

Love as a Principle and Love as a Passion

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele explores the complexities of love in the Christian experience, contrasting emotional passion with steadfast principle amidst personal trials.

Scripture: Psalm 23:4, Matthew 27:46, 1 Corinthians 13:4, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 John 4:16

Topics: "Divine Love", "Christian Experience"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about his personal experience with sickness and the temporary loss of spiritual perception, highlighting the struggle of feeling abandoned by God during illness and the eventual return to a deep sense of God's love and presence. He reflects on the importance of not judging others' piety based on outward expressions, the impact of physical conditions on conscious fellowship with God, and the difference between love as a feeling and love as a principle in Christian life. Steele emphasizes the value of a sharply defined Christian experience with a date to hold onto during times of spiritual darkness and mental depression.

Transcript

The author of this book after passing his eightieth birthday was so violently prostrated by pneumonia that he and all his neighbors thought the time of his departure had come. He knows not for what purpose his life on the earth has been extended, unless it is to publish a view of Christian experience in the sick chamber which may enable some other "forlorn and shipwrecked brother, seeing, to take heart again."

In common with many, I may say a majority of Christian teachers, I have taught that nothing but sin of commission or omission can obstruct communion with our heavenly Father; that the pure in heart may always "see God" by apprehending His presence and favor. I have supposed that when the poet Keble penned this couplet he deprecated sin only:

"O may no earthborn cloud arise

To hide Thee from Thy servant's eyes."

I have made the discovery that there is at least one earthborn cloud that does not arise from guilt or inward impurity, a certain kind or degree of physical debility destroying, or for a time suspending, the power of spiritual perception. There are disabilities which may be utilized for intensifying and prolonging communion with God; such as insomnia, which I have both suffered and enjoyed during the past twenty-five years.

The enjoyment is in the undisturbed fellowship with Christ which midnight sleeplessness affords. But when sickness was added this fellowship was utterly destroyed, though my intellect was unclouded. I, who for scores of years had been "on speaking terms with God" (Father Taylor), was greatly surprised and saddened to be thus deserted by my best Friend in this hour of my supreme need. In vain did I plead the promises so precious and so effectual in former years. In vain, when I wished to soar heavenward, did I mount my customary vehicle of devotion, the memorized hymns of the Wesleys, said by Dr. James Martineau to "have a quickening and elevating power which I very rarely feel in the books on our Unitarian shelves. After the Scriptures the Wesley Hymn Book appears to me the grandest instrument of popular religious culture that Christendom has ever produced." No voice responded to my cry:

"Leave, O leave me not alone,

Still support and comfort me."

For this experience, so contrary to my theory, my busy mind devised various reasons, seeing that I had no consciousness of having sinned. One suggestion was that it was disciplinary. Of course, this sickness may be disciplinary, but why is the Great Physician absent after having promised that He will be with me to the end of the world? Is He hiding Himself to test my faith? That seems derogatory to His character as both wise and good. I remembered Wesley's remark, "Our heavenly Father does not play bo-peep with His children." Then came the dreadful suggestion of materialism, that there is no spirit, human or divine, and Christian experience is all an illusion which certain physical changes dispel. That change has now come to disillusion me, about to die without God's comforting rod and staff. How did I answer this atheistic suggestion? Though there was no warm and cheering ray of light streaming directly from the face of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, I had the reflected light of a past definite manifestation of Christ as a bright reality affording a certitude transcending that of the solid earth beneath my feet and of the starry heavens nightly rolling over my head. This was the sure ground of my faith during that long search of my soul for an absent Saviour. Philosophy also came to the help of faith. It may be that Christ is as near as He ever has been, and is speaking words of comfort which I do not hear because my mental telephonic receiver is damaged by sickness. Can this be true? Then, though I may die making no sign of victory over the last enemy, all will be well with me, but my friends may be grieved. Such were my perplexing reasonings during the wakeful hours of twenty-five days and nights, while the heavens seemed as if made of brass, when, lo, suddenly I was ensphered in love:

"Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea,

And lost in its immensity!"

The explanation of this unexpected experience of God's oceanic love is not difficult when it is known that this was ten days after the favorable crisis of my sickness, and my convalescence had advanced far enough to remove the film which the disease had spread over my spiritual eye, so that I could not realize the presence of the divine Paraclete.

This experience teaches me several lessons: 1. Do not discount the piety of those godly people who do not die shouting "Victory! victory!" but who calmly meet the last enemy, trusting in Christ. When Bishop Janes, eminent for his devoutness and most intimate fellowship with his Saviour, was on his deathbed some of his clerical friends visiting him, expecting to hear ringing words of triumph in answer to the question, "How do you feel?" were greatly disappointed to hear him hesitantly reply, "I am not disappointed." How different was the exit of Bishop Gilbert Haven, whose remarkable characteristic was

the breath and intensity of his human sympathies and his lofty ethical ideals, who when dying I heard shouting aloud, "There is no death, there is no river here. Glory, glory, glory!"

2. The idea that conscious fellowship with God is dependent on right physical conditions explains the utterance of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" After the incarnation, the intercourse of the Son of God with His Father was subject to physical conditions, the same as that of any other human being. His divine personality never interposed to relieve Him from bodily suffering when hungry in the wilderness and thirsty on the cross. Nor was there any such interposition to prevent or relieve the unspeakable mental pain of the new experience of the sudden interruption of that communion which the Son had enjoyed with the Father from the time when He shared His glory before the world was down to the sad moment when through debilitating pain and loss of blood, His faculty of spiritual perception ceased to report spiritual realities. To say that this inability to hear the Father's voice speaking comforting words in this hour of His supreme need was a surprise to the Son of man, who construed it as the dereliction of the Father, may seem to some people as derogatory to His omniscience. Our reply is that when He disclaimed a knowledge of the day of His own second coming He disclaimed omniscience while on the earth.

The difficulty which exegetes encounter in this scripture has hitherto been insurmountable. Martin Luther, after meditating upon it several hours, exclaimed, "God forsaken by God! I cannot understand it, I cannot understand it." What a relief it would have been to him to regard this outcry of our dying Redeemer, not as the declaration of a fact, but as the expression of a feeling. This is a view which my recent sickness has suggested. If it is heresy let orthodoxy not roast me, for I will recant if convinced of error, but not before. If the Father's love for His Son was capable of increase, it certainly reached its climax when He saw His only begotten Son nailed to the cross a willing sacrifice for the redemption of a fallen race. These words of Jesus strongly sustain this idea, "Therefore doth the Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again." This verse is inconsistent with a real objective dereliction. Hence the interrupted companionship must have been a subjective experience, and not a reality.

3. This discussion would not be complete without the presentation of a germane topic, the difference between love as a passion, or feeling, and love as a principle. Love as a feeling, the source of Christian joy, being simple, is incapable of an analytical definition. It must be experienced in order to be known. Hence the homely phrase, "It is better felt than told." It is not originated by volition, but it arises in the believer's sensibilities through the agency of the Holy Spirit by the inward revelation of Christ as altogether lovely. It is not constant but variable in its presence and intensity; hence it is called an emotion, because it is always moving. The most spiritual person may at times be without any consciousness of this sensibility and of the joy which accompanies it. At other times he may realize a love divine burning in his heart like a furnace glowing with sevenfold intensity. These spiritual phenomena do not seem to be regulated by any law other than this, that they occur only in those who have the most intimate knowledge of Christ and are the most surrendered to His will. The purpose of love as a feeling awakening joy, and sometimes ecstatic bliss and rapture, is not only to cheer and encourage the believer amid his conflicts, but also to strengthen love as a principle which is absolutely essential to Christian character. This cannot be said of emotional love, although no true Christian is a stranger to this emotion. "No man can render Satan a better service than by preaching that one may be a Christian and have no feeling" (Whitefield). Christian love as a principle seems to be a composite embracing an intellectual assent to the truth of Christ's claims, an admiration of the stainless purity of His character, and an irreversible self-surrender of the will to His authority as a sovereign, to His infallibility as a teacher, and to His sufficiency as the only Saviour from the

guilt of sin and the love of sin. The will is the chief component of love as a principle, when in the attitude of obedience it adheres to Christ. Hence it is the object of the divine command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." All men have the gracious ability to obey this command. They have no ability to immediate volition to create in themselves the emotion of love and the joy which attends it. They are, therefore, responsible for the constant principle of love, and not for the occasional passion. Hence they are to be judged in the last day by the strength of this principle, and not by the number of glad hallelujahs they have uttered. In our judgement of one another we should remember this. But, as the principle of love in another person is to us inscrutable, we must refrain from saying which of the two episcopal brethren just named, the saintly Janes or the genial Haven, was the greater favorite with his heavenly Father.

4. Our last lesson is the great value of a sharply defined Christian experience with a date, standing forth in the memory as Mont Blanc above the other Alps, showing his crown of whiteness to all spectators, far and near. In the days of mental and spiritual depression, to which we are all more or less subject, because of "this mortal" which is our earthly abode, with its skyward window liable to be darkened, so that no direct ray of the Sun of righteousness can cheer us amid the gloom, such a memory is of inestimable value to keep us from blank despair. This is one of the reasons assigned by Wesley in his advocacy of instantaneousness in the initiation of the spiritual life and in the completion of progressive sanctification. He insists that there are two opportunities for memorable experiences in the spiritual life. These, he alleges, are valuable safeguards in times of mental depression, being careful to say that salvation does not depend on knowing the day and hour of our spiritual transitions, whether regeneration or entire sanctification. Dateless conversions are most numerous among those who are brought into the spiritual life through Christian nurture in the warm atmosphere of home religion, around the family altar and the open Bible. These should, for their own safety, be urged to seek first the direct witness of the Spirit to their holiness or perfect love.

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