

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

February 13, 2022

## *“Love Hazard”*

*Romans 5:1-11*

**George C. Anderson**

I read some love poems last week. I did not do this to prepare for a romantic Valentine’s Day dinner tomorrow night with my beloved wife of almost 40 years. My romantic Valentine’s Day dinner will be with a bunch of guys who gather annually at the beach for the Super Bowl and a few days of golf. *How do I love Millie? Well, if I counted the ways, somewhere on the list would be her allowing me to be on a golf trip on Valentine’s Day* (You know, I really should write a poem about that and give it to Millie).

No, I read love poems this past week because I wanted to get out of the Apostle Paul’s head and into the poet’s heart in considering the *cost of love*... particularly the cost that comes of those who have loved and lost.

Joseph Seamon Cotter speaks of never again seeing a last loved one’s winsome smile or hear her soft voice. Each stanza ends with a question asked of God:

O Thou, who hearest from above,  
Tell me, *is this the price of love?*<sup>1</sup>

For the speaker of a poem by the Hindu poet Krishna Dasani, it is discovered that the cost is high indeed.

Door is locked;  
And the key is Lost,  
Fate is cursed;  
And life is Frost,  
I chose to love;



And I am paying the price,  
Can't help – I didn't know;  
So high will be Love's Cost.<sup>2</sup>

And then there is what might be my favorite poem, Wordsworth's *She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways*. He tells of Lucy who has died, barely noticed in the world, but who was the world to him. The poem ends:

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

The unspoken question of each poem is this: “[Was it worth it?](#)”

That is a very *personal* question. And deep *heartfelt* questions like that sometimes find *head-*responses to be irritating.

That's why I read love poems this past week. I needed to get out of Paul's head and into the poet's heart. I know that Paul's heart is in what he writes in Romans 5, but the way this passage has been heard by many in the church... well, it is beyond irritating. Let's listen to what Paul says, and prepare for a shift from poetry to prose, from heart to head.

Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,<sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

I want to speak to grief one more time, even though my sermon is not about grief. As a minister, I have heard the question, “[Why?](#)” asked after the death of a loved one more than I can remember or count. I learned early on that such a personal question is not usually well answered by an intellectual response:

like the science of cancer;



the consequences of poor diet, lack of exercise or sustained smoking;  
the statistics of tornados;  
the fickle nature of chance;  
or the reminder that we all one day will die.

What if you were asking one of *these two* highly personal questions:

1. Is there hope?
2. How can I be saved?

## HOPE

The passage you just heard read from Romans: so often has been interpreted in a way that provides two unsatisfactory and irritating head-responses to these heartfelt questions.

First question: “**Is there hope?**”

First answer, provided by Paul’s first paragraph. Follow these steps:

1. Suffer. By suffering, you learn endurance.
2. Endure. By enduring, you build character.
3. Develop character because people of character have hope.

So, desperate one who wants hope: *go suffer*.

But let’s listen to Paul again. I know he sounds heady. When one speaks theologically, one tends to sound heady. But theology, to be *good* theology, must have heart. Let’s listen again to Paul and this time let’s *listen for his heart*.

Is it possible that Paul is speaking to those who already know suffering? They yearn for hope after all. Is it possible that he is speaking to those who are fighting discouragement, who sometimes wonder if they will make it, if it will be all right? Can you hear Paul encouraging those who suffer not to give up hope? Can you hear him remind the discouraged how blessings can come in the struggle of hard times; how it is possible to be stronger from having struggled and endured? Maybe Paul is not offering a formula for hope. Maybe he is *lifting up hope* for those who wonder if there is hope to lift up.

## SALVATION

Then we get to the next paragraph. The question that some have thought this second paragraph answers is this: “**How can I be saved?**” If you think that is the question, as many interpreters have said it is, then it sounds again like Paul is offering a formula.

1. God hates sin and when he sees sin, he will destroy it in his wrath.
2. You are a sinner and deserve to be damned.
3. Jesus loves you enough to take God’s wrath on himself.
4. With the Son’s death, the Father’s wrath is satisfied and is no longer in the way of God’s love.



That's where Paul ends if you read it that way. But because this formula is entirely about what God does, interpreters can't help but add something else about what **we** must do.

5. Confess your sins so as to activate what Paul just described: the saving power of what Jesus has done for us.

So, “**Do you want to be saved?**” Confess your sins so that they can *be the sins* whose punishment Jesus took upon himself.

This is a classic example of a head-response to a heartfelt question.

When this passage is read that way—

when this passage is read in this head-first, formulaic,  
transactional way—

you get it all wrong in trying to get it right.

Yes, this passage is about the doctrine of Atonement, that is about our salvation. But this wrong reading of our passage is what has been called Substitutionary Atonement. Jesus served as our substitute. When it came time for the chickens to come home to roost, Jesus took God's wrath upon himself. By Jesus' death we are saved... *if*, that is, we confess our sins and ask that the shadow of the cross fall over us.

That head-answer to a heartfelt question is, at least for me, *irritating*. And the main reason it is irritating is that it makes God out to be some sort of abuser of his Son.

But let's listen again to Paul, and let's listen for his heart.

Remember that Paul is speaking to the same readers for whom he just lifted up hope. He does not have in mind those grieving the loss of loved ones, but he has in mind those who are discouraged about the walk of faith. They've run into so much resistance. They have faced opposition, received scorn, and even suffered persecution because of what they believe. He is assuring them that God's saving love is already theirs.

Think of it this way. Paul is not describing how you get, but describing what they already have. He is not

explaining how to access God's love,

and certainly not talking about how to get past God's wrath to gain God's love.

It would be exceedingly odd for him to move from lifting hope to inspiring fear.

He is simply describing God's love.

And what is God's love according to Paul? What he says is in keeping with those poets who know what a risk it is to fully love another, and what cost can come from having loved another fully. God's love is Agape love—the full, vulnerable, selfless love of one who does not calculate the risk and accepts the cost.

Paul tells us how powerful this love can be. It changes lives.

Don't we know that? If we don't, we should. We should know that loving another selflessly is to take a great risk. It is to open yourself to



being hurt,  
being rejected, and even  
being betrayed.

No wonder we put guards up. No wonder we calculate the risk before letting others too closely in.

But we should also know how great the risk of those is who refuse to accept or show love in that way. Infants who are denied in their first years of life any sort of selfless love have a high chance of developing what psychologists call an “attachment disorder.” They grow up incapable of even understanding, much less receiving, or showing the kind of love that puts the interests of another before one’s own. The worst sorts of psychosis, and especially the worst sorts of sociopathy and narcissism, are the conditions of people incapable of selfless thoughts or behavior... incapable of love that is not heavily transactional to their own benefit. It is a living death of sorts.

Those who love in this world get hurt. Those who love grow hearts that then hurt all the more when they are broken. Those who often put the needs of others before their own out of either love of them or love of God sometimes are taken advantage of. That’s the sin of the world of which Paul speaks.

But maybe Paul wants us to know that Jesus meant what he said,  
that to gain a life one has to give it;  
to follow Jesus is to take up the cross of sacrifice.

Maybe our best selves are resurrected from the  
cost,  
sacrifice  
and death of having loved and being loved.

To truly love and be loved is to know the kind of life that one day we can say was worth  
living...  
even with the cost.

Jesus paid a price because he loved us with God’s kind of love. That is what Paul is telling us. Jesus didn’t get in the way of God’s wrath. He expressed God’s very heart. Yes, there are things that inspire the wrath of those who love. We should be angered by what angers God:

children abused,  
the weak being taken advantage of,  
the hurting ignored,  
fears being stoked and lies being told,  
someone as selfless and gracious as Jesus being killed  
because he gets in the way of what selfish people want.

But for some reason God doesn’t need to explain to us,  
any more than we need to explain why we love so deeply  
a parent,  
a child, or



a friend we would give everything for—  
God loves us.  
Enough to be with us in Jesus.  
Enough even to die without thought of revenge.  
That love is transformative.  
We are loved in that way,  
Paul is telling us.  
And we can love others in that way,  
he is telling us.  
And by such love,  
Hearts are broken and remade  
lives are transformed, and  
salvation comes.  
Take that into your head and heart when you calculate the cost of loving others  
as God, in Jesus, loves us.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Is This the Price of Love”

<sup>2</sup> “Love’s Cost”

