

We're nearing the end of this series exploring the dilemmas, or apparent dilemmas, in the Church's, and the Bible's, understanding of the meaning of the eternal love of God. By now some of you are well familiar with those three bedrock premises which must somehow be resolved: 1) God loves every person and wants to redeem every one into "heaven," into eternal loving relationship 2) God is all-powerful, and will fully accomplish His purposes and 3) Some people wind up in hell, forever separated from loving relationship with God. As you know—old news—all three of these cannot be true.

The issue for this morning is the relationship between God's love for every one of us human beings and our free will to reject His love. And it might appear to be right up there with the little child's dilemma: "If God can do anything, can He create a rock so big and heavy even He could not lift it?" That is, "If God our Creator loves us infinitely, could He create us with enough free will so we could forever reject His love, even at infinite pain to ourselves and to God?"

If God loves us, by definition, God may not force us to love Him back any more than a mad frenzied stalker may force the woman of his obsession to love him back. Love does not manipulate or coerce; God is all-powerful, but has chosen freely to subordinate His power when it comes to relationship with us. "God is love."

So we understand the problem. I think it's Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* who snarls in pride, "I would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven." The anthem of ego and individualism run wild: "No matter the consequences to myself or anyone else, I insist on living my own life my own way and nobody can make me do otherwise." [The value of unfettered free choice, the value of ego getting its own way, becomes the supreme moral good against which every communal or other good is measured.]

"I would rather make my own choices and be miserable than submit to Christ and be blessed and even God can't make me be happy." There it is: any willful teenager, any rebellious adult, any miserable sinner has the power to turn Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, into a helpless, impotent, broken-hearted, defeated God—forever and ever. Perfect: like the spoiled 6-year old who carries on and makes such a scene at the family reunion that one misbehaving youngster succeeds in spoiling the entire gathering for everyone else who is behaving nicely. Do you think a single spoiled child has the power to spoil the eternal Feast? We're accustomed to lousy parenting on earth, but do you think God is such a lousy parent?

Does that sound right to you? That's it? God is helpless in the face of a misbehaving child, or a mass murderer, in the End? For all eternity, God's plans are foiled and His heart broken by even one hateful, spiteful, stubborn woman or man given over to evil? (Never mind, for now, about us regular sinners.)

It's easy enough for people like us to conclude, "Oh, well, good riddance. Heaven will be better off without all the trouble-makers who have already done plenty to mess up this lifetime." But then people like us are capable of writing people off, shutting them out, giving up on them. [The great philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand died in the mid-80's, and it was a sad demise. As I heard it, as wealthy and famous as she was, even after months of decline due to cancer she died with only one paid caregiver in her room. Not a single current friendship left. She had written off every other person with whom she had had a significant relationship: they didn't live up to her Objectivist philosophy,

they compromised, they “let her down.” She kept excluding those from her life who did not measure up—and she died just as you would expect: alone, the victim of her own philosophy and adherence to it. No God, no mercy, no second chances—and she the judge of everyone else.]

People like us find it very difficult to love with the passion and patience of God. People like us have never gone to the cross to show, once and for all, what the love of God looks like. (Good thing Jesus came to save people like us, who often enough evaluate others thru our own eyes, our own values and filters, our own self-interest.) We may like the idea of a heaven free from our adversaries, but it would be unbearable for God to lose even one, forever.

I am convinced there is a simple way out of this apparent dilemma of our free will which may reject God, forever opposing God’s initiating love to redeem our mind and heart and win us over. (Sorry to be indelicate here, but I’m about to make a point. And sore fingers are tame compared to the biblical images of the flames of hell.) What if you had a hypothetical child whom you needed to keep out of the garage because he would now and then put his finger on the workbench and hammer his fingertips? The child was otherwise sane, and could feel pain the same way we do. He didn’t always exhibit this odd behavior but every now and then would try to sneak into the garage to go hammer his fingers and yell out in agony—and continue to hammer. This child sorely feels the pain, derives no pleasure from the act, and has no reason to continue the behavior, and every motive to stop the behavior.

A specific case like this helps clarify the principles. A wise parent would not hold this child morally responsible. This behavior makes no sense. This behavior would be considered random, crazy, bizarre—but not morally culpable. Such irrational behavior is hardly the same as “free will” or free choice.

But what about our own behavior, our own choices? As long as people think of God as another person about like us, interested in His own ego and perks whom we may ignore or reject in pursuing our own well-being, the apparent dilemma persists. But God is something entirely different. If I should oppose the will of God, I am exerting my independence, sure—but I am also opposing my own best interests. God is the Creator who created me with all my potential, with each of my gifts and interests and predilections. Because God loves me, when I obey God I am pursuing my own highest self-interest. God is enemy only to the ego intent on opposing God, and living in a form of “hell.” God is the tireless, eternal Friend and Savior to every person. As I worship God, as I offer my life back in full obedience to the Spirit of God, I am gaining the life for which I was purposefully created. God is our Source; in God our deepest needs and desires are met; in God is our highest self-realization; in God is our peace; in God is our joy; in God is our supreme and eternal fulfillment. (It’s ignorance and irrationality to continue to thumb our nose at God.)

God is our Source of fulfillment and joy whether we know it or not, acknowledge it or not. In this lifetime we may remain ignorant of the nature and love of God. But once we come face-to-face with God; once the risen Christ in His glory welcomes us across the threshold of death, our ignorance begins to fade, or vanish. We then begin to learn, if we didn’t already, that what God wants is the definition of what we best want; God’s purpose for us is our highest purpose. In this broken world, before we understand

who God is, we may choose to chance it; to follow our noses instead of our Lord. Our lives turn out broken, of course, but if we choose to hang onto our ignorance or denial strenuously enough it's hard for anyone else, even God, to change our behavior.

But over time, particularly in the next realm (once we have died), it becomes more obvious who God is. As time passes, our continuing choice to reject God, to go our own way even though it leads to isolation, darkness, frustration and pain becomes more and more like the behavior of that hypothetical boy intent on hurting himself for no reason. The story on the surface of it doesn't make sense. Once the veils of ignorance and denial are removed from us—once reality breaks thru and we see who God is—then to oppose His reconciling love makes no sense. Sooner or later, I believe, the sinner who rejects the love of God becomes only a hypothetical case. What real person (in this case, real and alive in the heavenly plane) can continue to hold out forever, irrationally, against his own best interest? Once our delusions are removed, who can keep choosing her own pain and suffering when the free gifts of fulfillment and joy in Christ are so obviously present?

It's the same principle on earth as in heaven. We parents have the authority and opportunity, as our children are young, to motivate and teach them. We reward them when they do well; we lay out and explain to them the appropriate consequences of their misdeeds. Every child is different, and from the "terrible twos" on they never forget they have free will—especially if they know mommy is talking on the phone or nursing the new baby or otherwise occupied. But as they grow older, we modify the rewards and the penalties in order to motivate them to continue to grow and mature. Good parents are cooperating with and maybe anticipating reality a bit: if we model for them and train them at a young age that it's important to keep their promise and to tell the truth when they're little, we spare them the consequences of a reputation for being unreliable and a string of broken relationships later on.

When they're little, their appropriate consequences may seem little to us: the reward of another song they like to hear, another hand of rummy; the penalty of 3 minutes in timeout. As they grow to be teenagers, we set different consequences: more time with friends permitted, and a later curfew—or grounded for the weekend, or the car keys confiscated for a time.

Of course kids do test and rebel; all our best parenting sometimes seems for naught. But the point is that as we grow the consequences grow, also. We pay a higher price for misbehavior as we grow older; likewise our own pleasures deepen as we become old enough to marry and have our own families, even choose our own vacations (rather than have to buckle into the back seat for whatever interminable vacations our parents make us endure when we're the kids...)

God has all eternity to set appropriate consequences, and so can influence our response without transgressing our free will. We do not stop growing and maturing just because at some point we are going to die; we are each one created to attain the very fullness of the stature of Christ; we are to "be perfect." We try pretty hard, but it doesn't happen down here. In the heavenly spheres we will still retain our free will to love God back or to thumb our nose at God; to cooperate with the love of God shown us so perfectly in Jesus, or to continue to struggle against it—but even our self-defeating struggles will not defeat God, in the End.

By our stupidity or sinfulness we are not capable of defeating Almighty God. He will not allow even the most spoiled, ill-mannered of us ruin the Eternal Banquet, the Heavenly Reunion. Jesus is a better Savior than any of us is sinner. Our free will does not change that.

Like a Master chess player, God continues to allow us to make the moves we like: to cooperate with His will, His love, or to play God ourselves and try to ignore Him. But in the end, each of us, having made every move we like for as long as we like, will find that the result is the same. Sooner or later, we learn that our alienation from God (and therefore from loved ones and from our own selves and our own best interests) does not pay any more than hammering our own fingers. In the End, God wins. The free will of God to win us over proves stronger than our own free will to reject Him. [This insight and others come from *The Inescapable Love of God*, by Thomas Talbott]

All this is what Paul is trying to say in his letter to the Philippians. You noticed his rousing command: “Therefore, my beloved, . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” [Phil 2:12-13] And surely you noticed how it follows immediately as the consequence of Paul’s ringing confession: “. . . so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” [v 10-11]

The love of God will not be defeated; Jesus will by love win over every one. What we work out “in fear and trembling,” as of utmost importance, is the path we choose to get Home. Do we dig in our heels or put on our hiking boots? Do we want to be like the child who seems to spend half his life in the principal’s office, testing the teachers, or do we want to take the less painful route? Do we want to repent and serve God willingly, or do we think we want to go it alone, apart from God, independent of God, ignoring God—and experience a little or a lot of the hell of separation, loneliness, darkness. Even Satan will learn, I believe: he is free to disobey God as long as he chooses—but how pathetic: in the long run, there’s no one to rule but his own pitiful ego. He has no following, he is no hero, he is fooling no one but himself.

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”—you choose: the high road or the low road, the short road or the long road, the Way of repentance or the way of long and painful refining, the proud insistence on learning our lessons the hard way. The way of spending much of our life in “time out,” or the Way of following Jesus into and thru the exciting and the hard places. (Enough of both, no doubt, before God is thru with us.)

The final outcome is not in doubt. Paul’s trying to encourage these believers he so loves to take the less painful route Home. The Philippians did not have the power to turn God into a Loser any more than anyone has that power today. Paul is very confident of this; Paul trusts in the pursuing love of God because the “Hound of Heaven,” the Holy Spirit, had found and won him, Saul, on the road to Damascus. Paul had every confidence in the love of God; still as Saul he had not chosen or expected God to “cut in” any more than he had chosen to be born in the first place. He still could have opposed the risen Christ, but Paul was clear, for God’s sake—resistance was possible, but pointless. He lived out the rest of his life eagerly aligned with the Way of the Christ, risking his life

and everything else to let others know the extent of the love of God shown us in Jesus. Resistance was possible, but pointless.

This experience accounts for Paul's buoyant spirit toward the end of our lesson. "Even if I am poured out as a libation for the sacrifice of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all." This was a familiar metaphor to the Philippians: on a pagan altar a libation of wine was poured into the flames of the burning sacrifice to the pagan gods, making them flare up bright. "Even if I should give up my life (which happened a few years later) and die for Christ, I gladly rejoice—and share my joy with you. Now you all go ahead and rejoice also."

Paul's joy obviously came from his confidence in the love of God which he had experienced. He didn't know whether his friends would take the long, painful way, or the blessed Way of repentance and submission—but he was reminding them they were in the hands of God; they would be won. They were to "work out their own salvation" knowing that the love and Spirit of God had firmly grasped them. Quit hammering your fingers, you silly, beloved Philippians!

Trusting in the all-victorious love of God, Paul also urges them in their conduct. [The familiar, "God loves you, now behave!" refrain.] "Don't hassle and fret; don't be petty. Keep shining your light, you followers of the Light of the World, in this darkening world. Shine like the stars in the midnight sky! Consider the glory of God who loves you; the power of the love of God which has claimed you—so don't sweat the small stuff. You help my life become especially worthwhile as you pass on to others the "word of life" I have shared with you and lived among you all." Paul is irrepressible in his hope for this church—of course long before they have died. His hope is in the love of God which has already encountered him and captured him. (God never robbed Paul of his free will—God won him over fair and square. And Paul lived the rest of his life in gratitude.)

"Be glad and rejoice"—"at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow." Every tongue shall confess that the love of God is more persevering, more powerful, than the rebellion of the sinner. What was my worry that seemed so pervasive? What was my doctor's diagnosis that sounded so ominous? What is the fear that keeps me a prisoner in the same old rut, that keeps me from stepping out in confidence to shine His light? What is the business setback I just learned about? What are the wounds I keep nursing, spending so much of my time looking backward rather than living forward? What is the abuse I suffered which makes it so hard to trust in the love of God—so my abuser continues to hurt me, decades later? Why do I tend to look down on others who don't have as much as I have, when in the End it will be my great pleasure to dwell in harmony with all those invited into the Banquet? Why do I invest so much in pretending my own excesses are virtues? What causes me so desperately to hold back from God, to mistrust and play my cards so close to my own vest, as if indifference to Him could possibly overcome His all-victorious love? (Even Satan will learn that his ridiculous insistence on hugging himself cannot compare with joining in the joyful circle of those who willingly serve God.)

God is tireless and undefeated in His pursuing, persevering love. He keeps coming after the self-righteous and the fallen; in love He keeps coming. The story is told [Clarence Macartney?] in Scotland of a simple shepherd in the Highlands. All his life he tended his sheep, calling out to them in the summer and in the storms over that stark landscape. He had a bonnie young daughter who loved nothing more than to go out in to

the wilds along with her daddy, following his every footstep. She especially loved to hear him call the sheep, caring and loud and true, over the Highland moors.

But as she grew up, an attractive young woman, her attentions turned from her homeland. She set out for the bright lights of the big city—Glasgow—and settled in. She loved her family, and wrote home every week, at first. But her letters grew less frequent. At home they began to fear she'd gone down the wrong path.

One of her friends from home was in Glasgow, and looked her up. He went to one of her wild parties. But she was now embarrassed by his accent, by his rustic clothes, his unsophistication. She snubbed him. She moved from her most recent known address, so her family lost all contact with her.

Her father knew what he had to do. He took off for Glasgow in his simple shepherd's garb. He started walking up streets and down, block after block, hoping for a random glimpse of her. No luck. After some weeks he got a better idea: he began combing the back streets and the alleys behind the saloons and bars and flophouses. This time he kept calling out his shepherd's call, caring and loud and true over the soot and the traffic and the crowds—who looked down on this simple figure. No matter to him. One morning in a squalid closed room with a window slightly open a lost young woman heard his familiar call. At once she recognized her daddy. She left her company, bolted down the stairs and thru the doorway into the brightness of the sunshine and into the welcome embrace of her delighted father. Together they soon went back to the Highlands, where her loving family and her church restored her. She lived out the rest of her life in gladness and rejoicing.