

July 2, 2006

Former Love, Present Affliction, and the Truth About Doubt

Psalm 42:1-11 / Psalm 77:1-9 / Job 10:8-22

Just as last week's passage addressed an issue we've all wrestled with at one time or another (that is, the issue of ANGER AT GOD), so also this week's passage does the same thing—addressing for us another issue we've all wrestled with at one time or another—the issue of DOUBT. Or more specifically, the issue of doubting God's intentions, motives, and purposes, in providentially allowing severe trials or painful afflictions to strike hard into the lives of His children.

And what is it that most frequently causes such doubt in believers, or feeds it once it begins to arise within? I believe it is simply this:

Doubt most often arises, and increases, when a person falls into the trap of trying to discern God's love for them, or the pleasure He takes in them, on the basis of nothing other than their present emotional state, life situation, or circumstances.

We are beings that rely so heavily on our senses and emotions and affections, that we have a hard time believing God is happy with us, when we feel unhappy. Or that God is pleased with us, when we are not pleased with ourselves. Or that God loves and delights in us, even when we are suffering pain and trauma or things that would seem to imply He hates us.

Or as I mentioned last week—we have a hard time believing God is not angry at us when we are angry at Him.

That, I believe, is what gives rise to the doubt Job expresses in today's passage—he looks at his present circumstances or situation, and the misery he's feeling, and on the basis of them alone, tries to discern what God's up to, and whether God loves, accepts or cherishes him.

And because he does, he comes to the wrong conclusion.

In fact, because he does, he falls into the unavoidable and unbreakable cycle of what I call coin flipping, or flower petal picking!

Did you ever do that when you were kids? Did you ever walk through a field, pick a daisy, and then as you plucked out each successive petal, say to yourself of some girl or boy: "She loves me, she loves me not." or for you women, "He loves me, he loves me not..." on and on till you got to the last petal—the result of whether he or she did or didn't love you being entirely dependent on how many petals that particular flower had on it!

Or maybe you were a coin flipper: “Heads she loves me, tails she doesn’t!” I can remember playing those silly little games with my friends when I was 8-9 years old!

Yet, silly as they were (and they were quite silly) that’s exactly what many Christians do whenever they try to discern God’s love for them on the basis of providential circumstances alone, or by merely looking at how things are going in their life at one particular point in time.

If they get a good job, God loves them. If they get laid off, He doesn’t. / If their kids are behaving, God loves them. If they’re not, He doesn’t. / If they’re happy, God loves them, if their depressed, God must not. / If they are well, God loves them. If they’re sick He must not. / And so it goes, on and on, “ad infinitum.”

That’s what we see happening with Job in today’s passage. But don’t be fooled! Clear as it is from this book that Job **SHOULDN’T** have done it, and that we also (like Job) **SHOULD NOT** do it as well, I see people doing it all the time! I even see the same tendency in **ME**—and I should know better! (I who frequently counsel people **NOT** to do it!)

Yet it’s hard not to get sucked into it. It’s hard to stop doing it, precisely because we are by nature such “sensual beings” — that is, we are people more heavily influenced by our senses, and feelings, and emotions, and circumstances, than we are by the **TRUTH** God declares in His Word.

But if we **ALLOW** ourselves to get sucked into doing it, or **GIVE INTO** our natural tendency to let our emotions or circumstances (instead of God’s truth) dictate the reality of our standing with God, then we will go our entire lives without **EVER** being **SURE** of God’s love for us.

By seeking to discern God’s love on the basis of what’s happening to us (or in us) we condemn ourselves to living in a habitual state of emotional instability, and doom ourselves to living in a state where our daily, or even hourly circum-stances, will dictate our emotional mood swings—driving us up or down at whim—which is a miserable place to be!

For under that scheme of thinking one can only be confident of God’s love when things are going well—which means they can never really be confident of it at all! Because they know that sooner or later, something is bound to go wrong. And they inwardly dread it, because they know that when it happens, they will once again question his love for them.

In fact, when **MANY** things go wrong, and **STAY** wrong for an extended period of time (as in Job’s case) they will be driven to depression, and actually start believing God has it out for them.

They can even become cynical and paranoid (as Job does in this passage) and actually start believing that God created them for the sole purpose of having someone to pick on, thereby even twisting God's former and obvious displays of love into a malicious conspiracy of having raised him in order to have someone to punish or hurt—as Job does indeed insinuate in verse 13-14.

In fact, taking a look at the passage, you'll notice that in verses 8-9, Job vacillates back and forth between then (when God did love him) and now (when God appears not to). "Your hands shaped me and made me," says Job. That's the "He loved me," part. But then he adds, "Will You now turn and destroy me?" That's the "He loves me not," part.

"You molded me like clay" he says, that is, like an artist taking great pride and pleasure in sculpting a new, unique piece of artwork to display. That's the "HE loved me" part. And the, "Will you now turn me to dust again?" is the "He loves me not" part.

Job even goes on to give us a beautiful and poetic description of God's fascinating involvement in his conception and prenatal growth, using colorful poetic similes to represent the different stages of his development:

"The milk being poured out," says Robert Gordis, "represents semen being poured over the egg; the curdling of that milk into cheese, refers to the moment of conception and the initial growth of the embryo as it is clothed with skin and flesh; and then as it develops further, it is knitted together with the forming of the bones and sinews."

(Verses 10-11 are a beautiful picture of God carefully and lovingly and tenderly overseeing the whole process of his development from conception to birth.)

And if we interpret verse 12 correctly, it appears to refer to God's love for Job from birth and then right up to the time his afflictions began.

"You gave me life and showed me kindness..." says Job—that is, "You showed me Hessed" which in the Hebrew, refers to God's Unfailing, Everlasting, Faithful, Covenant Love, or Loving Kindness as we saw a few weeks back) "And in Your providence," Job continues, "You watched over my spirit." It's what Norman Habel calls "a touching recognition of God's providential care for Job throughout his life."

But then, as Job begins interpreting even that beautiful and touching recognition of God's providential care for him in light of his present pain and affliction, it goes downhill fast! And God's undeniable displays of love come to be interpreted by Job, as a divine conspiracy.

Interpreting God's former love solely on the basis of his PRESENT circumstances, he thus distorts and discolors all of it, and suggests that God's hidden, secret, or concealed plan for creating, and watching over him all those years, was simply to an object that he could punish—a human scapegoat raised for the sole purpose of having someone to beat on whenever he messed up or sinned (vv. 13-14).

(Possible reference to the ancient practice of raising and nurturing abandoned children to be slaves, temple prostitutes, etc.?)

And not just when he messed up, but regardless of whether he messed up or not! "Whether I'm guilty or innocent," says Job in verse 15, "I am full of shame and drowned in my affliction." Or in other words, God intends to afflict me regardless of what I do. He's simply got it out for me. I'm cursed and there's nothing I can do to change it.

"Even if I hold my head high," he says in verse 16, "confident of my blamelessness, you stalk me like a lion hunting its helpless prey, and display your awesome power against me." "You bring new witnesses against me to accuse me," he says in verse 17, "and increase your anger toward me, your forces come against me wave after wave."

So what's he saying?

"Whether I'm guilty or innocent it makes no difference, for God's sole purpose in making him (the secret motive concealed in God's heart) was to have someone to punish. And because that was God intention all along, He has wave upon wave of afflictions ready to strike Job, like an army of soldiers marching toward him in column after endless column, row, after row, after row."

That's how the afflicted person often FEELS — they feel picked on. Like no matter what they do, God has it out for them and intends to send an endless stream of trials upon them, one after another, after another, to afflict them.

Not that they are merely going through a temporary hardship that will soon be gone and followed by better times, and better things, but that He has made them for one purpose — solely to have someone to torment relentlessly!

That's the state in which we find Job today — doubting and questioning God's love, and motives, and intentions for him — God's plan and purpose for his life. In fact, if you had said to Job at this point in his life, "God loves you and has a plan for your life." He would have laughed at you! "Love me? His only plan in creating me was to use me as a whipping post, and torment me day and night for the rest of my life here on earth."

That's why he wishes, as he says in verses 18-19, that he had gone straight from the womb to the grave when he was born. Because it's no fun living, when you FEEL that God is out to get you, or when your pain makes you FEEL that your sole purpose in existing is to be God's punching bag — punished incessantly for every sin and mistake you make. That is a summary of today's text.

And in that sense, Mike Mason pegs it when he says, *"The relationship between faith and doubt is often misconstrued. We tend to think about doubt as an intellectual problem, when in reality it has more to do with the emotions and the will."* He's right. And this passage shows just how right he is!

Which brings us to our **FIRST** point. That Job has birthed and fed doubt in his life, by wrongly trying to discern whether or not God loves him, on the basis of NOTHING OTHER than his PRESENT LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES. In fact, he so heavily relies on those PRESENT circumstances to discern God's love toward him that it even distorts his ability to see God's FORMER expressions of love as anything other than evidence of a cruel plan to make someone He could torment.

It's a sad state of affairs, but don't WE sometimes do the same? Don't we some-times question decades of unmitigated LOVE and DIVINE BLESSING, merely because we have had to endure a few recent months (or a couple of recent years) of suffering and pain?

Job was unspeakably blessed by God for 40 or 50 years! For nearly half a century God had placed a hedge of protection around him that Satan couldn't penetrate. Yet in spite of all those years of divine loving-kindness, all it took (at most) was two months of suffering (and I do grant you it was intense suffering)—but it took only two months of present affliction, to get Job to question an entire lifetime of past and present love.

You see, that's what happens when we try to discern God's love for us solely on the basis of present feelings, or emotions, or circumstances, or situations. It breeds doubt, and feeds doubt, and can only lead to uncertainty, insecurity, and emotional, as well as spiritual, instability.

If our circumstances are GOOD, it can lift us emotionally, and make us feel loved (at least for a little while). But when BAD things happen, that sense of God's love evaporates, and leaves us to spiral downward in an emotional nosedive which is hard to pull one's self out of—one we

can't pull ourselves out of so long as our trials continue. In fact, if they REMAIN BAD for quite some time (as was the case with Job) it can make us feel like God's only plan was to make us miserable—even though we had enjoyed decades of love and blessing.

And when we get to that point (better yet, before we get to that point) there is only one thing to do—REPENT for believing our FEELINGS and CIRCUMSTANCES, more than God's PROMISES! REPENT for allowing our present emotional state to have more sway on our perception of reality than what God declares in His Word!

And I don't use the word "REPENT " in a harsh or pejorative sense. I use it in the way the Bible does—to signify our need to stop doing one thing, and start doing the opposite—admitting we have embraced wrong or sinful ways of thinking, and feeling, and acting, or relating to God and others, and simply turn to embrace right ways of doing so.

I use "repent" in its most basic sense, which simply means, "to have a change of mind toward something." That's what the word "repent" means.

And in relation to the issue at hand, to repent means to believe God's PROMISES more than our faulty and transient perceptions. It means trusting His Objective Word more than our subjective feelings. It means letting the Gospel, and not our circumstances, be the source of our assurance of God's love for us, pleasure in us, and acceptance of us.

That's what Paul essentially tells us in Romans 8:35-39 where he writes:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or danger or sword? NO! In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor demons—not the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Shall we believe that promise and let it have its stabilizing effect on our lives. Or shall we like Job, allow our present circumstances and feelings convince us God doesn't, and never has loved us? Shall we live by faith or by sight; or maybe I should say, shall we live by faith or by our transient, undependable and fickle feelings that change drastically at little more than a minor hormonal fluctuation?!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. The consistency of God's love (or Hessed) and our need to cling to that truth. As I mentioned before, the word translated "kindness" in verse 12, is the

Hebrew word *Hesed*, sometimes translated “unfailing love,” or “unfailing kindness.” God’s *Hesed* we are told in Psalm 106 & 107 “endures forever.” It never ceases—ever! Likewise, in Psalm 103, David tells that “from everlasting to everlasting God’s *Hesed* is with those who fear Him.” That is, from eternity past, to eternity future, God’s *Hesed*—His unfailing love or kindness—is with those who fear. It rests upon His chosen people, His elect, on all true believers, from the everlasting past, through the ongoing present, and on into the everlasting future.

And we need to remind ourselves of that! If you are a believer, God’s love rested upon you long before you ever came to faith! Your trusting in Jesus did not make God love you; His love for you is what brought you to trust Him!

As Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:4-5: “God chose us in Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love (everlasting love) He predestined us to be adopted as His children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will.”

Why did he tell us that? To confuse us with all that talk about election and predestination? No! Not at all! He tells us that because that’s what the O.T. declares—that God’s love for His “chosen people”—(and that means all who ever have, or will, believe)—is from everlasting to everlasting! God’s love has no beginning and it will have no end! It rested upon us before time began, and it will continue to unfailingly rest upon us throughout endless eternity!

That’s the way divine love (or “*Hesed*”) is, according to Scripture! It doesn’t start when we repent and believe, or end if we struggle, fail or fall! It’s not fickle, and fleeting, and transient love, like our weak and conditional love. It’s faithful, unfailing and strong love which endures forever!

Which means that regardless of what the believer is going through—be it trial, or hardship, or sickness, or pain, or trauma—be it the loss of everything near and dear to you (like Job), or a physical affliction that covers you with painful pussy sores from head to toe—God’s love for you in those things is as strong as it has ever been, or ever will be. It can’t be otherwise, because His love for you is from Everlasting to Everlasting. It’s without beginning and without end! It is by definition eternal, unfailing, everlasting love that endures forever!

You see, as hard as it is for us to believe, God’s love for Job is just as strong during his afflictions, as it was when He was protecting Job with that hedge of protection and blessing every thing that he did. In fact, God was loving Job the whole time Job was yelling at Him, and venting his anger, and calling His justice into question, and even throughout today’s passage as Job slanders His

love and accuses God of having evil intentions. God doesn't stop loving Job, just because Job has stopped loving God! He doesn't love Job when he's good and reject him when he's bad. And Job, knowing that the love of God (the *Hesed* of God) was unfailing, and ever-lasting — enduring forever — should have known that!

And if YOU DIDN'T know it before, you do now! So don't ever forget it—especially during your times of trial. Don't ever let what you're experiencing, or your depressive feelings, or painful circumstances, or hurtful situations be the gage you use to discern the depth of God's love for you, because they are always faulty!

Rather, let it be your knowledge of what God says His love is like that keeps you going, when your feelings say it can't be true! God's love for His chosen ones does not fluctuate! Not when you're suffering; not when you're angry at Him; not even when your sinning (like Job in this passage) who is still the object of God's everlasting and unfailing love even as he slanders God, makes malicious accusations, and essentially accuses God of hating him.

Then **LAST**, though Job's doubt is so severe that it makes him twist even former expressions of love into a devious plan to torment him, it must be said, that when we are going through times when we question God's love; when because of the severity of our trials, we feel that He must hate us, it is necessary at those times to remember former love when going through present affliction.

It's what I call, Clinging to past love, for the assurance of present and future love — and I've done it often these past couple years.

I don't think I've ever felt as unloved by God as I have these last couple of years. And I don't say that to solicit any sympathy. I say it because it's true. (In fact, it started about the time I decided I would preach through Job!) At times I've honestly felt like God hated my guts, and I've told Him so—only to have it met with absolute silence. Nothing! Like talking to a wall.

And that is hard to take, after having had years of intimate times of pleasant spiritual communion, and even euphoric times in prayer and meditation. And let me tell you, to have tasted of the pleasures of intimacy with God, and then feel like that's been completely taken from you is hard to take—very hard to take. There have even been times I felt like throwing in the towel and leaving the ministry altogether.

And you know what has kept me from doing so?

Remembering those times of former love. Remembering those times of sweet communion with God. Remembering those unspeakably sweet times of mystical delight. Times of being so caught up in God, that I felt I had left earth and been transported to heaven!

I would remember them (sort of like Job reflecting back on God's kindness, and His providence watching over his spirit) and I would say to myself — "If He loved me then, He must still love me now, even though it doesn't feel that way at all."

That I believe are what past expressions of God's love are meant to do—hold us over during times of present affliction! They are God's way of saying, "I did love you, and therefore you can be sure I still do love you, even though right now you can't sense that love at all."

In Psalm 42, David, speaking of the "tears that are his food day and night" says, "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: How I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng." Ah! Those times of sweet communion! How they sustain the soul in times of weeping!

Asap does the same thing in Psalm 77. In agony of soul he looks back on better times and says, "I was too troubled to speak. Then I thought about the former days, the years of long ago. I remembered my songs in the night (that is, those times when my heart was running over with love and praise for God)."

I encourage you to do it also. Look back at those times of sweet communion. Look back and remember that with God, because His love for His saints endures forever. And because it does: Past love is the assurance of present love and future love. Know it and be encouraged.