

Amy Carmichael

if

A DOHNAVUR BOOK

CLC

PUBLICATIONS
FORT WASHINGTON, PA 19034

HOW *if* CAME TO BE WRITTEN

One evening a fellow-worker brought me a problem about a younger one who was missing the way of Love. This led to a wakeful night, for the word at such times is always, “*Lord, is it I? have I failed her anywhere? What do I know of Calvary Love?*” And then sentence by sentence the “*Ifs*” came, almost as if spoken aloud in the inward ear.

Next morning they were shared with another (for they had been written down in pencil in the night), and then a few others shared. After this some copies were printed on our little hand press for the Fellowship only; and that led to this booklet. At first when it was asked for, we felt, No, it is far too private for that. But if it can help any to understand what the life of love means and to live that life, then it is not ours to refuse.

Some of the “*Ifs*” appear to be related to pride, selfishness, or cowardice, but digging deeper we come upon an unsuspected lovelessness at the root of them all.

The pages in Part 2 are not meant to be read one after the other. Perhaps only one “*If*” here and there may have the needed word, and, leaving the others, the reader may find something in the last pages.

And in case any true follower be troubled by the “*then I know nothing,*” I would say, the thought came in this form, and I fear to weaken it. But here, as everywhere, the letter killeth. St. Paul counted the loss of all things as nothing that he might know Him whom he already knew; and the soul, suddenly illuminated by some fresh outshining of the knowledge of the love of God shown forth on Calvary, does not stop to measure how much or how little it knew of the love before. Penetrated, melted, broken before that vision of love, it feels that indeed all it ever knew was nothing, less than nothing.

It is clear, I think, that such a booklet as this is not meant for everyone, but only for those who are called to be under shepherds. And

there are some of them for whom it has no word. They have already entered into that of which I have been impelled to write.

—Amy Carmichael

Part 1

There are times when something comes into our lives which is charged with love in such a way that it seems to open the Eternal to us for a moment, or at least some of the Eternal Things, and the greatest of these is love.

It may be a small and intimate touch upon us or our affairs, light as the touch of the dawn wind on the leaves of the tree, something not to be captured and told to another in words. But we know that it is our Lord. And then perhaps the room where we are, with its furniture and books and flowers, seems less “present” than His Presence, and the heart is drawn into that sweetness of which the old hymn sings.

*The love of Jesus, what it is
None but His loved ones know.*

Or is it the dear human love about us that bathes us as in summer seas and rests us through and through. Can we ever cease to wonder at the love of our companions? And then suddenly we recognize our Lord in them. It is His love that they lavish upon us. O Love of God made manifest in Thy lovers, we worship Thee.

Or (not often, perhaps, for dimness seems to be more wholesome for us here, but sometimes, because our Lord is very merciful) it is given to us to look up through the blue air and see the love of God. And yet, after all, how little we see! “That ye may be able to

comprehend what is the breadth and length and depth and height and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge”—the words are too great for us. What do we comprehend, what do we know? Confounded and abased, we enter into the Rock and hide us in the dust before the glory of the Majesty of love—the love whose symbol is the cross.

And a question pierces then: What do I know of Calvary love?

Part 2

if

I have not compassion on my fellow-servant,
even as my Lord had pity on me,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I belittle those whom I am called to serve,
talk of their weak points
in contrast perhaps with what I think of as my
strong points; if I adopt a superior attitude,
forgetting “who made thee to differ? and what hast
though that thou hast not received?”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I can easily discuss the shortcomings and the
sins of any; if I can speak in a casual way
even of a child’s misdoing,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I find myself half-carelessly taking
lapses for granted,
“Oh, that’s what they always do,”
“Oh, of course she talks like that,
he acts like that,”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I can enjoy a joke at the expense of another;
if I can in any way slight another in
conversation, or even in thought,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

If I can write an unkind letter, speak an
unkind word, think an unkind thought
without grief of shame,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I do not feel far more for the grieved
Saviour than for my worried self
when troublesome things occur,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I know little of His pitifulness
(the Lord turned and looked upon Peter),
if I know little of His courage of
hopefulness for the truly humble and penitent
(He saith unto him, "Feed My lambs"),
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I deal with wrong for any other reason than
that implied in the words,
"From His right hand went a fiery law for them.
Yea, He loved the people";
if I can rebuke without a pang
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

in dealing with one who does not respond,
I weary of the strain, and slip
from under the burden
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I cannot bear to be like the father who did
not soften the rigors of the far country;
if, in this sense, I refuse to allow the law of
God (the way of transgressors is hard) to take
effect, because of the distress it causes me to
see that law in operation,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I am perturbed by the reproach and
misunderstanding that may allow action taken
for the good of souls for whom I must give an
account; if I cannot commit the matter and go
on in peace and in silence, remembering
Gethsemane and the cross,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I cannot catch “the sound of noise of rain”^{*} long
before the rain falls, and, going to some hilltop of the
spirit, as near to my God as I can, have not faith to
wait there with my face between my knees, though
six times or sixty times I am told “there is nothing,”
till at last “there arises a little cloud out of the sea,”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

^{*}1 Kings 18:41, margin.

if

my attitude be one of fear, not faith, about one who
has disappointed me;
if I say, “Just what I expected,” if a fall occurs,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I do not look with eyes of hope on all in whom there
is even a faint beginning, as our Lord did, when, just
after His disciples had wrangled about which of them
should be accounted the greatest, He softened
His rebuke with those heart-melting words,
“Ye are they which have continued with
Me in My temptations,”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I cast up a confessed, repented, and forsaken sin
against another, and allow my remembrance of that
sin to color my thinking and feed my suspicions,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I have not the patience of my Saviour with souls that
grow slowly; if I know little of travail
(a sharp and painful thing)
till Christ be formed in them,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I sympathize weakly with weakness, and say to one
who is turning back from the cross,
“Pity thyself”;
if I refuse such a one the sympathy that braces and
the brave and heartening word of comradeship,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I cannot keep silence over a disappointing soul
(unless for the sake of that soul’s good or for the
good of others it be necessary to speak),
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I can hurt another by speaking faithfully without
much preparation of spirit, and without hurting
myself far more than I hurt that other,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I am afraid to speak the truth, lest I lose affection, or
lest the one concerned should say, “You do not
understand,” or because I fear to lose my
reputation for kindness;
if I put my own good name before the
other’s highest good,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I am content to heal a hurt slightly, saying
“Peace, peace,” where is no peace;
if I forget the poignant word “Let love be without
dissimulation” and blunt the edge of truth,
speaking not right things but smooth things,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I fear to hold another to the highest goal because it is
so much easier to avoid doing so,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I hold on to choices of any kind, just because
they are my choices; if I give any room to
my private likes and dislikes,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I put my own happiness before the well-being of the
work entrusted to me;
if, though I have this ministry and have received
much mercy, I faint,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I am soft to myself and slide comfortable into the
vice of self-pity and self-sympathy; if I do not by the
grace of God practice fortitude,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I myself dominate myself, if my thoughts revolve
around myself, if I am so occupied with myself I
rarely have “a heart at leisure from itself”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

the moment I am conscious of the shadow of self
crossing my threshold, I do not shut the door, and in
the power of Him who works in us to will and to do,
keep that door shut,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I cannot in honest happiness take the second place (or
the twentieth); if I cannot take the first without
making a fuss about my unworthiness,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

when I am able to discover something which has
baffled others, I forget Him who revealed the deep
and secret things, and knoweth what is in the
darkness and showeth it to us;
if I forget that it was He who granted that ray
of light to His most unworthy servant,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I cannot be at rest under the Unexplained, forgetting
the word, “And blessed is he whosoever shall not be
offended in Me”; or if I can allow the least
shadow of a misunderstanding,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I do not give a friend “the benefit of the doubt,” but
put the worst construction instead of the best on
what is said or done,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I take offense easily;
if I am content to continue in a cool unfriendliness,
though friendship is possible,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

a sudden jar can cause me to speak an impatient,
unloving word,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.*

*For a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter
water, however suddenly jolted.

if

I feel injured when another lay to my charge things
that I know not, forgetting that my Sinless Saviour
trode this path to the end,
I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I feel bitterly towards those who condemn me, as it
seems to me, unjustly, forgetting that if they
knew me as I know myself they would condemn
me much more,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I say, "Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget," as though
the God, who twice a day washed
all the sands on all the shores of all the
world, could not wash such memories from my mind,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

one whose help I greatly need appears to be as content to build in wood, hay, stubble, as in gold, silver, precious stones, and I hesitate to obey my light and do without that help because so few will understand, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

the care of a soul (or a community) be entrusted to me, and I consent to subject it to weakening influences, because of the voice of the world—my immediate Christian world—fills my ears, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

by doing some work which the undiscerning consider “not spiritual work” I can best help others, and I inwardly rebel, thinking it is the spiritual which I crave, when in truth it is the interesting and exciting, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

monotony tries me, and I cannot stand drudgery; if
stupid people fret me and little ruffles set me on edge;
if I make much of the trifles of life,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I am inconsiderate about the comfort of others, or
their feelings, or even their little weaknesses; if I am
careless about their little hurts and miss
opportunities to smooth their way;
if I make the sweet running of household wheels
more difficult to accomplish,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

interruptions annoy me, and private cares make me
impatient; if I shadow the souls about me because
I myself am shadowed,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

souls can suffer alongside, and I hardly know it,
because the spirit of discernment is not in me,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

there be any reserve in my giving to Him who so loved
that He gave His Dearest for me; if there
be a secret “but” in my prayer,
“Anything but that, Lord,”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I become entangled in any “inordinate affection”;
if things or places or people hold me back from
obedience to my Lord,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

something I am asked to do for another feels
burdensome; if, yielding to an inward unwillingness,
I avoid doing it,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

the praise of men elates me and his blame depressed
me; if I cannot rest under misunderstanding without
defending myself; if I love to be loved more than love,
to be served more than to serve,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I crave hungrily to be used to show the way of liberty to a soul in bondage, instead of caring only that it be delivered; if I nurse my disappointment when I fail, instead of asking that to another the word of release may be given,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I want to be known as the doer of something that has proved the right thing, or as the one who suggested that it be done,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I do not forget about such a trifle as personal success, so that it never crossed my mind, or if it does, is never given a moment's room there; if the cup of spiritual flattery tastes sweet to me,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

it be not a simple and natural thing to say,
“Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the
Lord’s people were prophets,”
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

in the fellowship of service I seek to attach a friend to
myself, so the others are caused to feel unwanted;
if my friendships do not draw others deeper in,
but are ungenerous
(i.e., to myself, for myself),
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I refuse to allow one who is dear to me
to suffer for the sake of Christ, if I do not see such
suffering as the greatest honor that can be
offered to any follower of the Crucified;
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I slip into the place that can be filled by Christ alone,
making myself the first necessity to a soul instead of
leading it to fasten upon Him,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

my interest in the work of others is cool;
if I think in terms of my own special work;
if the burdens of others are not my burdens too,
and their joys mine,
then I know not of Calvary love.

if

when an answer I did not expect comes to a prayer
which I believed I truly meant, I shrink back from it;
if the burden my Lord asks me to bear be not the
burden of my hearts choice, and I fret inwardly and
do not welcome His will,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I avoid being “plowed under,” with all that such
plowing entails of rough handling, isolation,
uncongenial situations, strange tests,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I wonder why something trying is allowed, and press
for prayer that it may be removed;
if I cannot be trusted with any disappointment, and
cannot go on in peace under any mystery,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I make much of anything appointed, magnify it
secretly to myself or insidiously to others;
if I let them think it “hard”;
if I look back longingly upon what used to be, and
linger among the byways of memory, so that my
power to help is weakened,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

the love that “alone taketh light of every heavy thing,
and beareth evenly every uneven thing”
is not my heart’s desire,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I refuse to be a corn of wheat that falls into
the ground and dies
(“is separated from all in which it lived before”),
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I ask to be delivered from trial rather than for
deliverance out of it, to the praise of His glory;
if I forget that the way of the cross leads to the cross
and not to a bank of flowers; if I regulate my life on
these lines, or even unconsciously my thinking, so
that I am surprised when the way is rough and think
it strange, though the word is, "Think it not strange,"
"Count it all joy,"
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

the ultimate, the hardest, cannot be asked of me; if
the fellows hesitate to ask it and turn to someone else,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

if

I covet any place on earth but the dust at the foot of
the cross,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.

That which I know not, teach Thou me,
O Lord, my God.

Part 3

1

I have felt these words scorching to write, but it is borne upon me that, in spite of all our hymns and prayers (so many of them for love), it is possible to be content with the shallows of love, if indeed such shallows should be called love at all.

(Perhaps prayer often needs to be followed by a little pause, that we may have time to open our hearts to that for which we have prayed. We often rush from prayer to prayer without waiting for the word within, which says, "I have heard you, My child.")

The more we ponder our Lord's words about love, and the burning words the Spirit gave to His followers to write, the more acutely do we feel our deadly lack. The Searchlight of the Spirit exposes us to ourselves, and such a discovery leaves us appalled. How can even He who is the God of all patience have patience with us? Like Job we abhor ourselves and repent in dust and ashes.

But the light is not turned upon us to rob us of our hope. There is a lifting up. If only we desire to be purged from self with its entangling nets, its subtleties, its disguises (falsehoods truly), its facile showing of brass for gold, as the Tamil says; if, hating unlove from the ground of the heart, we cry to be delivered, then our God will be to us a God of deliverances.

No vision of the night can show, no word declare, with what longings of love Divine Love waits till the heart, all weary and sick of itself, turns to its Lord and says, "Take full possession." There is no need to plead that the love of God shall fill our heart as though He were unwilling to fill us; He is willing as light is willing to flood a room that is opened to its brightness; willing as water is willing to flow into an emptied channel. Love is pressing around us on all sides like air. Cease to resist, and instantly love takes possession.

As the 15th century poem *Quia amore langues* says,

Long and love thou never so high,
My love is more than thine may be.

More, far more. For as His abundance of pardon passes our power to tell it, so does His abundance of love: it is far as the east is from the west, high as the heavens is above the earth. But words fail. Love soars above them all.

To look at ourselves leads to despair. Thank God, the Blood cleanseth.

If thou be foul, I shall make thee clean,
If thou be sick, I shall thee heal.
Foundest thou ever love so leal?

Never, Lord, never.

3

Sometimes, when we are distressed by past failure and tormented by fear of failure in the future should we again set our faces toward Jerusalem, nothing helps so much as to give some familiar scripture time to enter into us and become part of our being. The words “grace for grace” have been a help to me since I read in a little old book of Bishop Moule’s something that opened their meaning. (Till then I had not understood them.)

He says, “for” means simply “instead”; “grace instead of grace.” The image is of a perpetual succession of supply; a displacement ever going on; ceaseless changes of need and demand.

“The picture before us is of a river. Stand on its banks, and contemplate the flow of waters. A minute passes, and another. Is it the same stream still? Yes. But is it the same water? No. The liquid mass that passed you a few seconds ago fills now another section of the channel; new water has displaced it, or if you please, replaced it; water instead of water. And so hour by hour, and year by year, and century by century, the process hold; one stream, other waters—living, not stagnant, because always in the great city there is perpetual exchange. Grace takes the place of grace [and love takes the place of love]; ever new, ever old, ever the same, ever fresh and young, for hour by hour, for year by year, through Christ.”

*T*here is no force strong enough to hold us together as a company, and animate all our doings, but this one force of Love; and so there is a constant attack upon the love without which we are sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

That explains why every now and then those who want to live the life of love seem to be constrained to seek the searching and the cleansing of the Spirit of God, first (it has often happened so) in the secret of our own hearts, and then together; and we know how graciously God has answered us, so that, though our word must always be “not as though I had already attained,” we do, by His enabling, press onward.

There is another reason why the adversary attacks love. It is this: Far out on our uttermost rim a thing may occur which is the reflection, so to speak, of something that was nourished in the heart of one who is in the very center. I have often known it to be so. Perhaps it was never expressed in act or word, the eye did not see it, the ear did not hear it. But spiritual influences move where sight and hearing have no place; and unlove in any one of us, or even an absence of the quality of love of which we have been thinking, is enough to cause the slow stain to spread till it reaches some soul in a moment of its weakness. And irreparable harm may result.

O Lord, forgive: The property is always to have mercy. Give me the comfort of Thy help again. Let it be Thy pleasure to deliver me, O Lord, my God.

5

The way of love is never an easy way. If our hearts be set on walking in that way we must be prepared to suffer. “It was the way the Master went; should not the servant tread it still?” It is possible that we may be enclosed in circumstances which drain natural love, till we feel as dry as grass on an Indian hillside under a burning sun.

We have toiled for someone dear to us, but never knew it was toil. We have poured out stores of health never to be recovered, but did not know it, nor would we have cared if we had known it, so dearly did we love. And all our hope was that the one so cherished would become a minister to others. But it was not so.

And then unwillingly we became aware of a strange unresponsiveness in the one for whom nothing had seemed too much to do, of a coldness that chilled, a hardness that pushed as with hard hands the heart that had almost broken to save that life from destruction.

Then (but only those who have gone through such a bereft hour will understand) a fear worse than any pain has us in its grip; is the love of years slipping from us? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”—is that fading from our memory? “Love never faileth”—is love failing now? Shall we find ourselves meeting lovelessness with lovelessness?

In such an hour a poem, now many years old, that expressed a desperate prayer, burned into words:

Deep unto deep, O Lord,
Crieth in me,
Gathering strength I come,
Lord, unto Thee.
Jesus of Calvary,
Smitten for me,
Ask what Thou wilt, but give
Love to me.

6

Our dear Lord listens to the prayer that goes not out of feigned lips, and it is written for our comfort that He causes those who love Him to inherit substance, the wonderful “substance” that is “grace instead of grace,” the perpetual gift of His fullness. This grace is no mere “impersonal substance,” but God working in us, the Lord in action in our very springs of thought and will. God is Love; so, for us, Love is this blessed “Substance” that the children of the Father are caused to inherit.

It is the river’s word again. The empty riverbed “inherits” the water that pours through it from the heights; it does not create the water, it only receives it, and its treasuries are filled, its pools overflow for the blessing and refreshment of the land. It is so with us: our treasuries of time, our years with all their months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, are filled with the flowing treasure of love that we may help others. Who could have thought of such joy for us but He whose name is Love? Now unto Him that is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory.

7

Let us end on a very simple note: Let us listen to simple words; our Lord speaks simply: "Trust Me, My child," He says. "Trust me with a humbler heart and a fuller abandon to My will than ever thou didst before. Trust Me to pour My love through thee, as minute succeeds minute. And if thou shouldst be conscious of anything hindering the flow, do not hurt My love by going away from Me in discouragement, for nothing can hurt love so much as that. Draw all the closer to Me; come, flee unto Me to hide thee, even from thyself. Tell Me about the trouble. Trust Me to turn My hand upon thee and throughly to remove the boulder that has choked thy riverbed, and take away all the sand that has silted up the channel. I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. I will perfect that which concerneth thee. Fear thou not, O child of My love, fear not."

And now...to father all in one page:

Beloved, let us love

Lord, what is love?

Love is that which inspired My life, and led Me to My cross, and held Me on My cross. Love is that which will make it thy joy to lay down thy life for thy brethren.

Lord, evermore give me this love.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after love, for they shall be filled.

Amen, Lord Jesus.