

How Does God Love Us?

Job 23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We are on the second last Sunday of our 2025 Faith Questions sermon series. This has been another year where we've had a wide range of very different kinds of questions, ranging from the practical to the more theoretical and plenty in between.

Last Sunday, it was a question about a statement in our church bulletin (perhaps you noticed a change today?). I know you were waiting with bated breath. 😊

(If you don't know what I'm talking about, the sermon is online, as they all are, text and audio.)

This Sunday, we have an expansive question about the love of God, what it looks like, what it doesn't look like, what we might assume about it, and what we perhaps shouldn't.

The love of God is the bedrock of Christian faith. Love is God's very nature, God's most fundamental disposition toward his children and toward the world. And love is what we are called to.

But what does this love look like? This is a huge question.

The way that I worded the question in the bulletin is a bit misleading. It doesn't really reflect how it was explained to me in subsequent conversations over the last few months since I initially received it.

The main question was not so much about whether God has emotions or if God's emotions map on to ours.

The heart of the question was, how does God love us and how do we love God across a wide range of experiences and emotions, on our side and on God's.

God's love is unconditional, we believe. God loves us when we are good, bad, happy, sad, angry, elated, scared, trusting. God's love is not altered by how we are feeling. It is like a ballast that gives stability and strength, even or especially when we are blowing around in the wind.

But do we love God across this same range of emotions and experiences? Or are we more likely to say we love God only when things are going well?

When Canada beats the USA in a hockey final, for example, it's pretty obvious that God love us! 😊 But what about when things don't go our way.

Can we be angry at God or sad or confused and still be said to "love" him?

And even beyond this, what about when God's emotional disposition to *us* is not particularly cheery? After all, Scripture does speak of God being angry and grieved toward his children.

There are huge questions around what theologians call "the impassibility of God" that we are going to set aside here for the sake of time. Some Christians have historically believed that God cannot have emotions or be vulnerable because to have emotions is to change and God cannot be changed. We can discuss over coffee if this interests you 😊

But if we are to take Scripture at face value and attribute some kind of emotional range to God, and if we grant that God can be angry, grieved, etc., how do we conceptualize this?

Is God a volatile, reactionary, unpredictable deity? Or are the expressions of his "darker" emotions still somehow expressions of love?

This week's questioner summarized like this: "How does God love us—and how do we love God back—when either, or both of us, are feeling something other than unconditional positive regard for each other."

I want to tell two stories that perhaps bring these more theoretical questions down to earth.

The first one comes from the jail. We were sitting around the circle one Monday, and I opened the space up for anyone to share what was on their mind.

One guy responded immediately. “My cellmate said a wild thing the other day. He told me that the word ‘hate’ is in the bible, somewhere in the Old Testament. I told him he was full of it, that God doesn’t hate he only loves.”

How to respond? “Well,” I said, “your cellmate is right, the word ‘hate’ is in the bible (around 200 times, depending on the English translation). It’s often even used in connection with God.”

He looked at me suspiciously before exhaling through his teeth. “Really? Man, that’s messed up!”

The conversation that followed was, as always, a lively one. He remained quite insistent that God wasn’t the sort of being that was allowed to “hate.”

God’s job was to love, and hate was decidedly beneath him. Hate is the sort of thing that lands people in prisons, after all.

I could understand his desire for the separation. He wanted God to be free of all moral contaminants. He needed things to stay in their proper place.

I tried to make the distinction between hating people and hating behaviours. “God doesn’t hate people,” I said, “only the things they do that either harm others, thwart the flourishing they were made for, or render worship in improper and destructive directions.”

He nodded warily. I could tell he was either getting bored or not really buying it. “God” and “hate” still didn’t belong together, in his view.

I tried a different approach. “Well, you’re a dad, right? What if your kid was getting mixed up in all kinds of bad things, things you knew were going to lead them down a terrible path?

You wouldn’t hate your *kid*, but wouldn’t you hate what they were *doing*? Would this hatred not be an expression of your love for them and your desire for their best?”

This one seemed to resonate a bit more. He grew quieter. Nodded his head. “Yeah, I guess.” He grinned. “But I still don’t like it.”

Second story. For this, we go from the jail to the church foyer after a service a few years ago.

A busy foyer full of people and conversation is usually a time for cheerful banter and connection with friends and talk of weather and sports or trying to say something polite about the sermon.

It's a place for the ordinary chatter that is part of the glue that holds together any human community.

Occasionally, though, someone departs from the script. After a Sunday service a few years ago, I was talking with someone about how things were going with a loved one who had recently been relocated to a care facility that could better help with their dementia.

The conversation was proceeding along familiar contours—there was talk about the facility, about how this person was adapting, about this or that glimmer of hope. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, a statement:

You know, sometimes I wonder how something like dementia could ever play a part in God's plan for a human life.

It wasn't a big dramatic bombshell or anything. It wasn't a gauntlet thrown down to see if I could produce an answer. Nothing like that.

It was expressed almost as a passing thought—as if this person was just thinking out loud and I just happened to be within earshot.

Amidst all the pleasant chatter there we stood, pondering this question of questions, this mystery of mysteries. All I could say is, "Yeah, I wonder the same thing..." I wonder it a lot.

The problem of how human suffering fits into a view of the world that has at its centre a loving God who intends good for his creation is, of course, a very old one.

For long stretches of life, it's a question that can remain abstract. We can *tell* ourselves that our beliefs about and even our love for God are big enough and broad enough to accommodate pain and the fact that God allows it.

But at some point, each one of us reaches a point in life where this question of questions, this mystery of mysteries migrates from “abstraction land” into the uncomfortable terrain of *our* land, *our* lives.

This is where Job found himself in today’s text. Mired in pain and suffering that he could not understand or explain, trying to hold on to his faith and his convictions about the goodness and the love of God even though his life exhibited little evidence of this.

And I think all of us get here at some point in our lives, if not (we hope and pray) to the extent that Job experienced.

Can we love God even when he seems to be allowing pain that serves no discernible purpose? Can we conceive of God loving us even when God is sending or at least *allowing* terrible things in our lives?

In the first story, my friend at the jail was trying to come to an understanding of the love of God that could incorporate the darker emotions of hatred and anger.

I tried to convince him that God’s anger at sin and at all that thwarts human flourishing was not God taking a break from his normal disposition of love but was in fact an expression *of* his love.

I think most of us can get our heads around the idea that sometimes the loving thing to do is to allow people we love to face the consequences of their sin, that God does this for us, and that he does it for good reasons.

We may not like it, but I think we get it. We know that it is not loving for God to just let us do whatever we want with no consequences. And we perhaps would even acknowledge that we have a duty to love and serve God even when his hand feels heavy.

In the second story, the person in the church foyer was pondering the even deeper mystery of how to conceptualize a love that allows pain and sorrow that seem completely undeserved and random.

Is it possible to love a God that allows evil in the world?

There is a sense in which evil is the price of admission for human freedom. If freely chosen love is the point of the whole story, there must exist the possibility of choosing to reject that love.

And the Christian view has always been that human rejection of God and of God's love is the source of all that is broken and destructive in the world.

There is suffering that is built directly into the context of our choices. And there is suffering that is just part of living in a broken world marred by sin.

It's not always easy to tell which is which. This is why it is wise to avoid speculating.

(I heard more than a few people confidently proclaiming that the recent wildfires in California were God's judgment on the debauchery of Hollywood. I think silence would have been the wiser option.)

But our question this morning is not so much about how to conceptualize the problem of evil and suffering, but whether we can love God through it all.

I think we can. I think this only because of Jesus.

In Jesus, we see that God has not exempted himself from the pain of this world. He, like Job, knows in a profound way what it is to suffer unjustly.

And he models for us a love for God and for the world that goes all the way to the end.

Jesus never stopped loving his disciples even when they betrayed and abandoned him. He did not stop loving God even as he cried out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

His love remained strong and true even through the darkest experiences of life. And this is the love we called to emulate. We will never do so perfectly, of course. We are not Jesus.

But the love we are called to stretch out toward is nothing less than the love Jesus' life and death and new life revealed to the world for all time.

Ultimately, we must say that the relationship of love between God and us is unlike any human relationship.

Our emotions can be unreliable, reactionary, impulsive, selfish. God's are not.

If God is grieved or angry at our sin, it is, we can be sure, for good reason. This is the shape that love ought to take in response to what should not be. If God allows difficult things, we can be sure that there is a goodness and a redemption that can exist on the other side, that the promise of God means that nothing has to be wasted.

To love God across the range of our experiences and emotions is in the end, like so many things, an act of trust.

God's ways are higher than our ways. This is the lesson Job learned in the end, even after giving full expression to his anger at God, his sadness, his confusion, his doubt, his fear.

And we should also remember that God said it was Job, not his eager-to-explain-the-theology friends, who spoke rightly of him.

Job's shaking fist at the heavens was an expression of love, of fidelity, of a relationship that he would not let go, even though it was almost literally killing him.

Sometimes God's love for us will feel difficult to take. Sometimes God will not be kindly disposed to our actions if we are hurtling toward a cliff (and this is a good thing!).

Sometimes we will be unable to understand how or why God could be allowing something (and indeed we may never know, this side of eternity).

Sometimes our love for God will have to push through periods of silence. When things don't seem to make sense. It may take the form of lament, protest, and grief.

But these, too, can be expressions of love.

Many times, in our human relationships, we demonstrate genuine love (as opposed to Hollywood mush) by refusing to walk away from each other. I think the same is true with our relationship with God.

We refuse to walk away when God's hand feels heavy.

We refuse to walk away when there is pain that we can't explain.

We refuse to walk away when we feel angry at God or confused or whatever, and we refuse to walk away when we suspect that there are some things in our life that might be causing God to be a little fed up with us.

We refuse to walk away trusting that God is shaping us through the harder things in life, that there are spiritual muscles we can develop, lessons we can learn, even if these don't seem obvious at any given moment.

To whom else would we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

God is love. True. We are called to love. Also true.

But this love is far deeper and more demanding than we often think, and we should be very careful not to make it less than it ought to be.

We must never take the easy way out and simply reduce "love"—God's or ours—to warm, fuzzy dispositions.

To conclude: How does God love us?

In the deepest, truest, most hopeful ways. In ways that do not shirk from hard truths. In ways that refuse to leave us as we are. In ways that are not held hostage to the volatility of our emotions and expectations.

In ways that may even call us to walk through dark valleys of sorrow...

... but *never* without his presence with us, and never without his promise that His love will ultimately triumph over all that is false and wicked and untrue, in our world and in our lives.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

