

LOVE CHANGES EVERYTHING

FINDING WHAT'S **REAL**
IN A WORLD FULL OF **FAKE**

MICAH BERTEAU



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*To Lindsey, the best and most beautiful wife ever;
our world-changing boys, Beckham and Braylon;
and any other Berteaus born after this book.
Y'all are my world and I love you more than words!
To my parents for always loving and believing in me.
Love y'all so much!*

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FOREWORD

JENTEZEN FRANKLIN

What an honor it is to be asked to say a few words about Micah Berteau’s book, *Love Changes Everything*. If ever we needed a book on love with a powerful word for the age we are in it is now. Micah unpacks the many ways the word “love” is used, abused, and overused by a media and marketing machine famous for exploiting even the most sacred of topics. But rather than focusing solely on the negative ways the world uses this timeless word, he instead provides a much greater context, using the biblical example of Hosea and Gomer to show God’s heart and original intent for a truth he created.

We live in a day and age when people are searching for love in all the wrong places and all the wrong faces. Songs are written about it. More movies are made about love than we have time to watch, and television is littered with opportunities to consume the love it sells. Far too often in movies and television love is

reduced to physical relationships as millions tune in and accept these shallow versions of love as though they were gospel. But they are not gospel—they are cheap imitations of what God originally intended and desires for us today.

We were made for more. *You* were made for more. It is obvious that our modern culture is obsessed with false notions about love. But you were made to experience far more than a “notion.” You were made to experience depths of love designed by the One who created you. Powerful stuff! If human love can change a person, what can the real love of God do? More. So much more. When you try to understand love through human eyes only, it is impossible to see God’s plan for your life or for your relationships with close friends and family and those people God places around you on a daily basis. No wonder we aren’t seeing God’s love and being moved by it like we need to be.

I believe that as you turn each page of *Love Changes Everything*, you will find the Lord speaking directly to you about the very thing that drove him to give his life on the cross—love. I also think that with each new chapter you will add another layer of revelation and will experience love at a whole new level in every relationship. This has been God’s plan since the beginning. There’s more. Commit to finding out just how much more and invest the time to walk through these chapters. I believe that as you unpack the truths in the pages ahead, you will discover all over again that love truly changes everything.

INTRODUCTION

God proved His love on the Cross. When Christ hung, and bled, and died, it was God saying to the world, “I love you.”

Billy Graham

Hey there, friends! Welcome to the beginning of this love expedition. Yes, you are reading a book on the love of Jesus. The powerful, relentless, profound, unshakable, unfathomable, immeasurable, overwhelming, incalculable, incomprehensible, and undeniable love of God. I know what you may be thinking: “What more could I learn that I have not already heard on this topic?” And you are correct that there are some strong books on the love of God. However, when God called me to write this book, I knew there was a message he wanted to release that I could not ignore.

This is more than a book; it is a journey. Everything I write about here has changed my entire perspective on life. I used

to be stuck in religion and legalistic living, and then I met real love. God has placed a message on my heart just for you. Seriously, I cannot shake the revelation that has been birthed in my spirit and brought to life through this book. So this is not another typical book on the love of God. It is much more than you may think, and the only way to find out is to keep turning these pages. My prayer is that this book will shift and shape your life forever.

We are all searching for something real. Something tangible that will add value and significance to our lives. Love is vague and vast. Love is well-studied yet highly misunderstood. Love is found down many roads, but it depends on what kind of love you are looking for. People all over the world will do crazy things to find love. But exactly what love are you chasing?

When you know what you're searching for, you can better understand why you do what you do. Is it a love full of feelings? Is it being loved and cherished by someone else that produces a profound sense of validation on your life? Is it temporary pleasure that gives you a sense of authentication, but just for a moment in time? What kind of love do you believe will bring sustaining significance to your being?

The answers to these critical questions will show your ideals and convictions. They will expose the true intentions of your heart. And please, no more "following your heart." Follow the Holy Spirit, not that thing in your chest. This will assist you in finding you. Your security cannot be founded upon a fake reality.

There is fake everywhere we turn. We are offered fake brand-name items. The only reason we spend too much money on a

knockoff is to make people think we can afford the real thing. It is a facade. The fake item is not made with the same quality; it will not last but will fall apart. Buying an imitation is more about wanting approval from others so we feel better about ourselves. However, those are fleeting feelings. Here today and gone tomorrow.

Falling in love with fake will always leave you frustrated, especially when it comes to fake love. There are numerous kinds of fake love that will catch your eye and that you can pursue. But there is only one love that can radically and unapologetically tear down the filters of your heart and carry you until your last breath. There is only one love that can take away the urge to settle for anything less than all that you are called to be. There is only one love that can step into the darkest of nights and light up your whole life. There is only one love that violently repels fake. This love—real love—changes everything.

Now let's take a ride that will change your existence. I can't wait to hear how you are impacted by the ensuing words. If you open your heart as you read and let God speak to you, you will never be the same.

1 THE FIRST MOVE

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.

Augustine

But *because of his great love for us*, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Ephesians 2:4–5 NIV, emphasis added

I was seven years old. My parents were pastors in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which is where I was born. However, my dad had just agreed to pastor a church in Modesto, California. This meant we were moving. This was a major life change for a seven-year-old and my first move ever. I was going to lose friends. I was going to lose humidity. I was going to lose crawfish. I was staring right in the face of the biggest change I had ever experienced.

However, I did not know that it would be the journey, not the destination, that would alter my life. Literally, the trip from Louisiana to California shifted everything.

I can remember leaving on a scorching hot Louisiana day. As I climbed into that all-pink 1987 van, I was nervous yet a little excited about this new season. In that van we had a TV with a VCR and Nintendo. I was most excited about that.

We drove into Arlington, Texas, and my parents surprised my two older sisters and me with a trip to Six Flags. Side note: my current church that I planted in 2018 is twenty minutes from this particular theme park. This will prove to be significant, as this fun trip turned into one of the most memorable and impactful moments of my life.

I recall walking into this theme park, filled with so much excitement. I was jumping and screaming with my prepuberty voice, beyond elated at what was about to go down. The moment we walked through the gates I began yelling, “Dad! Dad! I want to ride that ride! Let me ride that ride! Please, please, pleeaassee!” My dad turned and looked at me like I was crazy and said, “Son, that’s a hot dog cart.” What can I say? It looked like a delicious ride to me.

As we began to walk through the park, I remember being surrounded by thousands of people. It was also the hottest day in Texas history, or at least it felt that way. As we were walking, I looked up and saw a ride called The Demon. I’m a pastor’s kid, so my first thought was for my mom to pray that thing away. “Come on, Mom, whip out a few Bible verses and let’s bring freedom to this theme park,” I thought. She reassured me it was just a ride. We continued walking, but I’m still working through the emotional scars that moment left.

I started begging my dad for my favorite treat on the planet: ice cream. I asked over and over again, and my dad kept telling

me that we needed to eat “real food” first. Ice cream was very real to me, so I did what any obedient seven-year-old would do in that situation: I asked my mom. Unfortunately, she agreed with my dad and said, “Son, you cannot have ice cream right now.” I responded under my breath, without her hearing, “You can’t have any ice cream either, Mom.”

In the midst of my pity party, I looked to my right and there was a beautiful ice cream stand. Angels were beckoning me, and the sweet taste of chocolate ice cream called to me. I could not overcome the temptation. So I got in line. Yes, I jumped in the ice cream line. Adults around me were giving me confused looks, but I didn’t care; I was about to get exactly what I wanted.

When I finally reached the front of the line, the ice cream lady looked at me as I proceeded with my order. After I ordered she asked me, “Where are your parents, little boy?” I said, “Look, ice cream lady, just give me my ice cream.” I wasn’t saved by grace just yet. When she explained that I owed her money for the order, I realized that I didn’t know where my parents were! I needed my parents because who else would pay for this ice cream? Then it really set in: I was lost. I had no clue where my family was. I walked away from the stand and somehow found a security guard in the middle of thousands of people. He grabbed my hand and took me to a lost and found room.

Walking into this room was breathtaking. The AC was ice cold, the couch was supremely comfortable, and a basketball game was on TV. Was this life without parents? I had to admit, it seemed pretty great.

The kid sitting next to me, who was also lost, stood up on the couch, turned around, and looked out the big window behind

us. He screamed, “There’s my parents! There’s my parents! They are riding the train ride!”

I started laughing! Can you imagine the conversation between the couple who lost their child?

“Hey Larry, we lost Jimmy. What should we do?”

“The train ride looks fun. Let’s ride that. Jimmy will be fine.”

To this day, I’m not sure if Jimmy was reunited with his parents.

As I sat on that couch, it began to sink in. I was lost. And it was my fault. I had done what my dad told me not to do, and now I was in this situation. I thought through every punishment I might receive once I was reunited with my parents. Would I be disowned? Would I be reprimanded and yelled at for my disobedience? Would I be spanked? Would I be in time-out for the rest of my life? Would they take away my Nintendo? I was already condemning myself before I was even found. I was my own judge and jury. I was scared.

I looked outside and I saw my parents running toward the room. My dad led the way. I prepared myself for the worst.

My dad burst through the door and ran straight to me. To my shock, he grabbed me and squeezed me tightly. My arms were at my sides because a hug was not on my list of things that might happen to me.

He pulled back and as I looked in his eyes, I saw he was crying. Wow, did I have this whole moment wrong. With tears streaming down his face, he said something that has always stuck with me. His statement changed my life. Dad said, “Son, I missed you. I love you. Never leave me again.” In that moment I had the greatest revelation of my life. I was the one who made the wrong decision. I stood in the wrong line. I functioned in

disobedience, and I punished myself before ever giving my dad a chance. I deserved what was coming my way. I deserved the worst. Yet I got love. My dad still loved me.

Yes, Jesus loves you. But let me take this one step further for you. Jesus *still* loves you. While we were still sinners, Christ died (Rom. 5:8). Nails did not keep him on the cross, love did.

We live lives filled with mistakes. We often make wrong decisions and fail to break our sinful cycles. However, God won't stop loving us. That day, I saw my dad differently. What's more, I viewed God differently. I cannot earn or lose his love. His love will chase me down at my worst and love me in my dirt. When I received that picture, I lived *from* love not *for* love.

Right where you are, you are loved. Reading this right now, you are loved. Whatever you did last night, you are loved. He loves you just as you are, and he loves you way too much to keep you that way. When you get a glimpse of real love, it will change you from the inside out. This love will change how you think. This love will change how you live. This love will change how you date. This love will change how you look at your spouse. This love will change how you raise kids. This love will change how you see yourself. This love will change how you walk with God. This love changes everything.

God is speaking to you now, saying, "I miss you. I love you. Never leave me again."

Hosea and Gomer

Before we go any further, let's look at the backstory of Hosea and Gomer. Hosea prophesied around the middle of the eighth

century BC, during the tragic final days of the northern kingdom of Israel, and his message is directed primarily to that kingdom. He was the only one of the writing prophets to come from Israel, and though he is identified as the son of Beeri, little else is known about him. His ministry began during or shortly after that of the prophet Amos and lasted for at least thirty-eight years. Amos had prophesied that God would judge Israel at the hands of an unnamed enemy; Hosea identified that enemy as Assyria.¹

The first three chapters of Hosea tell us about the prophet's family life, which the Lord used as a symbol to illustrate his message to the people of Israel. This is the particular Hosea narrative we will explore together.

If you read through the sixty-six books of the Bible, you will find many stories and references to the love of God. However, one story reveals the immaculate love of God stronger than others, and that is the awkward love story of Hosea and Gomer.

I say awkward because it is like a fairy tale gone wrong. We will go through the entire story later, but first things first. Hosea was a man doing his best to follow God's will for his life. On the flip side, Gomer was a promiscuous woman—a harlot. God was not happy with his people Israel, because they were living in idolatry and abusing the love he had extended toward them. So when God spoke to Hosea and told him to make the first move toward Gomer, things got interesting.

God was not thrilled with the infidelity of his people. Hosea was ready to hear God's voice so he could deliver the message from God's heart. Gomer was living in sin. So naturally, the next move God made was to tell Hosea to marry Gomer.

What! Wait a second. God told a prophet to marry a promiscuous woman? Yes, he sure did. And God explained himself by saying that this shocking union would represent how his people had been unfaithful.

Without hesitation, Hosea married Gomer. There were probably some pretty upset young women who thought Hosea was the one for them. These girls were praying for a ring by spring. Instead, Hosea followed the voice of God and took Gomer as his wife.

I love that this whole story began with Hosea accepting what God said, even though it made no logical sense. If Hosea had stopped for two seconds and thought logically about what God was asking him to do, he most likely would've fought it. This is why you do not let your perception of reality shape God's voice in your life. Rather, you let God's voice shape your reality.

With no further explanation of why God would tell him to marry someone so seemingly incompatible, Hosea went ahead and married her. We do not get a play-by-play of the wedding or what people thought, but I am sure opinions were flying. We do not even get to see what Gomer thought about this series of events. It was Hosea's job to pursue; it was her job to say yes. That is important to remember for later, as this story ends up being much bigger than a love story between a man and a woman.

Hosea took the first step. He made the first move.

Lovestruck

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.
(1 John 4:9 NIV)

Once again, God made the first move. I'm sure you've had moments where you've sat in a room of guilt or regret, wishing you hadn't made that bad decision. All of humanity has been there. What God wants to convey to you and to people across our world is that you did not find love; Love found you.

One of my favorite Michael Jackson songs is "Smooth Criminal." There is just something about MJ's songs that gets you dancing with your no-rhythm self. (I apologize if you feel like you do have rhythm. Actually, I don't . . . you most likely move with passion instead of purpose.) I understand that this is not the most uplifting song in the world, but there is a point to be made.

There is a line in the song where MJ talks about how the person never really saw the crime coming because of how smooth and surprising the criminal acted. This analogy may seem strange to you, but stay with me for a minute. When God sent Jesus as his ultimate showcase of love for us, he became the smoothest criminal of all time. Jesus, full of love and truth, stole death, hell, and the grave away from Satan's grip. He stole the power of sin. He stole the hearts of all those who would relinquish their lives to him. And we never even saw it coming.

God showed his love by sending Jesus. I'm thankful he did not choose a Hallmark card to tell us how much he loved us. Have you ever thought how God could have handled this whole sin and Satan issue? He's God. He has all power and all authority and can do whatever he wants whenever he desires. God didn't send a little love token our way. God sent his own Son. Are you kidding me?

I am a dad and I have sons. I cannot begin to think about sending one of them to be the sacrifice for other people's sin

issues. And that is why I am not God. And neither are any of you. Because God did the unthinkable. He sent his very own Son to shake the foundations and create a new world order. What an act of pure love. There is no love comparable to this. God did not want to show his love by taking care of this issue from a distance. God wanted to be an up close and personal God. He didn't just want to tell us; he wanted to show us how "wide and long and high and deep" his love is (Eph. 3:18). And he did this while we were still sinners.

God made the first move. He sent his son Jesus as the greatest love sacrifice in the history of the world. He did it for sinners. He did it for people who would never acknowledge him as Lord and Savior. He did it even for those who curse his name. Jesus died for all of us. Jesus is the smoothest criminal of all time. When the devil thought he defeated Jesus with death, Jesus was defeating death with love.

God found you when you were lost. God saved you when you were stuck. God loves you every step of the way and every breath you take. He made the first move, now you make the next.