

Sermon 32: Romans 5:5-8: God's love: the ground of our hope

OUTLINE

The subjective proof of God's love

The objective proof of God's love

INTRODUCTION

How can I know that God loves me? How do I know that the whole thing is not just a cruel game that will end with me, the Christian, left hanging and going to final judgement? How can I know that this life of pain will be replaced with a life of glory? These are the questions that Paul sets about answering in the next section that we are going to deal with in Romans 5:5-8. Apart from Paul calling the Roman believers those who are 'loved by God,' this is the first mention of the love of God in Romans in any deliberate sense. Paul has been talking about suffering, and the benefit that every believer has of being able not just to cope but to boast in, rejoice in and exult in our sufferings knowing that they are tools in God's hand for a greater reward than we can imagine. Remember in V3 Paul began to speak about our ability to rejoice because of the lists of benefits we receive, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope. We pick up Paul's train of thought as he goes into verse 5, 'and hope does not put us to shame.' In other words, our hope is certain it will not disappoint, it will all go as God promised, there is no cruel ending where God withdraws His promises and we do not go to glory. And of course the question arises, but can we be sure? Paul anticipates this very question and sets out to prove our hopes are well founded because they are grounded on God's love.

Paul sets out two arguments for the certainty of our hope on the basis of God's love. The first proof of God's love is found in v5, '...because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' The other is concluded with v8, 'But God shows His love for us in that while we are still sinners, Christ died for us.' The first proof of God's love is based on the work of the Holy Spirit, the second proof on the work of the Son. The first proof is something that is subjective and experienced by us, the second proof is something objective and historical and is demonstrated not in our hearts but on the stage of history. Paul is wanting us to see that the evidence of God's love pervading our lives and that it is evident not merely in our knowing it by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but as an established reality in history. We are surrounded both within and without, subjectively and objectively, the Father, Son and Spirit are all engaged in demonstrating this love that we might know, that we might have assurance and a hope that can be grounded on no greater foundation.

The subjective proof of God's love

In v5 Paul talks about the first way in which the love of God is demonstrated to us, 'because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' In the first place we need to clear up any wrong interpretations of what Paul means by

'God's love.' There have been those who have tried to argue that this love that Paul is talking about is not God's love for us but our love for God. So the line of thoughts says that our hope is sure and will not disappoint because we have evidence of our salvation in our love to God. Now it is true that if you love God you have only been enabled by God's grace having worked the new birth in you. However, to say that our hope does not put us to shame because we love God is the exact opposite of what Paul is attempting to do here. Let me ask you, is your love to God perfect, do you fail to love God with all your heart, all of time in every way in which you should? No of course not, so to say that our love to God is the ground of our hope is to undermine our hope not to put it on the most sure footing.

Another misunderstanding that has crept into this verse is the one that sees the love of God in question not as God's saving love towards His church, but rather the supernatural love of the Holy Spirit that loves others through Christians. This too is incorrect, although it is true that the fruit of the Spirit in our lives can encourage us Paul is wanting to secure our hope on a foundation that does not teeter, that is not unstable and inconsistent. Our love towards others is weak and frail, it is imperfect, and any hope that is grounded on how well I love others is doomed to ensure depression not a hope that carries me through the most difficult times of my life.

No Paul is talking about the love of God towards the Christian. When Paul talks about the love of God for His church he reaches all the way back into eternity to show its perfect beginning and its unchanging nature. Listen to the love of God and how it was set upon the church from before the foundations of the world, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.' (Ephesians 1:3-7). God has loved us with an unchanging love, a love that has never given up, a love that determined that He would save His church, and worked out a plan to secure His purposes.

Paul tells us that the reality of this love is spoken to us in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Paul uses the word 'poured' to indicate that the amount of the love that God has for us is profuse and overflowing. The outpouring of God's love towards us is so profound and great we need strength to comprehend it, listen to how Paul prays for the Ephesian church in 3:14-19, 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith---that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.' It surpasses knowledge, you need strength to comprehend it, when you realise something of the flood of love it is as if you are in the ocean, and you cannot hold your breath long enough to find the bottom.

The next key word is the word, 'heart.' The heart is not the muscle that we know as the heart today from biology, but rather the heart is the centre of your being, the essence of who you are. It includes your thoughts, feelings and will. Paul is telling us that God causes us to know His love in the very core of our being, in our hearts. The depth of the knowledge results in certainty and conviction.

Then Paul tells us how, 'through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' How then does the Holy Spirit assure us of God's love and thereby the certainty of our hope? Firstly, the Holy Spirit Himself is the guarantee of the future glorification when we will be made to conform fully to Christ's resurrection glory. The Spirit is like the engagement ring that guarantees the marriage. Secondly, the ministry of the Spirit in changing us into that future state, a work that He has already begun to do which only awaits completion. However, what Paul most probably has in mind is the witness of the Spirit with our spirits that we are children of God, he talks about it again in Romans 8:14-16, 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.'

The Spirit causes new desires for God and holiness to rise up within us, and as He who knows the deep things of God ministers those things to our understanding and we experience marvellous glimpses of glory. We taste joy that is inexpressible and full of glory, the peace of God that transcends understanding, the height, breadth, length and depth of God's love to us in Christ and a knowledge of God as our Father with the accompanying desire to pray and be with Him. This is the portion of every Christian. Follow the logic here for a moment. God tells us that we are those who are able to boast in our sufferings, all because we see them in God's hands for our good, and because they produce hope in us, and that hope is unshakable because it is based on God's love. If the joy in sufferings is for every believer and it is possible partly because it produces hope, and hope has its grounds in God's love then it is for every Christian to know the wonder of that love, have strong hope and thus rejoice in sufferings. There have been those in the history of the church that have had some remarkable and overpowering experiences of the love of God, so much so that they have had to beg God to stay His hand. This is not what Paul is talking about here is the record of Sarah Edwards, Jonathan Edwards wife, it all began while another was praying and quoting part of Romans 8:34-35 "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised— who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?"(ESV).

She writes:

"They appeared to me with undoubted certainty as words of God, and as words which God did pronounce concerning me. I had no more doubt of it than I had of my being...I cannot find language to express how certain this appeared—the everlasting mountains and hills were but shadows to it. My safety, and happiness, and eternal enjoyment of God's immutable [unchangeable] love, seemed as durable and unchangeable as God himself.

Melted and overcome by the sweetness of this assurance, I fell into a great flow of tears...The whole world, with all its enjoyments and all its troubles, seemed to be nothing: My God was my all, my only portion..." This experience of hers continued into the night.

"That night, which was Thursday night, Jan.28, was the sweetest night I ever had in my life. I never before, for so long a time together, enjoyed so much of the light, and rest, and sweetness of heaven in my soul...The great part of the night I lay awake, sometimes asleep, and sometimes sleeping and waking. But all night I continued in a constant, clear, and lively sense of the heavenly sweetness of Christ's excellent and transcendent love, of his nearness to me, and of my dearness to him....I think that what I felt each minute, during the continuance of the whole time was worth more than all the outward comfort and pleasure which I had enjoyed in my whole life put together. It was a pure delight that fed and satisfied the soul..." (Murray, 194-95).

Some Christians have been tormented because they have not known such ecstatic experiences of God's love. These sorts of experiences are not the normal knowledge of God's love that Paul is talking about here. And when a Christian is not thoughtful about the Gospel and what Jesus has done for them they can lose this certainty. When Christians take their eyes off of Christ as the measurement of God's love they can lose their sense of God's love. If they sin and are not penitent God will hold them at a distance until they repent. However, through the use of ordinary means a Christian can have a true sense of God's love inwardly, and have a true and founded hope to get them through the difficulties with a firm assurance of God's intent towards them. John describes it this way: 'Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.' 22 Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" 23 Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'" (John 14:21-23).

The objective proof of God's love

Someone might want to say to me, 'But Nick, that is all subjective, I can't trust my emotions, after I sin I feel like the devil, never mind loved by God, isn't there a more sure basis that does not rest on my emotions?' Paul's answer for us is, 'Definitely!' In v6-8 he points us to the historical act of Jesus Christ dying on the cross for the sin of His church which is an objective proof of God's love that is concrete and never changing. 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person---though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die--- 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' This objective proof of God's love not only gives you an objective basis to know God's love when you are wallowing in guilt or in the middle of a difficult situation, but it also ratifies the feelings that we feel subjectively of the love of God proving that our conviction of love and forgiveness, of adoption and a destiny of glory is not self-deception but certain.

Paul's approach here is extremely pastoral. Picture it for a moment, you are suffering in a very painful trial. Every superstitious instinct in you thinks that God is judging you for the last sin you did, or a particularly terrible one from before you were a Christian. You have come from a background of Charismatic theology that teaches you that your victory depends on your faith, but your faith is lying on the floor flattened by guilt. You cannot find peace within in order to assure yourself of acceptance with God, you are not sure whether you are merely deceiving yourself with wishful thinking or not. And so you are looking around for a way to know God's love and acceptance, something that speaks louder than your present pain and guilt that God really does love you. You need a proof of God's love that does not depend on your emotions and your holiness, here it is, the cross.

God's love which He set upon you, in Christ, from eternity past does not fluctuate with your sanctification or quiet times. And now when you are going through tough times and everything around you seems to be against you shouting at you that you are being punished, God's eternal love has not changed. Paul points to the concrete act of Christ dying for the unworthy to prove the certainty of God's love to His children.

Paul highlights the intensity of God's love by demonstrating how vile and unworthy we are yet God has loved us. Paul uses three words, 'weak, ungodly, sinners.' 'Weak' speaks of our total inability in sin, we are spiritually bankrupt and unable to produce anything worthy that will provoke God's love so that He would give Christ for us. 'Ungodly' is a word that Paul used to describe the people under the wrath of God in Rom. 1:18-32, we are those who are by act and nature the very antithesis to God. And 'sinners' is self-explanatory.

The phrase 'at the right time' indicates that intentional plan of God, the plan that He had set in eternity past when He chose in Christ as His people.

Notice next who died, 'Christ died for the ungodly.' Paul is putting side by side the two most contrary things in the universe, perfect God in human nature submissive to God against its opposite, the sinful image of God in man set in opposition to God. As you read that name 'Christ' hear from Paul saturated with fervent emotion and intensity. Paul is using this single precious name as short hand for the infinite worth of Christ. Twice Paul uses this single name to impress upon us the magnitude of what God has done. Heaven's best was given for earth's worst. He was not merely given, He was tortured to death. He was not merely tortured physically but suffered immeasurable anguish as He suffered not merely the weight of Roman law but the wrath of God. And for what, for something more valuable than Him, No! For something that deserved it? Never! For us!

Paul uses an illustration to bring the point home. 'For one will scarcely die for a righteous person---though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.' Imagine it this way. You are fighting in the trenches in WWI. You have a good friend, on several occasions he saves your life. A day come along when you see a German soldier coming around a corner and raise his gun to shoot your friend, without any hesitation you dive in front of him and take the bullet saving his life. This is what Paul is talking about when he talks about daring to die for a righteous person. A body guard for the President would

gladly give his life to save the life of a President that he believed would save many lives. But would you die taking a bullet for the enemy soldier who has killed your friend? Would you die for the one who hates you and wants nothing more than to rob and kill you? This is what Christ has done and more. We can never exaggerate too much the gap between Christ's worth and ours, Christ's holiness and ours, and by measuring that gap we now have a glimpse of the size of God's love towards the church.

Christian if you want to know God's love here it is. While you were putrid, vile, an enemy in nature and action He gave His most precious Son in exchange for you. His pain is a pain that is louder than yours. Here is a proof that speaks louder than any pain you can experience—Christ suffering the wrath of God in the place of His church. When your mind lists in the direction of thinking, 'life is so full of heartache and pain, God cannot love me if I am suffering so much.' Shout it down with this one thought, 'Christ has died.' Do not allow any thought to have your attention more than the one it cost God the most to communicate, 'God loves you.' When pain is shouting at you that God does not love you, look at the cross and shout back with all your might, 'God loves me!' When the devil comes to you and tries to shout you down that you are not a child of God, God cannot love you after such a terrible sin, shout back, 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died---more than that, who was raised---who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8:30-39).