



Love After God

Pete Lowman

In the fourth and final part of this series, Pete Lowman considers what happens to love when God is rejected.

People say it 'doesn't matter' whether there's a God or not. In Britain today we're learning just how far they're mistaken.

A companion piece on this site has explored how our loss of God is logically linked with the identity crisis that forces us into self-destructive struggles to fabricate our sense of self-worth - through our work, our lovers, looks, power... self-worth which should be rooted more soundly in the knowledge of a loving God; a God who created us and died for us the way we are [Identity after God]. We've also examined the current crisis of directionlessness [God or no God? What Does It Matter?]; how our loss of God's loving sovereignty has left us abandoned to pointlessness, where nothing is really worth doing... abandoned us also to the 'age of anxiety', surrounded by fears of the uncontrollable breaking in on us; and with no reason to hope that 'experience' and 'maturity', or suffering and ageing, have any meaning or value.

In a third piece, we've explored what the loss of God means in ethics: that our society is slowly facing the lack of any compelling reason to be anything but selfish... And we're learning the meaning of the evolutionary 'law of the jungle', where - when push comes to shove - the weak go to the wall and only the strong survive. When the going gets tough the tough get going; but for the rest of us it's not so pleasant [Ethics after God].

But that's not all. The loss of God may hit even

closer to home... What's the meaning of love after God?

Often, as our artists grapple with these issues, they have turned finally to loving relationships as that which survives when everything has collapsed. Matthew Arnold wrote of the loss of Christian faith in *Dover Beach*; the "sea of faith", he says, "was once... at the full... but now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar..." Then he turns to his lover:

*Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Love, let us be true to one another; that will be left when everything else is gone. Lawrence makes one of his characters in *Women in Love* say the same: if there's no God, all that's left is to aim at a perfect relationship with a woman. The pattern recurs in Lennon's *Imagine*, the haunting title track of which was perhaps the most beautiful denial of Christian beliefs ever written. 'Imagine' didn't stand alone; other Lennon songs demonstrated profound unbelief, not only in Jesus and the Bible but in many other kinds of ideals besides. One thing, however, he still expressed particular faith in, his relationship with Yoko. 'Love, let us be true to one another' (Arnold): that is where we seek shelter when everything else is gone.

But again comes the problem. God is dead; and in a world of disposable marriages and sex-as-hobby, what precisely is this love? Joan Collins once admitted, "I've never been able to figure out what love means". Novelist Julian Barnes has an answer for her: love is just a way of getting someone to call you darling after sex. Camille Paglia is equally direct: sex is combat.

And if you don't believe that, still what is love? How do you tell whether or not your 'love'-relationship is a destructive 'codependency'? How

far should love extend - what does it necessitate in terms of commitment and forgiveness? 'I would have thought not forgiving was a sign of love', said a character in a recent TV drama. And where do we find the strength to forgive anyway? (Posterski's surveys of Canadian teenagers showed a correlation between commitment to the importance of forgiveness and Christian belief.)

It does make a difference if we have God's Word - particularly about Jesus' life and death - to teach us what love means in practice. Paul explained that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved His people: Christ poured out everything He had and was for us, and that, says Paul, is the model for our love too. But it's not just a matter of abstract teachings. Christians have believed that there's also supernatural power in God's Spirit to help us follow that model through; in creativity, mutual forgiveness, perseverance, devotion.

But suppose all that is gone: how can we know what it really means to love? "Love means never having to say you're sorry" (*Love Story*) is self-evidently stupid. But is love maybe a bargain where both partners receive care and fulfilment? Possibly; but then what happens when the fulfilment doesn't materialise? The husband is under work-pressure, the wife is pregnant, one partner has severe depression, 'fulfilment' is unavailable: is love, by definition, dead (and therefore replaceable)? Why and how should we work at rekindling it? Psychologist Lawrence Crabb points to confidence in God's loving sovereignty as the strongest motivator for giving effort to rekindling a relationship; but that too depends on faith...

What is love? 'His love of France was matched only by his love of women' was the slogan of a TV drama about a wartime resistance hero; can 'passionate love' envisage romancing a sequence of women, one tasted and cast aside after another? Maybe a major difficulty in many contemporary relationships comes when the man and woman mean different things by 'love', involving different expectations; and there is no way to know who is right.

Indeed, more and more the term begins to disappear. As we lose God, certain words are falling out of use: 'joy', for example, seldom seems used except by Christians (or else,

significantly, about sex); 'wisdom' is another example. Perhaps 'love' is going the same way - except in songs we know are 'sentimental', that is, unreal. A recent TV programme discussed the experience of adultery; strikingly, almost none of the participants used the 'love' word. Perhaps for them it was too much to hope for.

When we had a God we had a reason to celebrate the reality of love; but that is past. Literary critic George Steiner points out that love poetry, as a literary form, seems to be something that can die out. Does our culture have a basis for talking about, believing in, 'love' any more? Or is love dying with the death of God? And if our love-relationships were the prime shelter (and maybe goal) but left us in the darkness, and they too disintegrate; what then?

Facing realities

We stand as the heirs of a long cultural tradition that has turned away from God and looked for alternatives. Now, in the 'post-modern' era, we talk as if the God-question doesn't matter. One person believes, another doesn't, either way it's fine.

That is because we haven't faced the consequences: that without God our identity, our self-worth, purpose, ethics and relationships are all - logically - in severe jeopardy. A society made up of individuals increasingly despairing of their own value, sceptical of any meaning to life, deeply cynical about 'morals' and 'right' and 'wrong', and seeing 'love' as no more than a pretty phrase for sex-drives and temporary tactical alliances, will be an appalling place to survive. Already we sense such a society coming to birth around us; and worse may be to come.

In such a situation, we must find ways to ask whether the apparently 'trivial' issue of the loss of God-in-Christ isn't at the heart of what's going wrong.

This can recreate both faith and hope. Like a good scientific hypothesis, the fact that faith in Jesus makes sense of so many things our deepest intuitions tell us are realities is actually a good reason to believe in it. And in waking up to the consequences of the loss of God, we can begin to understand the meaning of the *presence* of God in Jesus, and of new birth in the Spirit.

Of how the love of God ensures our identity and self-worth; how His affectionate creativity guarantees purposefulness in our lives; how His fatherly care recreates hope, and a motivation for idealism; how His Word recreates meaningful ethics, and His Spirit gives us the power to carry them out, in relationships characterised by love that is far more than a word.

What the loss of God can explain, the rediscovery of the presence of God can restore to life...

*A greatly expanded and documented version of this article is now available on **bethinking.org** as Chapter 5 of Pete Lowman's book *A Long Way East of Eden*.*

The other articles in this four part series are:

Part 1 'Identity After God' can be found here

Part 2 'God or No God - Purpose after God - What does it matter?' can be found here

Part 3 'Ethics after God' can be found here

© 2005 Pete Lowman