



THE SACRED ROMANCE

COMING HOME
TO THE GOD WHO
PURSUES YOUR HEART

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION



JOHN ELDREDGE
&
BRENT CURTIS



NELSON
BOOKS

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

The Sacred Romance

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John Eldredge is represented by Yates & Yates, LLP, 1551 N. Tustin Ave., Suite 710 Santa Ana, California 92705, www.yates2.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Curtis, Brent, 1960-1998, author. | Eldredge, John, 1947- author.

Title: Sacred romance : drawing closer to the heart of God / Brent Curtis and John Eldredge.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Nelson Books, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references.

| Summary: "Find the peace, purpose, and connection you crave by slowing down, asking questions, and deepening your relationship with God or discovering it for the first time" -- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024028485 (print) | LCCN 2024028486 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400202959 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781400249947 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .C87 2024 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) | DDC 248.4--dc23/eng/20240628

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024028485>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024028486>

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

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O N E

THE LOST LIFE OF THE HEART

Thirsty hearts are those whose longings have been wakened by the touch of God within them.

A. W. TOZER

Humanity is foundering in a crisis of heart centuries in the making.

Many of us feel it; some of us have been nearly swept away by it. We have within us such deep desires for the life we long to live. And sometimes we get a taste in transcendent moments on vacation, or around a table with good friends. More often, we catch glimpses of it online, in someone else's story. Still, life eludes us all. We are drowning in information and awareness, and it seems each new revelation only undermines what we had confidence in the day before. Knowledge, we discover, does not in and of itself heal the human condition. God might help us, but wave upon wave of so much global tragedy and trauma undermines faith as well. Our hearts cannot help but wonder, *Where are you, God, in all of this?*

If we listen carefully, our heart is telling us something priceless

and promising. *This can't be it. There is something missing. There's got to be something more.*

The voice often comes in the middle of the night or the early hours of morning, when our hearts are most unedited and vulnerable. At first, we mistake the source of this voice and assume it is just our uncertainties and anxieties. We fluff up our pillow, roll over, and try to go back to sleep. Days, weeks, even months go by and the voice speaks to us again:

Aren't you thirsty? Listen to your heart. There is something missing.

We listen and we are aware of what the French call *ennui*, a sort of emptiness bordering on despair. And under the *ennui* is something dangerous, something that feels adulterous and disloyal to the religion we are supposed to believe in—whether that is the religion of global progress or some particular faith. We sense a passion deep within that threatens a total disregard for the program we are living; it feels reckless, wild. Unsettled, we turn and walk quickly away, like a woman who feels more than she wants to when her eyes meet those of a man not her husband.

We tell ourselves that this small, passionate voice is an intruder who has gained entry because we have not been disciplined or focused or “optimistic”; maybe we need to get more rest, practice our yoga, consume less media. Our pastor or priest seems to agree with this assessment and exhorts us to be more “faithful.” We try to silence the voice with busyness at work, or maybe through our efforts at promoting justice. We might join a book club on prayer, see a therapist, or train to be part of a team serving the homeless. Maybe we just hang out with our friends in coffee bars, talking about our dreams but never really doing anything about them.

Sometime later, the voice in our heart dares to speak to us again,

more insistently this time. *Listen to me—there is something missing in all this. You long to be in a love affair, a great adventure, a fresh start. You were made for something more. You know it.*

When the young prophet Samuel heard the voice of God calling to him in the night, he had the counsel from his priestly mentor, Eli, to tell him how to respond. Even so, it took them three times to realize it was God calling. Rather than ignoring the voice, or rebuking it, Samuel finally listened.

In our modern, fragmented world we often have no such mentor, so we do not understand it is God speaking to us in our heart. Having so long been out of touch with our deepest longings, we fail to recognize the voice and the One who is calling to us through them. Frustrated by our heart's continuing sabotage of a dutiful "Christian" life, some of us silence the voice by locking our heart away in the attic, feeding it only the bread and water of duty and obligation until it is almost dead, the voice now small and weak. But sometimes in the night, when our defenses are down, we still hear it call to us, oh so faintly—a distant whisper. Come morning, the new day's activities scream for our attention, the sound of the cry is gone, and we congratulate ourselves on finally overcoming our anxiety.

Others of us agree to give our heart a life on the side if it will only leave us alone and not rock the boat. We try to lose ourselves in our work or "get a hobby" (either of which soon begins to feel like an addiction); we have an affair or develop a colorful fantasy life fed by the latest romance novels or pornography. We learn to enjoy the juicy intrigues and secrets of gossip. We make sure to maintain enough distance between ourselves and others, and even between ourselves and our own heart, to keep hidden the total unbelief we are living now that our inner life has been divorced from our outer life.

Having thus appeased our heart, we are forced to give up our

spiritual journey because our heart will no longer come with us. It is bound up in the little indulgences we feed it to keep it at bay.

LOSING HEART

The life of the heart is a place of great mystery. Yet we have many expressions to help us express this flame of the human soul. We describe a person without compassion as “heartless,” and we urge him or her to “have a heart.” Our deepest hurts we call “heartaches.” Jilted lovers are “brokenhearted.” Courageous soldiers are “bravehearted.” The truly evil are “black-hearted” and saints have “hearts of gold.” If we need to speak at the most intimate level, we ask for a “heart-to-heart” talk. “Lighthearted” is how we feel on vacation. And when we love someone as truly as we may, we love “with all our heart.”

But when we lose our passion for life, when a deadness sets in which we cannot seem to shake, we confess, “My heart’s just not in it.” (How much of your heart even feels present these days?)

Brent and I are inviting you on a journey to recover your heart, or the lost places of your heart. Because in the end, it doesn’t matter how well we have performed or what we have accomplished—a life without heart is not worth living. For out of this wellspring of our soul flows all true caring and all meaningful work, all real worship and all sacrifice. Our faith, hope, and love issue from this fount as well. Because it is in our heart that we first hear the voice of God, and it is in the heart that we come to know him and learn to live in his love.

So you can see that to lose heart is to lose everything. And a “loss of heart” best describes most men and women in our day. It

isn't just the addictions and affairs, the anxiety and depression, all the trauma and heartache—though God knows, there is enough of these to cause even the best of us to lose heart. But there is the scatteredness, the weariness, the fact that most of us are living day by day merely to survive. Beneath it we feel restless, tired, and vulnerable.

Indeed, the many forces driving modern life have not only assaulted the life of our heart, they have also dismantled the heart's habitat—that geography of mystery, beauty, and transcendence we knew so well as children.

In physics class, the professor seemed to take satisfaction in explaining to us that the beauty of sunsets and rainbows was due only to the refraction of light through water and dust particles in the air. It was as if the miracle of light itself were somehow done away with by these explanations. Love is nothing more than hormones. Meaning is something we construct for ourselves. We remember leaving those classes with a sense of loss, a sense of “Oh, so that's all there is.” The message of our teachers was clear: Once we dispense with unhelpful mysticism and superstition, the progress of mankind will proceed unhindered.

All of us have had the experience at one time or another, whether it be as we walked away from our teachers, our parents, a church service, or sexual intimacy—the sense that something important, perhaps the only thing important, had been explained away or tarnished and lost to us forever. Sometimes little by little, sometimes in large chunks, life has drowned the terrain meant to sustain and nourish the more wild life of the heart, forcing the heart to retreat as an endangered species into smaller, more secluded, and often darker geographies for its survival. As this has happened, something has been lost, something vital.

For what shall we do when we wake one day to find we have lost touch with our heart and with it the very refuge where God's presence resides?

Starting very early, life has taught all of us to ignore and distrust the deepest yearnings of our heart. Life, for the most part, teaches us to suppress our longing and live only in the external world where efficiency and performance are everything. We have learned from parents and peers, at school, at work, and even from our spiritual mentors that something else is wanted from us other than our heart, which is to say, that which is most deeply *us*. Very seldom are we ever invited to live out of our heart. If we are wanted, we are often wanted for what we can offer functionally. If rich, we are honored for our wealth; if beautiful, for our looks; if intelligent, for our brains. So we learn to offer only those parts of us that are approved, living out a carefully crafted performance to gain acceptance from those who represent life to us. We divorce ourselves from our heart and begin to live a double life. Frederick Buechner expresses this phenomenon in his biographical work, *Telling Secrets*: “[Our] original shimmering self gets buried so deep we hardly live out of it at all . . . rather, we learn to live out of all the other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather.”

On the outside, there is the external story of our lives. This is the life everyone sees: our life of work and play and maybe church, of family and friends, paying bills, and growing older. Our external story is where we carve out the identity most others know. It is the place where we have learned to label each other in a way that implies we have reached our final destination. Bob is an accountant; Mary works for the government; Ted is an attorney. The Smiths are the family with the well-kept lawn and lovely children; the Joneses are that family whose children are always in trouble. Here, busyness

substitutes for meaning, efficiency substitutes for creativity, and functional relationships substitute for love. In the outer life we live from *ought* (I ought to do this) rather than from *desire* (I want to do this), and management substitutes for mystery. There are three steps to a happy marriage, five ways to improve your portfolio, and seven habits for success.

There *is* a spiritual dimension to this external world in our desire for justice, community, a healed earth; but communion with God is replaced by activity for God. There is little time in this outer world for deep questions. Given the right plan, everything in life can be managed . . . except your heart.

The inner life, the story of our heart, is the life of the deep places within us—our passions and dreams, our fears and our deepest wounds. It is the unseen life, the mystery within—what Buechner calls our “shimmering self.” It cannot be managed like a corporation. The heart does not respond to principles and programs; it seeks not efficiency, but passion. Art, poetry, beauty, mystery, ecstasy: These are what rouse the heart. Indeed, they are the language that must be spoken if one wishes to communicate with the heart. It is why Jesus so often taught and related to people by telling stories and asking questions. His desire was not just to engage their intellects but to capture their hearts.

Indeed, if we will listen, a Sacred Romance calls to us through our heart every moment of our lives. It whispers to us on the wind, invites us through the laughter of good friends, reaches out to us through the touch of someone we love. We’ve heard it in our favorite music, sensed it at the birth of our first child, been drawn to it while watching the shimmer of a sunset on the ocean. The Romance is even present in times of great personal suffering: the illness of a child, the loss of a marriage, the death of a friend. Something calls to

us through experiences like these and rouses an inconsolable longing deep within our heart, wakening in us a yearning for intimacy, beauty, and adventure. For life as it was meant to be.

This longing is the most powerful part of any human personality. It fuels our search for meaning, for wholeness, for a sense of being truly alive. However we may describe this deep desire, it is the most important thing about us, our heart of hearts, the passion of our life. And the voice that calls to us in this place is none other than the voice of God.

We cannot hear this voice if we have lost touch with our heart.

The true story of every person in this world is not the story you see, the external story. The true story of each person is the journey of his or her heart. Jesus himself knew that if people lived only in the outer story, eventually they would lose track of their inner life, the life of their heart he so much desired to rescue. Indeed, it was to the most religious people of his time that Jesus spoke his strongest warnings about a loss of heart: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matt. 15:8).

It is tragic for any person to lose touch with the life of their heart but especially so for those of us who once heard the call in our heart and recognized it as the voice of Jesus of Nazareth. We may remember him inviting us to a life of beauty, intimacy, and adventure that we thought was lost. For others of us, when he called it felt for the first time in our lives as if our heart had finally found a home. We responded in faith, in hope, and in love and began the journey we call the Christian life. Each day seemed a new adventure as we rediscovered the world with God by our side.

But for many of us, the waves of first love ebbed away in the whirlwind of service and activity, and we began to lose the Romance. Our faith began to feel more like a series of problems that needed to be

solved or principles that had to be mastered before we could finally enter into the abundant life promised us by Christ. We moved our spiritual life into the outer world of activity, and internally we drifted. We sensed that something was wrong, and we perhaps tried to fix it—by tinkering with our outer life. We tried the latest spiritual fad or a new church, or we “deconstructed” our faith, hoping that something truer would emerge. But we only found ourselves weary, jaded, bored . . . maybe even depressed. Others of us immersed ourselves in busyness without really asking where all the activity was headed.

What we want to say in these pages is simply this: *Our hearts are telling us the truth—there really is something missing!*

THE CENTRALITY OF THE HEART

It came as a great surprise to both of us when we discovered that the life Jesus offers us is a love affair of the heart, an adventure of epic proportion. It cannot be lived primarily as a set of principles or ethics. It cannot be managed with steps and programs. It cannot be lived exclusively as a moral code leading to righteousness. In response to a religious expert who asked him what he must do to obtain real life, Jesus asked a question in return:

“What is written in the Law? . . . How do you read it?”

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with *all your heart* and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

—LUKE 10:26-28

The truth of the gospel of Jesus is intended to free us to love God and others with our whole heart and to find a life worth living. When we ignore this heart aspect of our faith and try to live out our religion solely as correct doctrine or the pursuit of justice, our passion is crippled or perverted, and the divorce of our soul from the heart purposes of God toward us is deepened.

The religious technocrats of Jesus' day confronted him with what they believed were the standards of a life pleasing to God. The external life, they argued, the life of ought and duty and service, was what mattered. "You're dead wrong," Jesus said. "In fact, you're just plain dead (whitewashed tombs). What God cares about is the inner life, the life of the heart" (Matt. 23:27-28). Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the life of the heart is clearly God's central concern. When the people of Israel fell into a totally external life of ritual and observance, God lamented, "These people . . . honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isa. 29:13).

Our heart is the key to life and the way back to God.

The apostle Paul informs us that hardness of heart is behind all the addictions and evils of the human race (Rom. 1:21-25). Oswald Chambers writes, "It is by the heart that God is perceived [known] and not by reason . . . so that is what faith is: God perceived by the heart." This is why God tells us in Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." He knows that to lose heart is to lose everything. Sadly, most of us watch the oil level in our car more carefully than we watch over the life of our heart.

In one of the greatest invitations ever offered to man, Christ stood up amid the crowds in Jerusalem and said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38). If we aren't aware of our soul's deep thirst, his offer means nothing.

It is possible to recover the lost life of our heart and with it the intimacy, beauty, and adventure of life with God. To do so we must leave what is familiar and comfortable—perhaps even parts of the religion in which we have come to trust—and take a journey. This journey first takes us on a search for the lost life of our heart, and for the voice that once called us in those secret places—those places and times when our heart was still alive. The pilgrimage of the heart leads us to remember together what it was that first engaged us in deep ways as children: “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it,” said Jesus (Mark 10:15).

Our journey will take us to explore the hidden questions of our heart, born out of the stories of our lives. It is only by leaving home and taking a pilgrimage that we will begin to see how our own stories are interwoven with the great Romance God has been telling since before the dawn of time. It is on this pilgrimage that we begin to see that each of us has a part in the cosmic love affair that was created specifically with us in mind. Finally, this pilgrimage brings us to the destination, set within all our hearts, which in some way we have known, longed for, and been haunted by since we were children.

As we trace the steps of the journey toward God’s resurrection of the heart, we hope to help you discover your soul’s deepest longing and invite you to embrace it as the most important part of your life.

It is our aim to help you “guard your heart” to see more clearly the enemies of your heart and the hearts of those you love—to enable you to better enter the Battle for hearts to which our Captain calls us.

Our journey begins by asking questions, putting words to the movements of the heart. “What is this restlessness and emptiness I

feel, sometimes long years into my journey? What does the spiritual life have to do with the rest of my life? What is it that is set so deeply in my heart, experienced as a longing for adventure and romance, that simply will not leave me alone? Does it have anything to do with God? What is it that he wants from me? Has he been speaking to me through my heart all along? When did I stop listening? When did his voice first call to me?"