

The Immeasurable, Personal Love of Christ to His People

By Dr Peter Masters

Christian article | Sword & Trowel

May 2013

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us' (*Romans 8.35-37*).

It is an astonishing concept for us that Christ Jesus the Lord of glory, the second person of the Trinity, should dearly love his people. Here is an opportunity for us just to skim the surface of that mighty, unspeakable love.

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' asks Paul, immediately naming the forces that seek to do so. We notice at once that these are personified, so that tribulation is 'who', as if it were a person, and in a sense these forces are personal, because the enemy of our souls stands behind them, to take advantage of them, and to use them to obscure our sight of the love of Christ.

In time past the love of God seemed to me to be an impersonal or 'semi-personal' love, rather like the kind we see in benevolent organisations. Even the government indulges to some extent in benevolence, and there are benevolent organisations that exist to relieve poverty or need in people's lives. These organisations, no matter how noble, cannot really show personal love, tenderness, affection or regard for the recipients of their bounty, and we hardly expect them to. They are corporate bodies, and while they may have individual officers in direct touch with people, broadly speaking their benevolence is not a personal act of love. There may certainly be feeling in the hearts of the donors, who are aware that their contributions help flesh and blood, but this is not personal love.

However, when we think of the love of Christ, we must not be influenced by the notion of benevolent love only, because the love of Christ is an indescribably deep personal affection, however hard that is for us to grasp. It is so astonishing that our Creator, the eternal Son of God, maker of Heaven and earth, who is all in all, and fills all things, had from eternity tender affection for his people. Yet it is so, that Christ has bound himself to each one of his people, even to the weakest, the youngest, and the smallest, with fondness and affection beyond human comprehension.

He provides for us spiritually in every other way also, paying our way and undertaking for us. He came into the world, assuming human flesh and human personality so that he could truly take the pain and punishment due to us, feeling and bearing the wrath of God that we ought to have borne, concentrated into six dreadful, incomprehensible hours. And as he paid the price to secure our eternal salvation, he saw us in his mind's eye, knowing for whose sins he suffered, and yet bore it all out of personal love for us.

So great and pure and glorious was his love for us that he did not begrudge one pang of agony. We sing, 'O, the deep, deep love of Jesus,' and so it is, going back beyond time into eternity past. Before our parents conceived us, we were in his heart. Long, long ago he saw our future plight and condition in sin, and determined to be our sin-bearer and to prove himself the lover of our souls.

We cannot see or imagine the origin of Christ's love, yet we know it will reach forward into the eternal future, because none of those upon whom he set his love and for whom he suffered and died and rose from the dead, will ever perish. He will take them home gloriously and securely for ever.

We remember how patiently he called and brought us to himself, and how he has repeatedly pardoned all our defections, failings and turnings away from himself, and all our foolish, sinful words and actions. Yet his forbearance is so great, it has always brought us to repentance, setting our feet once again upon the rock of salvation, restoring our joy and communion, and hearing our prayers.

'Who', asks the apostle, 'shall separate us from the love of Christ?' What force or power could wrench us from his affection, from his watching over us, from his standing near to us to hear our every cry?

Constancy of Divine Love

So let us consider some thoughts about the love of Christ. We love a husband, a wife, a child, a parent or a friend, but how constant is our love? At best it is spasmodic, or at least we express it falteringly. Sometimes it is very little expressed in words and actions, even by someone who possesses love and that is very sad. But the love of Christ, and this is almost beyond comprehension, is constantly expressed towards us in his forgiving patience, in his help, in his nearness, in his care over us, and even in his disciplinary influence toward us.

Even when Christ places in our lives some setback to bring us to our senses, because we are straying and not repenting, he measures and monitors his correction so that it is never too much, nor ever unkind, but just right, according to his perfect wisdom. Our very first cry of genuine repentance and rededication restores joy and peace, and we prove that his love is constant, unabating and undying.

If Christ's love to us is faithful and constant, what about ours to him? We have been redeemed. We have the greatest imaginable riches. We have spiritual life, understanding and Heaven. We have spiritual faculties. What more could we desire? Yet we go through life sometimes feeling sorry for ourselves because some mere earthly convenience is not available to us, or something earthly is smashed or broken. How can we react badly to earthly losses when we have riches beyond those of billionaires? Should we not express our love to him every day at the time we have specially set aside for him?

Should we not often express our love, in thanksgiving for safety accorded, blessings given and help received? Should we not express our love by planning what we are going to do for him in the hours ahead – who we will speak to for him, or who we will show kindness to in his name? As he delights to plan eternity for us, saying, 'I go to prepare a place for you,' should we not plan acts of service for him?

Protecting a Treasure

I was reading just recently the book of *Ezra chapter 8*, the account of Ezra's dangerous journey, when he went to Jerusalem in 458BC. He gathered the Levites and others and set out from a rallying place by a river called Ahava, somewhere in Babylonia. His long journey was particularly dangerous because Ezra had declined an armed guard from the king of Persia, being ashamed to ask for protection when he had told the king that God was with them and would protect them. The danger was immense because they carried great treasure, and there were many bandits along the route.

As we read the account, although this is not the primary sense, we cannot help thinking of our journey through life, carrying our treasure of salvation, our new nature, our priceless knowledge, our title deeds of Heaven, and our deposit of the love of Christ. Ezra's party kept their treasure safe until it was weighed and counted in Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, and found to be intact. Will we keep our treasure intact?

Our journey is not from Ahava to Jerusalem, but from conversion to glory, and we are carrying the treasure of Christ's love, consciously appreciated at conversion. We received our new nature, with joy and peace in believing, and communion with Christ – untold treasure and riches. We must keep it until we enter the eternal Jerusalem and cast our crown at the feet of the Lord.

We must pray for help that nothing will steal the love of Christ from us – our peace, our belief, our faith, our trust, our love, our service – diverting us from the way. We must pray and take care that we do not go back to our old ways. Let us keep our treasure to the end of the dangerous, perilo

us journey, to bring it untarnished, unplundered and not dissipated, all the way to the end of the journey.

Husbands and wives, do you reflect the love of Christ? If you should unworthily lose patience with each other, or be irritated and disturbed by anything, do you extend to each other the patience that Christ extends to you, always expressing your love, always seeking to make the other happy? With all

the love of Christ shown to us, how can we be impatient, unkind and unreasonable to each other? His love should always challenge us and move us.

Of course, there are many respects in which Christ's love to us cannot be returned. I have several times mentioned his patience; but we never have to be patient with him. We can only return his patience in the currency of devotion and service. Similarly, he drew us to himself, our salvation being his initiative. We cannot take initiatives with him, but obey him. He is our Lord, we are his servants.

His generosity cannot be returned, for while he floods our life with blessings and gifts, how can we enrich him?

He sanctifies us, making us better people, moving our consciences by his Spirit, but we cannot sanctify him, for he is holy.

There are many respects in which the love of Christ is not returnable in kind. The love of Christ in so many respects and in its glories and extent is a one-way traffic to us, and we must return it in such form as we can, and love him with all our heart.

No earthly work of fiction, describing the love of one person for another, can come anywhere near the love of Christ for his people, because it is immeasurable and incomprehensible. In love he informs us of everything he does and plans, in his Word. He consoles us in all our distresses. He grants us joy and happiness according to our need. He inspires us in everything we do when we commit our way to him.

Who shall separate us...?

But our text asks, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' Can the devil's orchestrated attempts to take us away from his love succeed? Shall 'tribulation' separate us, asks Paul. That word refers to outward troubles, but of course no outward trouble can separate us from his love. We are never deserted. He is ever at hand. When we call upon his name he intervenes, sometimes taking away the problem, other times strengthening us to bear it, and at the same time consoling us. And throughout we have communion with him, and our troubles can be used by him as a witness to other people, so that they not only hear our words about Christ, but they see how we draw help from him in troubles.

Then, as a bonus, our troubles wean us from the world. So often, just as we are becoming too enamoured with the world and drawn into its clutches, a great problem arises, a difficulty or disappointment, and we see afresh the hollowness and unreliability of this fallen world, with its shortcomings, false promises and sin. Then we are brought to look to Christ all the more, and our hearts are filled once again with the realisation that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. How often we look back at that famous 28th verse of *Romans 8*, 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.'

The apostle also names persecution as a force threatening to obscure the love of Christ, and Paul knew much persecution for the sake of the Truth. We may be ostracised in some way for Christ. But we are always his, and our efforts will bear fruit even if we do not see it ourselves. In any form of persecution we are known most closely by the Lord, who tells us so in the Sermon on the Mount. How blessed we are and supremely happy as the result of persecution. The Lord's eye is upon us and we may say, 'His heart feels for me and his affection is around me. He has personally assured his people that they will know great blessing on account of this.'

Supportive Love

Paul mentions famine, hunger and all forms of deprivation that may hurt considerably, and test us sorely, but Christ will place divine arms around us and may use our trials in remarkable ways. As we go through them there will be constant tokens of his love. In all distresses we must think of eternity and of spiritual riches, and of the price Christ has paid for his people. How, reasons the apostle (by inspiration), can we ever be forsaken and unloved? Whether nakedness, poverty, peril, great dangers, war, disasters, the sword or other violence, none of these things can possibly terminate the love of Christ. We are always his, his mind is ever on us, his heart is constantly for us, and he is ours and we are his.

Chastising Love

Paul proceeds to quote from *Psalm 44*, saying: ‘As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ Somebody once remarked to me that God’s disciplines are not specifically mentioned by the apostle, but they are – in this verse. *Psalm 44* is a national lament of the Jews, that God has withdrawn his blessing from them, and that they are under punishment for their sins. The psalmist on their behalf declares that they wish to repent and return and know God’s blessing and power and presence once again. *Psalm 44* is a prayer of people under discipline, and this is the psalm the apostle quotes. In effect, therefore, he says that even discipline cannot separate us from the love of Christ.

We mentioned earlier that chastisement is Christ’s love bringing us back to him. We see the love of Christ in the words of *Hebrews 12.5-7*, ‘And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth...If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as sons.’

The love of Christ even in discipline is never cruel, but ultimately beneficial. And what if he did not correct us? Whatever would happen to us? How backslidden we would become; how far from him! What suffering we would bring into our lives! It is love that draws us back.

Furthermore, says Paul in *Romans 8.37*, ‘In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.’ Christ not only loves, but he loves with a tenacity that will bring us triumphantly through to final victory.

Then, in emphatic language, the apostle states: ‘For I am persuaded’ that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He means that he is wholly convinced and at peace on the matter; fully satisfied, with no debate or argument in his mind. ‘I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities’ can disconnect us from the divine love.

Ultimate Love

Death, the king of terrors, has been defeated by Christ on Calvary, and believers shall most certainly land on the triumphant shore to enter the great reception hall of the King. We cannot speak with precision about that wonderful place, or describe its grandeur or the people who will greet us there. The only descriptions of the presence of God and the reception given to those who enter are in the book of Revelation, which are symbolic, not literal. We read of there being all kinds of precious stones, or at least the appearance of them in colour and glory. But symbols only point our minds in a direction which they cannot wholly explore, suggesting wonders beyond our present powers of comprehension.

We are told in Scripture that we will be welcomed by people, including those to whom we spoke the word of life. We may assume that there will be loved ones who have preceded us to Heaven. Supremely, there will be the Lord himself, and mighty angels. Who knows how many fellow pilgrims will enter glory together, as the number of the elect is vast, and many in the world receive their homecall every second of the day.

Reception areas in human life are very often a muddle, but there can be no muddle or confusion in Heaven. The reception hall of the King will be sublimely orderly and perfect, suffused with excitement, awe, delight and amazement. There, saved spirits bear the likeness of Christ, emanating purity, beauty and love beyond anything we have seen or known on earth. The blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, as praise and glory fills the place – an astonishing experience to the believer, his greatest day, his ultimate day.

While still in this earthly life, our human constitution is made to be afraid of death, and to recoil from it. Yet in the spirit, we should look forward to it and should glory in it, because for us the greatest day imaginable is that day when the soul takes flight and goes into eternity. It is our supreme moment to enter into the presence of the One who set his love upon us and redeemed us, and has loved us without diminution or interruption every second of life, and will do so all the way until we see him in his majesty and glory

Threatening Factors

Life will not separate us from Christ's love, says Paul. It may threaten to do so. Honours and love of earthly things may for a moment eclipse our awareness of the love of Christ, and dilute our love for him, but they will never impede his love for us.

Nor will angels, says Paul, who will never get in the way of the love of Christ. Some foolish heretics in the early days of the church, in their imagination, allowed angels to get in the way. They held that angels were intermediaries between people and God, and that God must be approached through them. It was a destructive fiction, and Paul sweeps it aside with contempt. Good angels are helpers in our joy, and will never obstruct the love of Christ for us. Christ will never use an angelic bureaucracy, saying to those glorious spirits – 'Go and express my love towards my people, for I cannot cherish and succour them personally for the time being.' Our Lord is very God and his power and affection is continuous, everlasting, and undiminishing, and its expression is never delegated to lesser beings.

Nor can fallen angels – 'principalities, nor powers' – obstruct his love. Some Christians make the mistake of thinking these may cut us off from Christ's active, experienced love, and sometimes a worried soul will fear that someone has placed a curse on them or on their house or even their car. They know people with occult interests, and feel vulnerable if subject to their anger. So they erroneously attribute to fallen angels and the devil powers they do not possess to interfere with believers.

But Scripture is clear – the demons of darkness can do nothing whatever to stand in the way of the love of Christ for his people. A child of God cannot be placed under any so-called curse. No such thing can hinder their spiritual walk. Good angels would not obstruct Christ's love, and bad angels cannot obstruct his love for his people.

'I am persuaded,' says Paul, 'that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come...' When the apostle Paul wrote this letter, Nero was the emperor of Rome, and Nero's persecutions were well advanced. Paul himself would soon be martyred at the emperor's command. And yet he says present things, good or bad, cannot possibly impede or take away the love of Christ. Nor could things to come. Whatever happened in the future, Christ's love would be in control, and always exercised towards his people.

'Nor height', that is – fame, elevation, fulfilment, happiness, accomplishment or honour, would ever diminish his love for his people. These things may cause us to lose sight of his love for a moment, but soon their attraction will be dispersed, and we shall see the incomparable treasure of Christ's love once again, which never abated.

Nor will 'depth' remove Christ's love, perhaps referring to the very deepest grief and sadness. It may be that a believer suffers unfathomable depression, but no matter how unwell we feel,

those feelings cannot cut us off from the invincible, unfaltering love of Christ, and we must constantly tell ourselves that. No slander, disappointments or griefs can dislocate his mighty love. We may have lost a dearly loved person, but we cannot be cut off from the love of Christ. He will never, never betray any of his own children. In him we possess the most precious treasure imaginable, the undying affection of the Lord of all glory.

Look at the climax that the apostle brings about in this 39th verse: ‘Nor height, nor depth,’ says Paul, ‘nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.’ No created being or power or force, angelic, demonic, earthly, animate or inanimate, possesses the power to check or disable the love of God the Father, or the love of the Holy Spirit, or of Christ our Lord. It is the love of all persons of the Trinity, seen most of all by us in Christ Jesus our Saviour; a love which is undying, constantly affirmed, affectionate, planning, proven and full of kindness.

How much we owe our love to Christ! How carefully we should strive to bring our treasure intact, all the way home to our Jerusalem! Let us make sure we keep alive our constant realisation and appreciation of it. Reflect on it often, praise and thank him for it – the astonishing, incomprehensible, immeasurable love of Christ for his people.