

Appreciating the Love of God

Romans 5: 8

“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”.

Introduction

1. To speak of the love of God might seem to be a bit of a truism or a cliché. We talk quite glibly at times about the love of God. It is something of which we know; we read of it frequently; hear it in sermons and believe it to be real. Yet, I think we are in danger of losing sight of the enormity of God’s love. It must not become a mere truism or platitude, something we take for granted. Yet, when we turn to the NT we find that this subject of the *“love of God”* is Paul’s passionate interest. The love of God is always at the basis of what Paul has to teach. Did you know that Paul has more to say about the love of God than John in his Gospel writing? It is true to say that the teaching, *“God is love”*, is a truth that most religions of the world have not attained. It is a significant unique teaching of Christianity. P. T. Forsyth speaking of the holiness of God said, *“The holiness of God is not an attribute of God; it is the whole God Himself as holy”*. We could equally say that *“the love of God is not an attribute of God; it is the whole God Himself as love”*. Therefore, it is essential that we spend some time learning more about the love of God.
2. In our desire to define the love of God we must not sink into sentimentality. The meaning of the word *“love”* needs to be constantly re-defined as we become progressively influenced by the world through its romantic stories and pop songs. The world sees *“love”* as some kind of general benevolence and confuses it with sentimentality which is only interested in achieving happiness. Hence when they talk of the *“love of God”* it is often taken to mean that God is merely concerned with personal happiness, the *“feel good”* factor.
3. Indeed, the real meaning and significance of the love of God can only truly be found in the cross. Although the New English Bible is not often used its rendering of Romans 5:8 is very useful. It reads like this, *“Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God’s own proof of His love towards us”*. In the cross God has given us evidential *“proof”* of His love. You notice in our text that it portrays God Himself defining the meaning of love, *“God demonstrates His love”*. It is not Paul speculating and giving us his own version. God alone is the One who can truly define, describe, classify and demonstrate the meaning of His love towards us. The love of God can never be discovered by searching; it is something that has to be revealed to us. God has to take the initiative and *“commend His love towards us”*. The Greek is even more explicit, *“God demonstrates His own love in respect of us”* (my translation).
4. If it was not for the cross we would never know about the true meaning of the love of God. Indeed, we would never have known the true meaning of love. Therefore, when we want to find a true definition of love, we do not turn to the dictionary; rather we turn to the cross of Christ.
5. When the world wants to talk about God in the light of natural tragedies and the tyrannies of evil we see around us, it finds it impossible to speak of a God who loves. Yet, the love of God is just as objective and historical as the evidence which seems to deny it. Bethlehem’s manger and Calvary’s cross

are objective realities demonstrating that God is a God of love. Someone once put it like this, "*The cross is a window opened into the very heart of God*". If we want to know something of the inner workings of God, we only have to consider the cross. If we want to know what it means when we read that "*God is love*", we only have to look at the cross.

6. We might, of course, ask why is it important that we should need to know much about the love of God for us. Does it really matter? Is it not something that we can speak about and then put on the back-burner? It is like a married couple were one asks the other, "*Do you love me*" and the somewhat indifferent answer comes back, "*Of course I love you; you know I love you*". It is where this love in relationships is sometimes taken as read; believed; accepted; taken for granted, but not spoken about or expressed.
7. However, throughout the NT we are constantly reminded of the love God has for us. In fact John puts it like this, "*So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us*" (1 John 4:16). John uses two important verbs here. "*We have come to know*" the love of God. He then adds, "*and to believe*" the love God has for us. Knowing and believing are important. Knowing might be seen as an acceptance of the teaching itself; but believing might be seen as something to do with the heart; a deep recognition and acknowledgement of God's love, and something that is burned into the heart.
8. As we come to view Romans 5:8 we find that it must be considered in its own context because the verse begins with "*But...*" Meaning that it is part of all that is written before. In fact, as look at the whole chapter it contains repeated link words, "*for..therefore*", that take us back to the beginning of the whole epistle.
9. It is important that we grasp the over-all theme in this part of Romans. Many mistakes in exposition are made because an over-view of the passage is ignored and the writer's theme and purpose is lost. What is Paul seeking to establish in chapter 5 of Romans? For the answer we need to turn to the beginning of the letter.
10. We have to begin with chapter 1:16 where Paul gives us a clue about what he is writing. In that verse he states, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*". His theme is the Gospel. This theme runs through from this verse at least until the end of chapter 8 – possibly omitting chapters 6, 7 which are parenthesis dealing with specific issues that have arisen.
11. This means that chapters 1:16 – 4:25 are devoted to explaining the Gospel itself. He starts with sin (1:18-3:20), then leads on to the atonement (3:21-31); justification (4:1-25). So what is he addressing in chapters 5 and 8? The subject is that of assurance of salvation. It is all about how we can know that we are genuinely the children of God.
12. How then does Paul develop his theme of assurance in chapter 5? First, in verses 1-2 he states the facts that result from justification (his subject in chapter 4). From justification three main blessings arise. The first is "*peace with God*". This is followed by having access into "*this grace in which we*

stand". Finally, we "*rejoice in hope of the glory of God*". These are the three main factors that constitute our salvation and all issue from justification.

13. If we truly understood and believed the teaching in these two verses about the significance of being justified through faith, we would never have cause to doubt our salvation. His aim is to teach us the absolute finality and fullness of our salvation flowing from justification.
14. At this point he seems to pause whilst he addresses, perhaps, an objection raised by one of his readers. Someone will say, "*but what about the Christian life, sanctification, surely I can lose my salvation?*" The answer is simple. What happens in the Christian life does not directly affect our salvation. But, if one wants to look at the Christian life and understand its meaning with all its struggles and experiences, Paul addresses this in verses 3-5. His point, of course, is to show that even our experiences in the Christian life cannot rob us of our final salvation.
15. However, when he comes to verse 6 he is not continuing with the previous theme of the Christian life. He is now returning to his subject in verses 1-2, Christian assurance based on our salvation in Christ. He started by talking of the fruits of justification, now he turns his attention to the atonement – subject dealt with in detail in chapter 3:21-31.
16. Let me put it like this. If the doctrine of justification – taught in chapter 4 – gives me this assurance, what can the doctrine of the atonement give me in terms of my assurance? So, in verses 6-11 this is what Paul is addressing. His point is to show us how our salvation is so unshakable. It is based, here in this section, on the cross of Christ and what that means and its significance. Again, if we could grasp the teaching that Paul is giving in these six verses we would be in no doubt about the validity, security and soundness of our salvation. It is impossible to lose our salvation and it is all based on this teaching; namely the doctrine of the cross.
17. I suggest that the key verse in this section is verse 8 which tells us about the "*love of God*". The key to our assurance lies in knowing and believing the love of God. This was what we saw in 1 John 4:16. If 1 John was also written with a view to providing us with assurance of salvation, then knowing and believing the love God has for us is essential.
18. As we progress through this teaching I want to put to you two questions. I will remind you of them at the conclusion of each section and then again in my final conclusion. It may be that they are rhetorical questions which leave us with greatly increased admiration for the love of God.
19. The first is this; as we look at the atonement we want to ask, "*What sort of God does this kind of thing?*"
20. The second; as we view the atonement, is this, "*If God is capable of doing this, what else is He capable of?*"

1. Appreciating the love of God: God's own love for us

- 1:1 Right from the outset we are shown that we are not dealing with our love for God but His love for us. You do not get your assurance from measuring your love for God. The primary means of assurance is found within an objective

view of the cross. It is about looking away from ourselves to God; getting a view of the wonder of His love for us. The need for us to get our doctrine right cannot be over emphasised. Much of our trouble as Christians is due to our failure to understand the teaching set before us in the scriptures. These things were written for our learning. God has ordained the written pages for our comfort, consolation and assurance.

1:2 I fear that sometimes we spend more time looking at the Imperatives of Scripture but not enough time considering the Indicates of scripture. Whilst learning about what we should be like and act is important, the NT would turn our attention to the Indicates; i.e., statements of facts about our salvation. It seems as if Paul considers this essential to our assurance. He does not introduce any imperatives in Romans until he gets to chapter 6:11. This means he has spent five and a half chapters giving us Indicatives after Indicatives; truth piled on top or more truth; teaching and more teaching. So, here in chapter 5 we are looking at Indicatives. Here we will find our encouragement and comfort in assurance of salvation.

1:3 Paul uses an interesting word here in verse 8 which is rendered by the NIV as “*demonstrates*”. The AV has “*commends*”. The Greek can be translated, “*exhibit; demonstrate; prove; introduce; present*”. The NEB has “*prove*”. The concept here seems to be that God is in the process, through the death of Christ, of showing and displaying His love. If we want to know anything about the love of God we have to look at the atonement. Here the love of God reaches its height, its climax. Nothing more than the cross could reveal the full quality of the love of God.

1:4 Indeed, it is the love of God that is the very source of our salvation. It is not found in our love for God, or anything that we can do. It is found in the initiative of God. God so loved the world that He chose to send His Son. In the love of God we have the ultimate ground, fountain head and cause of our salvation. If we want to find out why God initiated this salvation rescue project, we have only one answer; because He loved us.

1:5 Romans 5:8 shows us that salvation starts with God. It is all about what God has done. It is not what I have done or could achieve. It is solely because of Him. We have nothing to claim. Assurance is to be found by looking to Him. He started it all. Salvation is the Project of God. He designed it; He initiated it; He implemented it; He proceeded with it; He has achieved it. We read something like this in Romans 11:36, “*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen*”. Salvation came from Him; worked efficiently because of Him and will eventually glorify Him. It is about God from start to finish. Can you hear the words of Phil 1:6 “*He who began a good work in you will finish it at the day of Christ Jesus*”? Or, “*God so loved the world that He....*” (John 3:16). Again, “*You are His workmanship*” (Eph 2:10). If salvation was our doing; the results of our “*workmanship*” there would be no assurance.

1:6 It was all motivated by love. As Christopher Wright puts it, this God loves to love. “*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*”.

1:7 I then ask: “*What sort of God does this kind of thing?*”. “*If God is capable of doing this, what else is He capable of?*”

2. Appreciating the love of God: The objects of His love

- 2:1 To really appreciate the love of God we have to consider the condition and state of those who were and are the objects of His love. Note how men and women are described by four very negative words in verses 6-10. We, the objects of God's love, were "*weak*" (6); "*ungodly*" (6); "*sinner*s" (8); "*enemies*" (10). What is it that makes the love of God so outstanding? It is the state and condition of those who constituted the objects of His love.
- 2:2 The term "*weak*" (6) means that we were powerless; unable to do anything to meet the demands of a Holy God or please Him. In chapter 8:7-8 Paul expands on this concept of human weakness by saying "*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*" Notice the twice mentioned "*cannot*". It is not just that men and women choose not to submit to God's law they simply cannot; they do not have the ability to submit. The man or woman outside of Christ "*cannot*" submit to the Law of God. Such a person also "*cannot*" please God. This has to be epitome of human weakness. There is nothing a person can do to win or gain their salvation, or make themselves right with God, or address the issue of their sin which earns them condemnation. Such people are the objects of God's love.
- 2:3 The second term "*ungodly*" (6) shows a gradual progression intensifying the impoverished state of humankind. It is a term which means failing to give God the glory due to His name. It means a deliberate turning away from God; shaking the fist in the face of God and saying, "*we will not have this God to reign over us*". This is blatant rejection of God; it is man in revolt. People are anti-God. There is no "*fear of God before their eyes*". They will not even entertain thoughts of God. If they are religious and attend a place of worship it is not to worship the God of the bible, rather it is a God of their own making. Even religious people are ungodly. Such are the objects of God's love.
- 2:4 Thirdly, we have "*sinner*s" (8). For us this is a rather commonly used term in our evangelical jargon. In NT days it may have referred to persons who were irreligious in the sense of having no concern for observing the details of the Law. Such people were often treated as social outcasts. It was commonly used specifically, of men stained with certain definite vices or crimes, e. g. the tax-gatherers: Luke 15:2; 18:13; 19:7; hence, the combination. Prostitutes were called "*sinner*s".
- 2:5 Before we jump to the wrong conclusion thinking that we – the upright and middle class - could not possibly be included, notice how Paul includes himself, "*we were still sinners*". Here is Paul, the ex-Pharisee who once regarded himself as "*under the law blameless*" (Phil 3:6) classifying himself as a "*sinner*". Indeed, everyone born of Adam is born into this world already constituted as a "*sinner*"; "*For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners*" (Rom 5:19). Such were the objects of God's love.
- 2:6 Fourthly, "*enemies*" (10). Can you see the progression here? We have reached the climax in Paul's description of those who are the objects of God's love. He has moved on from describing men and women as "*weak*", to being "*ungodly*", to being "*sinner*s". All this must bring us to the point where we are portrayed as being "*enemies*" of God, and God as our "*enemy*". There is hostility between us and God; war is declared; the battle lines are drawn.

- 2:7 It is in chapter 8:7 that Paul repeats this concept, *“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot”*. There is open defiance from our end towards God. As in the last European war we all said that we would not be ruled by Hitler; we attacked him and the Third Reich; we opposed him; we sought to topple him. Hitler was our enemy and we were his enemies. Such is man's natural approach to God. He is to be hated; despised and opposed.
- 2:8 But what about God's approach to us? Can we be described as being the enemies of God; does God look upon fallen humankind as His enemies? The answer is found in a word used by Paul in Romans six times between chapter 1 and chapter 5. It is the word, *“wrath”*. Paul began his teaching with this term in 1:18, he used it twice in 2:5, once in 2:8, then again in 4:15 and then, for our purposes, finally in 5:9.
- 2:9 Wrath is God's hostility against sinners. The wrath of God, namely His holy recoil against sin, is a natural response in the Godhead, bringing judgement and condemnation on the *weak, ungodly, sinners and enemies*. Of course there is a difficulty here. How can we speak of God loving us when we are enemies of God and God is our enemy? John Calvin said, *“He loved us even when He hated us”*. In wrath He remembered mercy. Such were the objects of God's love.
- 2:10 All this, of course, is expanded by Paul in Romans 1:18 – 3:18. He said there, *“the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness”*. The following chapters explain this in more details but bring it to this dreadful conclusion in 3:10-18. Such are the objects of God's love.
- 2:10 How can a holy God love such people and send His Son to die for such people? This seems to be something that even causes Paul to be surprised. Look at what he writes in Rom 5:7 where he compares the love of God demonstrated in the atonement with the love that humans show towards one another. He says, *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die”*. Our history has shown many occasions when selfless individuals have given their lives to save those of others. We often hear about this in relation to the two great wars where many died on the battle fields for the sake of their countrymen. They felt that their fellow human beings were good enough to die for.
- 2:11 But this cannot be compared to the love that God has shown towards us. God does not send His Son to die for *“good”* people. On the contrary, Christ died for the *“weak...ungodly...sinners....enemies”*. This love of God is outstanding. These were/are the objects of God's love. You see the way to measure the depth of the love of God is to look at the deplorable condition of the people whom He loved.
- 2:12 *“What sort of God does this kind of thing?”. “If God is capable of doing this, what else is He capable of?”*

3. Appreciating the love of God: Christ died for us

- 3:1 Again this is another well used phrase. How often do we talk about the death of Christ, but in a way that seems to have lost its significance. How often have we sat at the Communion Table and gone through the motions but somehow being untouched. Is it because we have talked; heard preached; sang about the death of Christ so often that it has become mere evangelical words? What exactly is meant by the words in Romans 5:8 "*Christ died for us*"? Notice that within the space of five verses Paul mentions the death of Christ three times.
- 3:2 To appreciate the significance of the cross we have to consider the doctrine of the Trinity. What do we know about the doctrine of the Trinity? Do we understand the teaching on the Trinity? Do we want to understand this complex doctrine? Does it matter? Yes, it does matter; yes we need to understand it; yes it is important. Why?
- 3:3 The doctrine of the Trinity is important for us to come to understand and appreciate the love of God in the death of Christ. We will not fully grasp the enormity of the cross until we have grasped the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- 3:4 What is the doctrine of the Trinity? In simple terms it can be spelt out like this, "*There is One God comprising three individual Persons*". Two apparently contradictory issues emerge here. First, there is only One God. We do not teach that there are three gods. Second, within this One God there are three distinct, separate Persons. The Three in One.
- 3:5 It is possible that we sometimes fall into the trap of thinking there are three gods. We speak of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Much thought is given to their individual work and operations in the realm of salvation. This is fine. But, we are in danger of losing the oneness of God; the unity of God and make the mistake of thinking – unconsciously – of the Persons separately and not as one single Godhead.
- 3:6 You cannot separate the Trinity. Where One Person is present the other two are also present. The Trinity operate together as a unit. For example, Creation is the work of God (Genesis 1), but Jesus also is said to be the creator (John 1:3) with the Holy Spirit playing an active part. Furthermore, we may say that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. Yes, but so does the Father and Son. Jesus said, "*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 14:23). Sometimes we read of God the Father raising Jesus from the dead, then we read of Jesus saying, "*I lay down my life that I may take it up again*" (John 10:17), but so does the Holy take a part in the resurrection (Rom 1:4).
- 3:7 How does all this affect the death of Christ? When we speak of Jesus dying, we must also speak about God dying. Luther came out with an amazing statement, he spoke of, "*The Crucified God*". Commenting on the cry of Jesus on the cross, the cry of dereliction "*My God, my God why have you abandoned me?*", Luther said, "*God abandoned by God; how can this be?*" Another writer put it this way, "*Who is God in the cross of the Christ who is abandoned by God?*"
- 3:8 What was Luther saying? Without being accused of Patripassianism (4th century heresy that put the Father on the cross), Luther was pointing out that

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19). God was not outside of the cross. He too was suffering – although differently - for Christ Himself is God. Luther was right to say, “The crucified God”. The Holy Spirit also played a valid part in the cross; Hebrews 9:14 reads, “Christ...through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God”.

- 3:9 In the 18th century a famous hymn writer, Charles Wesley wrote two very significant hymns. The first we sing at Christmas, *“Hark the herald Angels sing...”* One verse goes like this, *“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity”*. What is he saying? He is showing that Jesus is the God/Man. He is truly God veiled in flesh; Very God of Very God; in Him we see the Godhead. The reality is that He is God in every sense of the word – real man, but also real God. He had grasped the doctrine of the Trinity in relation to the Incarnation. Wesley was then preparing us for another hymn that we would sing at Easter.
- 3:10 In the second hymn he wrote, *“And can it be...”*. The first verse goes on to read like this, *“Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God shouldst die for me”*. There it is! *“That thou my God shouldst die for me”*. He had an understanding of the cross which recognised the doctrine of the Trinity. On the cross what do you see? You see Jesus – but whom do you really see? *“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see”*. This is what was happening on the cross. Not a man dying; but Jesus the God/Man. As Luther would put it, *“The crucified God”*.
- 3:11 But let us take it even further. Here is God, the Holy Law giver; the One who said that the soul that sins shall die; that has pronounced judgement and condemnation on the sinner; who pours wrath on the ungodly. What is He doing at the cross? He is subjecting Himself to His own penalty; He has become sin (2 Cor 5:21) taking the place of sinners and then taking upon Himself the full weight of His own broken law with all of its curse (Gal 3:13) – His own pronounced judgement and wrath. God was in Christ; veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Thou my God shouldst die for me. The crucified God.
- 3:11 This is what Paul means when he says, *“God demonstrated His love for us in that while were.....Christ died for...the weak...ungodly...sinners...enemies”*. Leon Morris said, *“We would not know the reckless, sacrificial love of God were it not for what is revealed in the cross”*.

Conclusion

1. I want to conclude simply with those two questions with which I began and have repeated throughout, *“What sort of God does this kind of thing?”*. *“If God is capable of doing this, what else is He capable of?”*
2. I said they were rhetorical questions, but they are worthy of our meditation. If the cross opens up a window into the heart of God, what does the cross really tell us about this amazing God? What does it tell us about the quality and depth of His love? Does it not show, as Paul will expand on this in the latter half of chapter 8, that such love will never let us go? Surely, in the light of this demonstration of God’s own love for us we have nothing to fear about our salvation. There is no possibility that anything in this world or universe that can separate us from the love of God. His love is too strong. I have to keep on asking this question, *“What sort of God is He? What kind of God does this sort of thing?”*

3. But think now about this - *“If God is capable of doing this, what else is He capable of?” “If God is capable of the cross what does this teach us about else He can do?”* It is this that Paul is arguing in Rom 5:10 *“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”*. Think about it. Look at the quality of God’s love towards us *“when we were enemies”* and Christ died for us. But now that we are no longer enemies – *“how much more”* – is His love bound towards us now that we are *“reconciled”* and are *“in His life”*, i.e., united with Christ. He is saying the same thing in Rom 8:32 *“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?”* If He has done the greater thing – given His Son as your substitute – it is obvious that He will do the lesser thing.
4. You have no cause to fear that God will leave you or desert you. You are no longer an enemy of God; you are a friend of God. It is Paul’s aim in this chapter that his readers know how to rejoice in their salvation free from any anxieties that they might lose their salvation. The only way they can do this is to understand and grasp the greatness of God’s love for them. He has already told them in verse 5 of this chapter that the Holy Spirit is able to subjectively convince them of God’s love, *“God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”*. Now he wants them to understand the teaching and doctrine that will also convince them, but this time objectively.
5. I have to leave you with this words, *“God demonstrates, proves his love for us...”* Can you see it? Can you appreciate it? Finally, it must be pointed out that the Greek word translated *“demonstrates”* is in the present tense. This means that Paul is really saying that this love of God is always on view; always being demonstrated as long as the cross is being surveyed.

Richard Lee. June 2012