

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

LIFE AND DEATH AS ANTAGONISTS OF LOVE

ROMANS viii. 38, 39.

AN able and ingenious critic proposes to read the sentence thus : " I am persuaded that neither death, nor *even* life, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is questionable whether the Greek will bear that rendering ; but there can be no question that the thought which it suggests is true, although it contradicts a very general and familiar persuasion. We all admit that, in a certain sense, both Life and Death are antagonists of Love ; but if we were asked, Which is the greater antagonist of the two ? most of us would answer, " Death ; not Life : " whereas it is Life, not Death, which is the more fatal to Love. Life is often the death of Love ; whereas Death commonly gives Love new life.

" Who," or " what," demands the Apostle, " shall separate us from the love of Christ ? " And in his reply he gives us two catalogues of the various powers and influences which we fear as likely to weaken or to alienate our love from Him in whose love we live. In his first catalogue he enumerates, " tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, sword ; " in his second catalogue he enumerates, " death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present and things to come, height and depth." As we follow and consider his words, the first catalogue presents no difficulty to our thoughts ; we feel, we acknowledge, that the rigours of pain, want, hunger, danger have often strangled love ; we forbode that, were we long exposed to them, our love might die.

But the second catalogue is more difficult : we ask, for instance, How should "height" or "depth," or, again, How should "angels," separate us from the love of Christ? And it is not until we perceive that St. Paul is indulging in one of those passionate and rhetorical outbursts which are characteristic of his style that his words shoot into light. But then, when we seize this clue and follow it, we understand that, in the rapture and exaltation of his spirit, he defies all heaven and earth to extinguish, or even to lessen, his love for Christ, or Christ's love for him : the very "angels and principalities" of heaven, supposing them capable of the endeavour, could not shake him from his rest, nor all the "powers" of hell,—no vicissitudes of time, whether "present" or "to come," nor aught within the bounds, the "heights and depths," of space. Strong in the love of Christ, he is more than conqueror over them all. "Death" cannot move him, although it introduce him into new and untried regions of existence; nor "even life" itself, although life is the severer test of love and has often proved its death.

This is the general scope and intention of St. Paul in the passage before us: and, taken thus—in this order, in this sense—it carries us back to the point at which we started, viz., that both Death and Life are in some sort to be feared as the antagonists of Love, but that Life is by far the stronger and more deadly antagonist of the two.

Now that men fear Death, as likely to separate them from the love of God, to impair their union with Him, or, perchance, to put them beyond his reach, is beyond a doubt. There is nothing which

most men fear so much as death ; nothing, alas, which most Christians fear so much. We have an instinctive and natural dread of it, which even faith finds it hard to conquer, to which our imperfect faith often lends an additional force. It is not only the darkness and decay of the tomb that we dread ; it is also the judgment which lies beyond the tomb. It is not only that we are loth to part with those whom we love ; we also fear lest, in the pangs of death, we should relax the grasp of faith. And hence, in our Service for the Dead, we use a prayer than which few are more pathetic : “ O Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, *suffer us not at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from Thee.*” A most pathetic, and yet, as we often mean it, a most un-Christian prayer ! For what we too commonly imply by it is that if, amid the pangs of dissolution and the darkness of death, we should cease to see God by faith and to put our trust in Him, He will forsake us ! that if, oppressed by mortal weakness, we loosen our hold upon Him, He will let us fall ! that at the very crisis, and in the very circumstance, in which an earthly friend would strengthen his comforting grasp on us, our heavenly Friend will relax his grasp and let us drop into the darkness which waits to devour us up ! Whereas Christ has taught us that God's help is nearest when we most need his help, that He perfects his strength in our weakness, that our redemption from all evil depends, not in our fluctuating sense of his Presence, nor on our imperfect love for Him, but in his being with us although we know it not, and his eternal unbounded love for us.

Indeed our whole conception of Death is in much un-Christian. We do not realize, as we might and should, that for us death means life and immortality, a nearer access to God, a clearer vision of his glory, a more perfect participation of his grace and peace. We have so little faith in God and in his wise ordering of the universe that we can hardly rise to the level of Schiller's fine saying, "Death happens to all, and cannot therefore be an evil." We persist in taking it as an evil, although we know, or might know, it to be a good.

Let us consider for a moment how the case stands, and learn once more how baseless are our terrors, how faithless and irrational our tears. There are perhaps twenty millions of men living and moving in England at this day : but how many millions on millions lie beneath its soil ? If, instead of sleeping in the earth, the dead were laid upon its surface,—where could we plant a foot without profaning their ashes ? More than two thousand years ago the Romans had a suggestive periphrasis for death. When they lost a friend, instead of saying, "He is dead," they said, "He has gone over to the majority." The majority ! Yes, and how vast a majority ! how populous is the mighty kingdom of the dead ! *And yet we dare weep for them !* Might not they much more reasonably weep for us ? If we believe that God cares for the few millions now on the face of the earth, can we believe that He does not care for the innumerable millions who have not passed from his sight because they have passed from ours ? If He cares for the small minority who now inhabit the world, must He not

care for that vast majority who, for aught we know, may still be in this world, though they are invisible to us? If *we* are not separated, can *they* be separated, from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord and theirs? It is incredible. To despair of the dead is to distrust God. To fear death is even more unreasonable than to fear life.

Let us take an argument as well as an illustration from our own experience. What does *that* teach us of Death and Life as Antagonists of Love? Death *is* an antagonist of Love: for it takes from us those whom we have learned to love: it separates us from them; we can no longer see them, and serve them, and lavish on them the tokens and proofs of our regard. But though death severs us and them, does it sever *love*? does it extinguish, or even lessen, our affection for them? Does it not rather enlarge, refine, consecrate our love for them? They take a special dearness and sanctity in our thoughts. We forget what was lacking or imperfect in them. We think only of their better qualities, of how good they were, how staunch, how kind. There never was a true love yet which did not conquer death, which death did not hallow and deepen and make perfect. But does *Life* always elevate love and enlarge and sanctify it? We know that there is no such searching and crucial test of love as life, with its monotonous toils and cares, its vicissitudes and provocations, its inevitable differences of view and collisions of will. Whereas Death confirms and hallows love, Life often diminishes and desecrates it. Many who stood before the altar with a strong and sincere affection for each other have afterward gone, by

different paths, with alienated hearts, to distant graves. Life, with its cares and disappointments, its constant friction of will with will, mood with mood, temper with temper, has snapped the bonds which Death would have soldered close for ever.

And as with human love, so with love Divine. *Death* cannot detach our love from God; for it brings us closer to Him; it shews Him to us more nearly as He is, and thus constrains us to a more profound, a more constant and perfect love for Him. But *Life*, with its anxieties and toils, its trials and temptations, is for ever calling our thoughts away from Him, teaching us to forget or to distrust Him, inspiring us with motives, affections, aims, alien and opposed to his will. If we have any true spiritual life in us,—is not this the very burden of our confessions and prayers, that we do not love Him as we ought and would; that we are not like Him; that, while He is righteous, we are unrighteous, while He is kind, we are unkind; that even when we would do good, the evil in us overcomes the good: and that we are thus becoming more and more unworthy of his love, more and more unworthy to live with Him and to abide in his House? Alas, no sooner do we consider ourselves than we find that, if we fear Death, we have much more reason to fear Life, and its power to alienate us from God and Christ! The more we consider and know ourselves the more welcome to us grows St. Paul's persuasion, that neither death, nor even life itself, is able to separate us from the love of God; that, if our love for Him be cordial and sincere, however imperfect it may be, it will nevertheless conquer all the opposing forces of Life no less than all the powers of Death.

And St. Paul's persuasion may well be at least our *hope*. For if death cannot lessen our love of man or woman, although it separates us from them,—how should death lessen our love for God when, instead of separating us from Him, it conducts us to his Presence, unites us more intimately with Him, shews us more perfectly how good He is, how worthy of our love? Life, indeed, is more perilous than Death: but for every case in which we see the inevitable cares and collisions of life alienate two loving hearts, we may see a score in which they only bind them into a closer and more sacred unity. And God, remember, has none of those defects of character which alienate us from men and women whom once we held dear. To love Him is to love righteousness, truth, goodness, gentleness, peace. He is at once the Ideal and the Incarnation of all excellence. We shall never, as we grow wiser and more experienced, discover anything in *Him* to lessen our love and reverence. The danger lies in our own defects, in our partial knowledge of Him, in the instability of our best affections, in our too frequent preference of a love inferior to his, of a good less complete and satisfying than that which He bestows. Happily, He knows us altogether. Happily, He suffers long and is kind; He is very forbearing and of a most tender mercy. If once we truly love Him, if our hearts are really set on goodness and truth and charity, He will forgive our inconstancy, our imperfections and defects; He will use the infinite resources of his wisdom and power and grace to develop our love, to supply our defects, to chasten us from our faults, to make us what we

would be, to lift us into an unwavering constancy, an eternal righteousness and peace. Weak and inconstant as we are, we may at least *hope* that He will not suffer even life itself to separate us from Him.

Thus far, however, we have taken the phrase "love of Christ" or "love of God" as denoting *our* love for them. It may also cover *their* love for us. Some Commentators affirm, indeed, that the question of verse 35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" means, "Who shall detach *our* love from Christ?" and that the assertion of verse 39, that nothing shall "separate us from the love of God in Christ," means that nothing will ever alienate *their* love from us. The exegesis is doubtful; but the thought to which it gives expression is beyond all doubt. Our conception of this passage will not be complete unless it embrace both these ideas. For our love to God depends on his love for us. If his love can be shaken, our love will not abide. And, therefore, we may be sure that—somewhere in the passage, perhaps throughout it—St. Paul meant to speak of God's love for us as well as of our love for Him. And of his love for us we need have no doubt, whatever becomes of ours for Him. Even at our best we may only be able to *hope* that our love will not change; but we may know beyond all question that, even if our love should change, God's will not. Nothing can by any means separate us from that. Whom He loves, He loves to the end; for there is no end to his love. What power can Death, or even Life, have over *Him*? Death may separate *us* from those who are dear to us; Life may estrange us from them: but how can Death separate any soul from

Him? or how can the vicissitudes of Life estrange Him from any soul of man? His kingdom includes all; it lies on both sides the grave, this and that. The dead live to Him; to Him the living die. We are the offspring of his love; for if He did not love us, and design our good, why should He have made us? And those He once loves, He loves for ever. He *is* Love; He cannot deny Himself.

But we must not limit and measure his love by our own, although our love is the best image of his and our best help toward understanding Him. It does not follow that, because He loves all his creatures with a love over which neither Life nor Death has any power, that they will all be happy, or even that they will all ultimately be blessed with life eternal. His love, simply because it seeks the welfare of all, can be very stern. So can our love be; so *is* our love, in proportion as it is wise and strong. We can correct our children for their good; we can expose them to much pain, compel them to toils which they dislike, and even permit them to misconceive and distrust us. If we see a poor bird in incurable agony, we can crush it out of its pain because we love it. Because we love it, we can shoot a dog or a horse, when it is hopelessly diseased. If we see a child incurably vicious, or a man utterly brutalized and degraded, we can say, "Well for him that he had never been born!" Even while our hearts tremble with awe and pity we can send the irredeemable criminal to death, or to a life more hard and cruel than death. It is our very love for men, and even for the wretched criminal himself, which gives us strength to pronounce such a doom upon

him. To hang a man may be the worst use to which we can put him ; but if he will not be put to any better use, that worst use may be the best of which he is any longer capable.

Love can bear pain, then, bear even to inflict pain, if the love be pure and deep and strong. And God's love is perfect. It is pure and deep and strong beyond our thoughts. It shines a steadfast Light through all the changes of Life, through all the separations of Death; for it shines down from a heaven above their reach. Because his love is so pure, so enduring, so inexhaustible, it can take forms of correction; because it seeks our good, it can inflict the discipline, the toils and pains, which make us good. *It may be* that even as our love despairs of some of his wounded and degraded creatures, and thrusts them out of this life, so He may see that some men need even sterner corrections than this life affords, and that some, wholly incorrigible, must be destroyed from his Presence and the glory of his power. But, however that may be, we may be sure of this, that nothing can separate any soul of man from his love, whether in life or in death. And in this lies our hope, our rest. God's love cannot change, however we change. If his infinite Love *can* recover us to life and righteousness and peace, we shall be recovered: if we are irrecoverable, what better proof of his love can He give us than to put us out of our misery and degradation in the thick darkness of an eternal death? So long as we have any love for Him, any craving for goodness, for truth, for peace, we must be recoverable—nay, we have the witness in ourselves that we are being recovered by his

grace ; and therefore so long as we love Him, we may be fully persuaded, with St. Paul, that neither death, nor even life, can possibly separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But before we can *rest* in this persuasion, we must know and feel that *we* love Him who first loved us. We cannot rest in the mere conviction that He loves us ; for, as we have seen, his love may compel Him to chasten and afflict our souls in life and in death : it *may* even compel Him, if we prove incorrigible, to destroy us out of our misery. If we would be sure that we shall never sink until we become "unworthy of life eternal," we must now and here lay hold of that life. For, obviously, we have no right to count on any future grace if we neglect the grace which is now bestowed upon us. Obviously, if we do not improve our present opportunities, if by neglecting and abusing them we harden and deteriorate in character, we lessen our power of using any opportunities which the future may bring. If we are not to stake our all on an ominous Peradventure, if we are to have any grounded persuasion, any hope even, of future life and virtue and blessedness, we must faithfully employ our present means of grace ; we must now form at least those rudiments of character which are to be developed hereafter. We shall want God's love when we die, and when we pass through death into the unknown region which lies beyond its farther bourn ; but how can we hope to have it then, and to delight in it, if we put it from us now and shrink even from thinking too much about it? Take an untutored child of the streets into an elegant and refined home ; constrain him to adapt himself to the

habits which use has made second nature to you ; lavish on him the delicate signs of courtesy and affection which culture has taught you to appreciate ; breathe round him an atmosphere of order, purity, gentleness, love ; and the poor outcast will simply hate and resent the change ; at the very first chance he will fly back to his old habits of life. And, in like manner, it may very well be that, when we pass out of this rude world, if we should find ourselves in the presence of an Infinite Love ; if we should find ourselves within a kingdom of heavenly order and purity and peace, it may very well be that the light of that Love will kindle on us like a fire, if we are strangers to it, and all that sweet order and concord and stainless purity be simply intolerable to us. If we are sensual, sordid, selfish here, how can we hope, all at once, to relish that which is spiritual, noble, unselfish, Divine ? Before we can be persuaded that nothing shall ever separate us from the love of God, and can rest and delight in that persuasion, we must be made partakers of the Divine Nature, *i.e.*, of the Divine Character ; the baser self in us, which delights in sensuous pleasures, in sordid gains, in the pursuit of self-interest and self-indulgence, must be brought into subjection to that better self which delights itself in the Almighty, which attaches itself to that which is spiritual, which craves to bring a Divine order and beauty and peace into our whole nature and into the world around us.

If we ask : “ But *how* is this Divine Character to be attained ? how are we to rise into this better self and to mortify that in us which is base and sordid and selfish ? ” St. Paul replies, “ You must have the love of God shed abroad in your hearts. ” Now

many of these New Testament phrases about "love" have sunk into so mere a cant that, possibly, St. Paul's answer is no answer to many of us, simply because it conveys no clear thought to our minds. But if we consider it for ourselves, if we shake it free from the cant that has stuck to it, we shall find it a very clear and pertinent answer. For what, after all, is it which tells most on human character? Is it not love? Does any other passion change and elevate and hallow character like this, and make a man a new and a better man? When it is not a mere craving of the senses, nor even a mere longing for sympathy, nor both combined,—*i.e.*, when it is true genuine love, does it not conquer the baser and selfish instincts of the soul? has it not, again and again, drawn men from their vices, lifted them out of the mire of self-indulgence, and infused into them a power which has transfigured their whole nature and raised them into a pure and noble life?

But what *is* this love? what is the secret of its power? Is not all true love at bottom an admiration of excellence and a desire to possess it? The woman sees in the man, or thinks she sees, a larger, stronger, firmer character than her own—less at the mercy of impulse, able to stand against the blows of circumstance and the shocks of change,—a fairness, a justice, a quiet strength on which she can lean, and which will save her from her own defects. And the man sees in the woman a character more delicate and refined, more pure, more flexible than his own, more open to "melting charity," more patient under pain, more tender and yielding;—in short, a character which is the complement of his own, rich in all he wants, yet receptive of all that he can give. The

manly vigour and beauty, and the womanly comeliness and grace, which at first attract us, are the mere outward signs of these moral characteristics; and Love interprets them, and the man grows dear to the woman, and the woman to the man, in proportion as their reading of each other proves true, in proportion as they find in each other the qualities they hoped to find.

But if love for man or woman can thus change and elevate the character, why not love for God? If love be indeed an admiration of excellences we do not possess and a desire to complete our nature by appropriating them, the love of God must be simply the most transforming and elevating of all emotions: for in God are all excellences, human and divine. We cannot for very reverence say that God is more tender than a woman and stronger than a man; for to his tenderness there is no limit, to his strength no bounds. He is fair and kind, He is tender and true, He is wise and strong beyond our farthest reach of thought. If we have any love of excellence, we cannot but love Him so soon as we really know Him.

How, then, may we know Him? and so know Him that we may love Him? and so love Him as that nothing, neither Death, nor even Life, can separate us from his love? St. Paul suggests a reply in the words, "*the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" If we would know God and love Him, we must find Him in Christ, in that Perfect Man—so strong and yet so gentle, so true yet so tender—who moves before us in the Gospels. Is it difficult to love *Him*? It is not difficult to admire and praise Him. There is hardly the man in Christendom who does not do that. Even those who reject his claim to be one with the Father, even those who

hold the Gospel to be but a late and imperfect tradition overlaid with many incredible fables, even those whose keen eyes detect flaws in his character and teaching,—even these admit that no man ever lived or spake like Him, that He is, beyond all rivalry, the wisest and best of the sons of men. It is not hard, then, to admire and praise Christ; but to love Him *is* hard: for *that* takes faith. We often think of faith simply as an organ by which we perceive things to come; but faith also makes the past real and vital to us. Faith is the shaping spiritual imagination which, as we read the Gospels, makes Christ live and speak, which detects the God in Him, which teaches us that his love is nothing less than Divine.

So that, as the conclusion of the whole matter, we come to this: that, if we would have the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, we must faithfully study the Gospels which reveal Christ to us. As we study them in faith, as Christ shapes Himself to us, not as the central figure of an historical painting, but as a Man among men, *the* Man of men; as we see how strong He was against evil and yet how tender to men, not despairing even of the vilest, but full of an exquisite, pathetic, and redeeming hope for them, the conviction will grow upon us that his love was in very deed the love of God, that God loves us as Christ loved men, and *will not* despair of us or give us up. And when once this conviction is reached, we must be other and less than men if we do not respond to his love with a love that will be the beginning of a new life in us, a life from which nothing can by any means separate us, whether within or beyond the bounds of time and space.

CARPUS.