have, and allow it to radiate into the world around you.

CONTINUE READING

The journey continues in eighteen chapters

Thank you for reading the Introduction. The rest of *Lanterns of Love: Seeing God in All Things* walks through all five parts, from remembering the light to living it, with a small practice at the end of every chapter.

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Get the Companion Journal

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