

# “Daisies”

Text: “Live Loved” (attached at the end) <sup>1</sup>

Like many of you, I’ve been considerably helped by the picture of God’s love presented in the best-selling book, *The Shack*.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the book, the author recommends a follow-up book, *He Loves Me!* as “an adventure into the heart of the God we hoped was truly there.” I wanted such a follow-up, and was not disappointed. This morning’s message is largely crafted from the insights of that book.<sup>3</sup>

One phrase that God uses repeatedly in *The Shack* is “I’m especially fond of so-and-so.” I’ve not been able to get away from that. Can you really imagine God saying “I’m *especially* fond of . . .” and then speaking your name? I mean, *really*?

What most of us tend to do in daily life is to make conclusions about God’s affection rather like we used to do as children when we pulled petals from daisies:

“I got a raise. *He loves me!*”

“I didn’t get the promotion I wanted; I lost my job altogether. *He loves me not!*”

“Something in the Bible inspired me today. *He loves me!*”

“My child is seriously ill. *He loves me not!*”

“I gave money to someone in need. *He loves me!*”

“I let my anger get the best of me. *He loves me not!*”

“Something for which I prayed actually happened. *He loves me!*”

“I stretched the truth to get myself out of a tight spot. *He loves me not!*”

“A friend called me unexpectedly to encourage me. *He loves me!*”

“My car needs a new transmission. *He loves me not!*” (p. 4).

And given such an approach, many of us go through life in a state of uncertainty and fear, never certain which God we’ll meet on any given day—the one who wants to scoop us up in His arms with laughter and love, or the one who will ignore us or punish us for reasons we can never understand (p. 6). Our approach and our experience tend to reinforce each other, and we end up quite uncertain about what sort of relationship with God we actually have, if indeed we have one at all.

In *He Loves Me!* Wayne Jacobsen notes that the *He loves me*, *He loves me not* dance most of us engage in could also be called struggles with what he calls “the favor line.” The favor line is the invisible line or bar that tells us whether or not we’ve met enough of someone’s expectations to attain his or her approval. Our parents had such a favor line, and we knew well how to work it. Each of our teachers in school had one; each of our friends had one in the past or has one now; and our boss has one, too. So it’s only natural to assume that God has a favor line as well – *He loves me*, *He loves me not* (p. 45).

Unfortunately, our attempts to manage the favor line frequently cause us to end up where one teenager did: “Same old thing, Dad. God is good. You are bad. Try harder!” And that conclusion causes us to spend much of our spiritual lives alternating between shame and fear—not a very happy place to be, at all.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on April 12, 2009 – Resurrection Sunday.

<sup>2</sup> William Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Jacobsen, *He Loves Me! Learning to Live in the Father’s Affection* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007). Page numbers refer to that book.

One of the more famous “favor line” conversations in the New Testament is Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who ran up to Him, knelt down, and asked, “*Good teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?*” (Mark 10:17). As the conversation develops, it’s clear that the young man really thought he was doing pretty well at keeping God’s commandments, but he was still unsure that he had gained eternal life, and he had little confidence that his present course would achieve it. “What can I do!” he pled.

What the man expected was for Jesus to give directions about how to raise the bar a little higher, but what Jesus actually did was to put the bar forty feet in the air: “*Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” Both Jesus and the man knew this was impossible. What Jesus really wanted was for the man to give up his efforts to exceed the favor line, trusting simply in God’s love.

As we gather on this Resurrection morning, the message of the Cross is that God has fulfilled in Himself everything He would ever require of us. Abandoning our attempts to establish our own worthiness is central to the power of the gospel. If we can learn that, a door stands open that will lead us to the very heart of our loving Father (p. 65).

For all this, you and I frequently seem more comfortable fearing and trying to please a holy God than we do loving Him. Yet fear does not lead to love, nor does it lead to real transformation—only to temporary changes of behavior. “We all remember that we loved our parents, but that wasn’t enough to keep us from doing things they told us not to do. Only the youthful fear of getting caught and punished was enough to deter us from wrongdoing. Many of us transfer that same idea to God, so it’s no wonder we trust our fear more than His love (p. 81).

Now the fear of God is not wrong—God told us that it was the beginning of wisdom—but it’s only the beginning. It’s the first rung on the ladder to knowing the wonder of God’s love. Love is the end of wisdom. “If you don’t love God,” Jacobsen noted, “you would be well-served to fear Him. At least that might keep you from behaviors that will destroy you and others around you. But once you know how much He loves you, you’ll never need to fear Him again” (p. 79).

And how can we discover the full extent of God’s love? . . . by looking at the Cross. The illustration is inadequate, but consider this: “What if your young child was diagnosed with a rare blood disease? The doctors tell you that the disease is almost unheard of in children. Though they have a form of chemotherapy that could cleanse your child’s blood and restore him to health, the drug is too strong for the child’s undeveloped body to withstand the dose necessary to cure him. In other words, the cure would kill him before it healed him.

“But there is a way around that, they say. They could transplant his blood into your own. You would then contract the disease and they could administer the chemotherapy into your blood. Though it would make you horribly ill and [might] even kill you, the therapy would produce antigens in your blood that could then be transplanted to your child’s body and cleanse him of his disease.

“Would you do it? Most parents wouldn’t hesitate for a second. Neither did God.” The message of the Cross and the empty tomb is that God has already borne in Himself what we could never have borne and survived; and this has produced by His blood just such a fountain of life. Transfused into any person who desires it, His blood can cleanse us of sin and reunite us with this One who loves us . . . but such trust must still be freely chosen, even as it had to be in Eden (pp. 121-123).

Satan's lie in Eden was calculated precisely to destroy Adam and Eve's confidence in God's trustworthiness; and when difficulties press in around us, you and I may hear the same whisper in our ears: "If God's not going to give you what you think you need, maybe you should go get it yourself."

And again, there's only one place where you and I can learn the trust in God that was shattered in Eden—at the Cross of Jesus. Adam and Eve's troubles began when they lost sight of the trustworthiness of God's love, and when we look at the Cross we see the overwhelming, unimaginable extent to which God's love is willing to go for us.

Jesus taught us two crucially important principles of trust as He moved to and through Calvary. Toward the beginning of that last Passover week, as Jesus again prepared His disciples for His death, He told them, "*Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, 'Father, save me from what lies ahead?'*" (John 12:27).

We can imagine the disciples nodding their heads in approval of that approach, since that's what most of us do, too: "Save me, God! If you get me out of this I will serve you forever!" But that wasn't what Jesus chose to pray. What He prayed was, "*Father, bring glory to your name.*"

Of that choice, Jacobsen wrote, "In this brief exchange you learn everything you will need to know about prayer and about what it means to follow God in this life. For in every situation you'll ever encounter, you will be offered two options in prayer: 'Father, save me,' or 'Father, glorify your name!' One will lead you to frustration and disillusionment, the other to the greatest wonders in God's heart" (p. 176).

We make this choice not once for our entire lives, but in the immediacy of each situation we face. When I didn't get the job I wanted, the raise I deserved, or the medical report I hoped for, the choice is 'Father, save me!' or 'Father, glorify your name'" (p. 178).

But Jesus taught us an even deeper lesson of trust from the very Cross itself, as He cried out, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46). Stay with me here.

Could the Faithful One really be unfaithful to His Son at His darkest moment? Never! Inconceivable!

I'm sure you remember the poem, "Footprints in the Sand," which ends like this: "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But I've noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why in times when I needed you most, you would leave me."

The Lord replied, "My child, I would never leave you during your times of trial and suffering. When you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

That was the situation at the Cross, too. The key point is the difference between what is and what is perceived. As Jesus actually became Sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), He surely felt forsaken, but that doesn't mean that He actually was. And shortly after this cry of abandonment, Jesus offered the greatest demonstration of trust in the history of the world: "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*" (Luke 23:46)—to the Father He could neither sense nor see. In that utter despair and agony while destroying the power of Sin, Jesus did what Adam and Eve did not do: He trusted His Father (p. 128).

You and I, too, have felt abandoned by God in some of our darkest moments. Some of us may be in such darkness now. This does not mean that He has left us, but only that we can no longer see or sense Him in the darkness. God is always there, never turning His face against those who are His (p. 127).

“No longer do we need to hesitate to trust this incredible Father and His intentions toward us, especially when we lose sight of what God is doing in our lives or question His seeming inactivity. Instead of doubting Him, we can assume He’s doing something greater than our expectations might allow and continue to walk with Him as best we can. When I can’t figure out what God is doing; when I’ve just messed up to the greatest degree; when I’m lonely and empty, the answer is still the same: ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit’” (p. 129).

Now while the Cross and the empty tomb have the power to free us completely from *He loves me, He loves me not*, and while “Father, glorify your name” and “Into your hands I commit my spirit” are prayers that can anchor our lives through any storm, our Father also knows how difficult it is for us to learn to trust Him. He is not threatened by that or angry with us as we struggle toward doing so.

One of my favorite vignettes in *The Shack* goes like this: “But why me? I mean, why me? Why do you love someone who is such a screw-up? After all the things I’ve felt in my heart toward you and all the accusations I made, why would you even bother to keep trying to get through to me?”

“Because that is what love does,” answered Papa. “Remember, Mackenzie, I don’t wonder what you will do or what choices you will make. I already know. Let’s say, for example, I am trying to teach you how not to hide inside of lies . . . and let’s say that I know it will take you forty-seven situations and events before you actually hear me—that is, before you will hear clearly enough to agree with me and change. So when you don’t hear me the first time, I’m not frustrated or disappointed, I’m thrilled. Only forty-six more times to go!”<sup>4</sup>

So it is that much of the curriculum for our transformation lies in the very things we’re most likely to ask God to change, because many of them are not particularly pleasant. That’s why trust born at Calvary is so absolutely crucial if we’re going to be able to pray, “Father, glorify your name.”

But can you even *begin* to imagine how you might live this day if you were absolutely convinced that God already loves you as much as an infinite God can possibly love? Can you imagine how freeing it would be to know that nothing you can ever do will make God love you either more or less?

God has already moved you above the favor line. God is not keeping score. The question now is whether or not you’re going to choose to trust Him and choose to “live loved.”

Love will take you farther than law ever will. When Jesus said, “*If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching*” (John 14:23), what He meant is that if we get the loving right, the keeping will take care of itself (pp. 172-173). *He loves me, He loves me not . . . He loves me!*

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<sup>4</sup> Young, pp. 186-187.

# Live Loved

Reader One: *This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins (1 John 4:10).*

Reader Two: *We keep our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne (Hebrews 12:2).*

Reader One: *As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:14).*

Reader Two: *My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).*

Reader One: *So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death (Romans 8:1-2).*

Reader Two: *See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! (1 John 3:1).*

Reader One: *We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them (1 John 4:16).*

Reader Two: *Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love (1 John 4:18).*

Reader One: *The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field (Matthew 13:44).*

Reader Two: *Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God (Ephesians 3:17-19).*

Reader One: The Word of God for the People of God.

Reader Two: Thanks be to God!