

God's Amazing Love

Yangon 2012

Scripture Texts:

Romans 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Psalm 51:1-17

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalms 51:3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

Psalms 51:6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Psalms 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Psalms 51:13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

Psalms 51:15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

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Introduction:

How would you feel if suddenly you discovered you were going to have thirty days—a whole month—when you couldn't say a word?

If you had an entire month to listen to God, what do you think you might hear?

I want to share a story with you. It is a story of betrayal and of love.

The story began several years ago when I heard about a Christian retreat during which people were silent for 30 days as they studied the Bible and sought God's will for their lives. The theme verse for the retreat was taken from **Hosea 2** where God says: "I will now allure you, and bring you into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to you." (14)

I wondered, "If I didn't talk for 30 days, would I feel God's love more?" Last summer, God gave me the opportunity to find out. My husband encouraged me to make the retreat, so I joined 25 other Christians at a retreat center where we entered into silence.

While we couldn't speak to one another, we were allowed to sing and pray out loud during the three worship services each day. Once a day we were also allowed to talk to a spiritual director who helped us understand better what God was teaching us through our Bible study and prayers that we did the rest of the day.

Each day we were assigned 4 Bible passages with which to pray and meditate on each day. At first they focused on the love of God. Day by day we meditated on passages like **Psalms 23 and Romans 8 (38-39)**

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Through these passages God impressed on my mind--but more importantly on my heart--a simple message I had always known in my head, but not believed in my heart: God's love for me meant that I was "enough"; I am just who God wants me to be.

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Have you ever felt that no matter how much you have done for God and for others it is not “enough?” Have you ever thought that although you want to please God, you aren't quite “good enough” to deserve God's deep approval? Have you ever sensed that God seems to be able to use others more because somehow they are better, or they are smarter, or they are prettier, or they have more connections or opportunities, or they aren't tempted as much as you are to sin, or are they are more spiritually mature than you? Have you ever wished that when God made you, God had done it differently?

I have thought and felt all those things. I've been a Christian for forty years and a minister for twenty-eight years. I love God and I long to serve God—but deep inside I always believed that being who I was, I couldn't really love or serve God just the way God wanted me to. In my inner heart I felt that who I was didn't please God as much as others, and that if I were just more like them, God would like me better. I am ashamed of thinking and feeling this way, but I have the courage to tell you this because I know that many, many people struggle with these same thoughts and feelings.

Let me tell you something that I discovered about long silences and prayer. When there are no distractions, and when we have time and space to really open to God, God is able to show us our weaknesses, not to harm us, but to invite us to grow.

When I heard God say, “Because of my love, you are enough.” I knew that God wanted me to change how I felt about myself. I wanted to accept myself more too. But I didn't know how. When I met with the pastor who was my spiritual director that afternoon, he encouraged me to ask God to help me. There was no other way it was going to happen. Then, he told me, it would be up to God to choose the best way to help.

I told God, “I need Your help. I want to feel Your love and your acceptance. I want to have confidence that You created me the way You did and that you can use me as I am.”

While I waited for God to answer, the focus of our Bible studies changed from the love of God to our sin.

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Sin, Confession, and Love

In fact, for an entire week we studied passages that dealt with sin. As we prayed with these biblical stories and texts, we were encouraged to talk with God about our own sins. I could easily affirm what David said in **Psalm 51:3** “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you...have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.”

In **Ephesians 6** we are encouraged “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” (11) What we learned is that Satan uses the same tactics against us over and over and we respond with the same sins over and over. We were encouraged to identify the pattern of our sinning so that we could devise strategies to overcome the temptations we faced.

Of course, thinking so much about our sins was difficult. There were no distractions to give us a break. The more I saw the extent of sin in my life, the more embarrassed and ashamed I felt. One morning we had a teaching on confessing our sins. At the end of the lecture the leader encouraged us to take an extended time of prayer—several hours—and in God’s loving presence to write down every sin we could remember committing since we were born. I was horrified! Who would ever want to do such an exercise? It sounded humiliating. But I had decided before I started the retreat to do everything that the leaders suggested, so I made my list.

When I went to talk to the pastor about my experience of recalling my sins and what I had learned from naming each one, he told me that the next step was to read the list out loud to another person. This meant I would have to share all the horrible things I had thought and done with him.

The verse in **James 5:16** came to mind, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another...” But I still didn’t want another human being to hear all of my sins! I knew I needed to though. The next day I arrived at his office with my list. I read the whole thing out loud to him without stopping. It was horribly embarrassing, and I felt a lot of shame, especially because the same sins kept being committed decade after decade.

My spiritual director didn’t say anything; he just listened. When I was finally finished he said, “Now we are going to pray.” I bowed my head. He prayed, “O God, I have no idea why in the world you call us into ministry or choose

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to use us! I can't imagine what you are thinking. God. You love us, even when it hurts You. You know what we are like, and still you want to be with us." Pain stung my heart as I listened to His words acknowledging the truth of my sinfulness--and the choice of God to love me even when I had not loved him with my actions or attitudes. My betrayal of God when I sin had never hurt so much.

After my confession and our prayer, the pastor assured me of God's forgiveness of my sins. I was so thankful for the truth of **1 John 1:9**: If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." When I left I went down to the chapel and held on to a standing wooden cross and prayed, thanking God for his loving kindness.

Several days later the retreat leaders gave us a special break when we could make a telephone call to our family. I called my husband Tim and told him about my difficult week of meditating on my sins and about my experience of writing them all out and confessing them to the pastor. Then I said, "I am not going to read you the list, but I do want to tell you the five sins that I am most likely to commit. I hope that by hearing them, when I come home you will be able to help me see when I am being tempted, and help me to resist sinning more." Tim replied, "I love you." I responded, "Just wait to say that, you haven't heard my sins yet!" And then I told them to him. When I was finished, Tim said, "I love you so much!" I responded nervously, "Are you sure?!" "Jill," he said, "We've been married for over thirty years, do you think I didn't know these things! I love you," he reassured me.

Tim's words were the answer to my prayer for God to show me His love and teach me how to accept myself as God created me. I had bared my soul to God and to my husband. Instead of receiving the condemnation and criticism I knew I deserved, I received forgiveness and love. In fact, for the first time in my life I was completely sure that God loved me through and through, even with all my weaknesses, shortcomings, and failings. My husband loved me too—as I was. I felt their knowing love bringing me to a new and deep acceptance of myself.

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Conclusion

I could never have imagined that God would choose to answer my prayer to know that because of his love I was acceptable. But God's love changed me. After this experience with my husband I knew that I could accept who God made me to be. I knew that I could never be "good enough" to earn God's love, but that I could come to God in honesty and discover his love even when I was weak and needy.

There's more. God changed how I see others too. Before, even though I believed in God's love for each of us, it seemed easy to see others' faults. Now it seems easier to see God's love for those I am with—not because they are "good enough," but because God is full of love, patience, and kindness—for me, and for each and every one of us.

Would you like to believe, even more than you do now, that God made you just the way you are?

Would you like to feel, even more than you do now, that God delights in you, just the way you are?

Would you like to know God's love in a deeper way?

Ask God to help you to experience God's love more than ever before.

His love will find you—probably in a way you can't even imagine right now.

Like the **Psalmist** may each of be able to say, "I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever."

(52:8)

Let's pray...

Hymn: Love Lifted Me

Benediction: "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ." 2 Thessalonians 3:5