

Rich Nathan
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God's Empowering Presence
Romans 5:5-8

How I Know That God Loves Me

This morning I am going to begin a new series on the Holy Spirit. Many of you know that over the course of the summer we have been emphasizing evangelism and the particular book that we were looking at as I was teaching on evangelism and outreach was the book of Romans. We came to a text a few weeks ago that I didn't teach on; I said I was going to and I am going to pick up with that text today. But this text sort of launches us in a fresh direction.

The direction is that of the consideration of the work of the Holy Spirit. I haven't actually taught on the Holy Spirit here at church for some time. I continually want, indeed, I long for a church that is running on all cylinders. I have never wanted to be a church that is simply a one instrument orchestra. Well, that church over there is simply known for good preaching or that church over there is known for its worship or that church is very good at counseling families. I have always wanted to do the whole Bible. I believe that the whole Bible is the blueprint for church life.

That is what we are trying to do here at the Vineyard—the whole thing, to have the engine work on all cylinders. So, it is my desire as the pastor here to see God produce a church that is functioning well in all areas. A church in which we are continually seeing new people come to know Jesus and giving their lives to Christ and we are watching people grow up in Christ so we are seeing not only evangelism, but also discipleship and also worship and also compassion ministries to the sick and the poor and

those in the inner city. And we are seeing the expression of church life flowing out toward the world in world missions.

We are not just concerned about adults, but we are concerned about children and families and singles, a church that works on all cylinders.

Well, let's take a look at today's text as we move into a consideration of the work of the Holy Spirit. In future weeks I am going to pick up on such subjects as speaking in tongues and the spiritual gifts and the Spirit's power in assisting us to break life-controlling habits.

Today, we are going to move back into Romans 5. Paul is listing the benefits of being a saved person. And so he writes:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. [And then he makes an assertion.] And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”

We boast as Christians; we exalt in, we are thrilled by the prospect that one day we are going to see God in all of his glory. But not only that, we will also share in God's glory. We, ourselves, who are Christians and linked to Christ will be transformed and changed into the likeness of the Son of God. We rejoice in that. It fills us with confidence.

But not only so, we not only rejoice in pie in the sky when we die by and by, we also rejoice in our present sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance and perseverance produces character and character, hope. And here is the verse that we are going to look at today:

“And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.”

How is it that we can presently rejoice in our sufferings? Let me give you a little word picture to illustrate what life is currently like. Let me give you an idea of what is happening in the world right now. I have used this illustration on a number of occasions. I want you to picture a suspension bridge with two huge towers. A bridge that looks like the Golden Gate Bridge or the Verazzano Bridge—one of those huge suspension bridges with two massive steel towers.

Now the one steel tower represents the first coming of Jesus Christ when God came as a man into this world. He was born of the Virgin Mary. He lay in a manger as a baby. He grew up, suffered for our sins. He died on the cross and was resurrected from the dead. The first steel tower represents the first coming of Christ.

That second steel tower off in the distance represents the second coming of Christ when Christ will return again in glory and we will be totally changed; when he puts an end to world history and to this present evil age.

Well, we live, as it were, between the two towers—between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming. We experience many of the blessings and benefits that have been brought into this world by the first coming of Christ. Living between the towers, we can look back at the first coming and the cross and experience the forgiveness of sins. We can look back at Jesus’ first coming and realize that at his first coming, he brought a little piece of eternity, a little piece of the kingdom of God into this age.

But we have not yet experienced the fullness that we will one day get from the second coming. Many people describe where we live right now as caught between the ages. We live at a time of the already of the first coming and the not yet of the second

coming. We have great blessings flowing from the first coming of Christ, and yet we know that there is still tremendous suffering in this age. And Paul is talking about that in verse 3 when he says, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings...”

Now, tell me, in living between those two towers, in living at this present moment in 1995 when we are not yet fully in the kingdom, all of our problems have not yet disappeared, how can we rejoice in suffering? What keeps the bridge up? Why doesn't the bridge that we are standing on just collapse and send us tumbling to the bottom of the sea with our problems?

Some of you, right now, are in the midst of a massive custody battle with an ex spouse. Or you are continually frustrated and in conflict with an ex spouse. Some of you are frustrated at work. You are working in a really difficult situation with a very, very unpleasant group of people around you or you are just stretched to your limit in terms of how much work you can handle and your employer, your boss, just keeps pouring on the heat. Maybe the language at your job is just really getting to you or you are underpaid and under appreciated. Some of you are out of work. And you don't know how you are going to make ends meet.

And then there are those of you who have just experienced a significant life crisis. Maybe you are sick. You have some kind of disease. A family member has just passed away—a mother, a father, a grandparent, a friend. Some of you are going through life crisis.

I know every Sunday as we gather as a church, there are people sitting next to you, all around you, who are in pain. And I know that every time I get up to speak there are people here who are in pain.

Why should we who are Christians, who have given control of our lives over to Jesus Christ, why should we be able to say, of all people, we rejoice in our sufferings? And then Paul goes on and says, “And this hope that we have will not disappoint us.” The hope that is in our hearts is not a fantasy. We are not just dreaming, just wishing on a star, just filling ourselves with positive thinking and mantras. Put on a happy face, a stiff upper lip.

Why is it that you, who are a Christian, should never give way to despair? Why should you, as a Christian, never throw in the towel? If you are a follower of Jesus, you should never say, “I can’t handle this anymore” and give into suicidal thoughts. You know, friends, Christians have given into suicidal thoughts. That may shock you, but some don’t know or haven’t experienced what we are looking at here in Romans 5:5 – a hope that never disappoints, an ability to rejoice in the midst of suffering. Some have not ever captured that.

Other Christians throw in the towel in other ways. They give up on their marriages and walk away, just throw in the towel. I have tried. I’ve tried. I’ve tried, it is not working, forget it. I can’t rejoice.

Others throw in the towel in terms of their faith. It is obvious that God is not going to help me. They walk away from the church bitter and broken.

Tell me, friend, what is it that keeps the bridge that we are living on from collapsing into the water? Paul tells us. The cables that hold the suspension bridge up is a knowledge of God’s love. Verse 5, the reason why hope is not a fantasy to those of us who are followers of Christ, the reason why it is not just positive thinking and wish fulfillment as we are going through difficulty is because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.

You know what my desire is for those of you who are in pain? As a pastor, I want you to be able to say whatever you are going through, whatever you will ever go through, I want you to be able to say, “I don’t understand this present situation. I don’t understand why my marriage has to be so tough and this other person’s marriage is so good. I don’t understand why I have to come down with this illness or someone I love has come down with this illness. I don’t understand why my finances must always be so uncertain. Indeed, I may never know why life has been so hard. The Bible says we know in part in 1 Corinthians 13. I may never know until I come into the kingdom why I needed to suffer so. But I do know this. I know that God loves me.”

Whatever you are going through right now, you need to be able to say, as a Christian, “I know that God loves me.” You see, the only anchor for the soul, the only cables that keep the bridge up between the two comings of Christ, is the love of God, and a sure knowledge of the love of God.

What else, other than God’s love, can you hang your life on? What else will never disappoint you? Your marriage? I can immediately get hands raised, if we were so inclined to do, all over this congregation of people who went into their marriages with the highest hopes, just the way you went into your marriage, if you are married and the way some singles are planning to go into their marriages—they went into their marriages with the highest hopes, believing that this would secure them. And somewhere along the line, they were sadly disappointed. Some of you actually got betrayed. You experienced the unfaithfulness of your spouse who promised you, vowed to you, that they would keep only unto you so long as you both shall live, and then they lied.

No one who is ever betrayed plans on being betrayed or believes that they are going to be betrayed. That is why it is such a shock.

What is it that we are going to hang our lives and our hopes on? Your job? Or the notion that America will find its moral bearings again in an age where anything goes? That we will rediscover our moral rooting? There are no stronger cables to hang your life on, nothing else that will never disappoint other than the love of God.

I want you to be able to say with complete confidence, utter certainty, here is the anchor for my soul: I know God loves me. I have called today's talk, the first in this series on the Holy Spirit, "How I Know That God Loves Me".

Let's pray.

As I said, I am calling this talk "How I Know That God Loves Me" and this is the first in a series of talks on the Holy Spirit. You might be a little surprised. Why, Rich, are you talking about the Holy Spirit in a talk on God's love?

Well, one of the reasons I am talking about the Holy Spirit is because Paul does here in this text in verse 5. He says: "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit..." In the Bible, we often see this link-up between the Holy Spirit and our own understanding and experience of love. For example, Paul writes in Galatians 5: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness." When the Holy Spirit comes into one's life, the first thing that will happen is that love will be produced.

We see this connection between the Holy Spirit and love in 2 Timothy where Paul writes again: "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and self-discipline." Instead of timidity, God has given us a spirit of love.

What you see in the Bible is this wonderful connection between the Holy Spirit and God's love. And it is even indicated by Paul's choice of words here in Romans 5:5 when he speaks of love being poured out into our hearts. This is not a common

expression in the Bible, “poured out”. In fact, there is only a couple of usages in the scriptures of “poured out”. One is in reference to the blood of Jesus that the Bible says was “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” And the other is in reference to the Holy Spirit. I think this passage is sort of a harkening back to Joel’s prophecy in Joel 2:28 when the Old Testament prophet Joel, prophesying about Pentecost, says: “And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy and your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions. Even among my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

The idea is really very simple. In the Apostle Paul’s mind the experience of love could not be thought of apart from the experience of the Spirit. And if love was to be poured out in our hearts that was really another way of speaking about the Holy Spirit being poured out in our hearts. So what we are going to find as we go through this is that you don’t have the capacity to say, “I know God loves me in the midst of my suffering or in the midst of pain, I know that God loves me” apart from some experience of the Holy Spirit. Paul links these two thoughts up real closely. He is suggesting to us, friends, and I am going to work this out, but I want you to hear this at the front end, he is suggesting to us that knowing that God loves me is not just a deduction drawn from certain acts of God. It is not just a deduction drawn from the Word of God. Part of the cable that holds the bridge up is an internal work of the Holy Spirit. He is saying in essence, “I know God loves me in part because of the internal work of the Spirit in my life.” Anything short of that will leave you with an incomplete knowledge of the love of God for you.

You may ask, “Rich, why are you doing a series on the Holy Spirit? Why take time and press this out week by week?”

I will tell you my answer. It is real simple. I have come to the conclusion that a good portion of the Christian church is Trinitarian in name only. You know the Christian name for God is “Trinity”. We believe in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God in three persons, blessed Trinity. The Christian name for God is Trinity.

Yet, while all Christians must be doctrinally committed to a Trinitarian view, to the belief of God in three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, yet, in practice many Christians are binatarians. They believe in God as Father and God as Son, but the Holy Spirit, in practice, is just a gray blur.

In fact, there is a descending order of understanding and relationship and connection to the persons of the Godhead, at least what I have observed in people’s relationship with God. The average Christian can relate to Jesus. He is concrete. He is God made visible, after all. And so the average Christian can connect with baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas morning. Yes, yes, that is real.

And they can connect with Jesus standing up in the boat and speaking to the storm and multiplying loaves. They can connect with Jesus hanging on the cross, and with being raised from the dead. The average Christian connects best with God the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, when it comes to God the Father, the average Christian has a little more problem connecting and we will talk about that in some future weeks. But people struggle with the Fatherhood of God for a lot of reasons including their own experience of being fathered, their own earthly fathers and have struggled there in those relationships. And so many Christians’ connection with God being their Father is a little less concrete than with God the Son, Jesus.

And when it comes to the Holy Spirit, the connection is almost entirely broken. As I said, for many Christians, for many of you perhaps, the Holy Spirit is a gray blur. If many Christians were asked, “What is your relationship to the Holy Spirit?” they would say, like the Ephesian believers in Acts 19, “I didn’t even know there was a Holy Spirit”. Or practically for me, there is very little in my Christian life that I relate to the Holy Spirit through.

Someone was recently telling me that in a group he was leading, a fellow came up to him and said, “I am tired of being in a group that talks so much about the Holy Spirit. I am going to go to a Christian group that doesn’t talk about the Holy Spirit at all.” God, in this person’s mind, is not a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the three persons of God being equal in power and dignity, God is a Binary: Father and Son.

And not only is a large section of the church binatarian, but in many portions of the church there is an extraordinary fear of talking about the Holy Spirit because to talk about the Holy Spirit is talk about experience. And whole portions of the Christian church have become experience phobic. The moment someone begins to describe an experience they had with the Holy Spirit, the person is immediately suspect. Or might be challenged or chastised after a testimony about the Holy Spirit. Oh sister, that is experiential. That is subjective as if experience and subjectivity is a very dangerous thing. Oh, watch out. Watch out, we are talking about nitroglycerin now. We don’t want to get too close. Experience and subjectivity will blow up in your face. Feelings are to be totally avoided for mature Christians.

Friends, what I hope to demonstrate through this series on the Holy Spirit is that the Bible writers knew absolutely nothing about non-experiential Christianity. Christianity that wasn’t felt would have been absolutely nonsense to the writers of the

New Testament and, especially, to the apostle Paul. He wouldn't have known what you were talking about. To hear people talk about not experiencing the Holy Spirit and yet they are Christians. I can imagine the apostle Paul scratching his head and saying, "Now, run that by me again. You have received the Holy Spirit without feeling God's presence? You are talking about joy that doesn't make you feel glad inside? Or peace that doesn't give you a feeling of serenity in your soul? Now, what is your understanding of rivers of life flowing up from your inner being except something that is inwardly experienced?"

I can imagine the apostle Paul listening to some modern pastor or elder or reading some book that critiques experiential religion and responding with "you are talking about a different gospel. You are talking about a faith that is unlike the faith that I wrote about in my epistles."

Understand, brothers and sisters, that the Holy Spirit is God experienced presence. God's felt presence. The presence of God can always be felt according to the Bible writers. And there is never a question in the Bible of when God shows up, people sitting around saying, "Well, I really don't know if God showed up or not." I don't know if God is really behind the curtain in the holy of holies, after all, who can tell? Or if God came into the temple. Or is that God up there on top of Mt. Sinai after all? You know, these things are so mysterious and you just have to take it by faith. You really don't know by experience if that is God up there with Elijah on top of Mt. Carmel or God at Jesus' baptism. You just deduce that from certain principles of doctrine and you work it out in your mind. Just take it by faith.

There is a massive study of Paul's letters that was just completed by one of the foremost New Testament scholars named Gordon Fee. He is a New Testament scholar of the first rank. Here is what Gordon Fee says about the Holy Spirit:

“The Holy Spirit in Paul’s writing was always thought of in terms of the personal presence of God. The Spirit is God’s way of being present. Whatever else the Holy Spirit was for the apostle Paul, he was always an experienced reality.”

Whatever else he was, the Holy Spirit is always experienced. Now for this series, I have borrowed Gordon Fee’s book title and I am calling my series, *God’s Empowering Presence*. There was no thought in the New Testament of a Christianity that is not felt and experienced.

Paul in Romans 5:5 is answering the question how can I know that God loves me and a part of his answer is “because I feel love.” Notice the location of the love of God that is poured out. Paul says in Romans 5:5: “...because the love of God is poured out”. Where? In my head? In my mind? Through some sort of doctrinal assertion? The love of God is poured out in our hearts, the deepest part of us, the place of our experience and our feelings.

You will find, throughout the Bible, that the place of the Holy Spirit’s activity is chiefly in the heart. What we are going to try to do through this series is help you connect up your head, what you have been taught, what you have believed, your doctrine, with your heart, what your experiencing, what you feel. To feel the Holy Spirit’s presence is to feel God’s love.

How did it ever come to be with all the passages that are highly experiential in the New Testament, passages like the one we are looking at, the Spirit of God poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit; or a passage like Romans 8 that we will look at next week on the witness of the Holy Spirit, where the apostle Paul says that you didn’t receive a Spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of Sonship and by

him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit, himself, testifies with our Spirit that we are God’s children.

Or John 7:37-38 where Jesus stood up in the temple and said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit that those who believed in him were later to receive.” How did it ever come to be that Christians could believe that normal Christianity was not felt, was not experienced, and that experiences with the Spirit are to be treated with suspicion?

I believe that there is really only one answer. The enemy of our souls would very much like us to know nothing of the power of the Spirit to deal with him. The enemy of our souls, Satan, would like nothing better than for us to know nothing of a felt experience of God’s love. The enemy of our souls, Satan, would like nothing better than for God’s children to walk around weak and powerless to do deliverances, to deal with all the havoc and pain that Satan sows in this world.

And at a time when everyone in the country is running around looking for experiences of spiritual reality, the 90’s has seen an explosion of spiritual pursuits. Folks are traveling out to the desert for UFO conventions. People are traveling to Nova Scotia to feel the spiritual vibrations set up in certain parts of Nova Scotia. People are dancing in the light. Pretty soon they are going to be country line dancing in the light. People are talking about out of body experiences and near death experiences. Everywhere you go, angels are giving you advice.

I think that Satan would like nothing better than for people to turn to Christianity and find there a desert of spiritual experience. That Christianity would offer not true experience, healthy experience, biblical experience, but no experience. People looking

for water for their souls would turn to Christianity and find arid words. Words without power. Words without feeling. Words without reality. Just arguments and deductions but no experience.

That is not what the Bible offers. The Bible offers true spiritual experience.

Friends, much of the Christian church are simply living not out of the scriptures, but out of this cultural revolution begun in the 1700's called The Enlightenment. Much of the Christian church has its mind about God informed not by the Bible, not by the Bible writers like Paul, who speaks about the Holy Spirit poured out in your hearts and love poured out in your hearts, but rather out of the enlightenment and thoughts about God that are essentially deistic and rationalistic and naturalistic.

By the 17th and 18th century philosophers came up with this non-biblical notion that God just wound up the universe in creation like a great gigantic clock maker would wind up a clock. God wound up the universe and set it in motion according to certain natural laws and then withdrew his presence. This is what deistic thinking produced.

The Bible never speaks of God stepping back away from creation, not allowing us to feel his presence. But many people have adopted that view. And even those who doctrinally claim that they are not deistic are, in fact, deistic. Deists don't believe that God interacts regularly with his people. They make fun of that idea.

From the Enlightenment, many Christians became rationalists. Reason was exalted to the highest place. Emotions, subjectivity, feelings were viewed with suspicion. Again, the Bible writers don't share those enlightenment prejudices. Bible writers have no problem describing experiences as a valid basis for our faith and our understanding.

How do I know that God loves me? Because I have had this experience of God's love poured in my heart. That is not the only basis, as we will see in a moment, but that is a valid basis according to the apostle Paul.

This fear of experience and this drawing out of perspective from the enlightenment rather than from the Bible informs even some of the best biblical expositors and commentaries on the book of Romans. One of the really great commentaries on Romans, which I have on my shelf, written by a great evangelical writer, a very prominent person in the Christian world today, this man's writing is a model of clarity and lucidity, a very clear thinker. He comes to Romans 5:5 and you know what he says? He says, "I don't deny that some people have experiences that are dramatic, experiences of God's love, but what about all of those who don't? We can't at all suggest that a deep heart-felt experience of God's love is normative for Christians because so many people never feel that. No, we have to deduce God's love from something more certain, from doctrine."

When I read this man's comments on Romans 5:5, I felt like tossing the commentary across the room because I thought to myself: You know, this man betrays his own prejudices, his own biases, by how he comments on the text. Surely, if he came to another text regarding the call of Christians to forgive each other, he would never suggest that because many Christians don't forgive, that that isn't something that we shouldn't urge on the church. He would never say, "Well, because many Christians are racists, we shouldn't urge on the church a non-prejudicial, non-bigoted approach to blacks and browns." He would never say that just because many Christians sleep with their boyfriends or girlfriends that we shouldn't urge on the church the standard of biblical morality taught every where in the Bible, that sex outside of marriage is

absolutely, fundamentally wrong and grieves God and wounds people who engage in that practice. And yet, over and over again, when evangelical writers comment on these experiential portions of the New Testament, they shift the interpretative method and suddenly the standard is not what the Bible says, but the low level of people's experiences.

Well, friends, I believe we should preach what the Bible says. And my job as a pastor is to urge upon you the whole counsel of God and call you to the standard of the Word of God. I realize we fall short of everything. We are not as holy as we ought to be. We are not as unprejudiced as we ought to be. We gossip more than we ought to. We don't live up to the standard of the Bible in almost anything. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't urge that in the church and call people upward.

And so as I look at texts on the Holy Spirit and New Testament religion, what I see is a faith that can be felt. And where experiences of God are a regular and normal part of a Christian's life and walk.

So, let me get back now to my opening question. How I know that God loves me? Well, let's break up the question. I know God loves me because God loves. In fact, the Bible teaches that God is not only a lover, but that God is love. Love is God's very essence. Everything God does is a manifestation of that essence to us. Love is the absolute and everything that God does is in relationship to this absolute.

What I mean, therefore, is all of God's activity is loving. When he executes judgment, it must be loving judgment. When God disciplines, his discipline must be loving. God's activity of healing flows from love. This revelation in the Bible is a loving revelation. The words he speaks to us will come to us as words of love. I know that God loves because God is love.

As Bible writers have reflected on the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, here is how the Saints from the past thought about God being love. They said, see here at the very center of the universe we have God existing in relationship within three persons. From eternity we had loving relationship. God the Father is the lover. God the Son, the beloved. The Holy Spirit, the saints of old said, is the love that the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father. As the Father looks at the Son and says, “I love you”, and as the Son looks back at the Father and says, “I love you”, their love for each other is, in fact, the person of the Holy Spirit. And that love that God has for the Son and that the Son has for the Father is poured out into us.

This idea is hinted at in John 17:26 where Jesus says in his high priestly prayer: “I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and I, myself, may be in them.”

You know how Jesus is in us? He is in us by the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit coming into a believer’s life creates in the believer a love for Jesus, the Father’s own love for Jesus.

I know that God loves because God is love. But I must know that God loves me. Understand that when you are going through suffering, it is not enough to know that God loves humanity in some generic way, that God loves the world in some abstract way. You must know that God loves you. That God has chosen to single you out and set his love on you.

Now, Paul communicates that in this text because Romans 5 over and over again uses the first person personal pronoun “we.” Over and over he says we have been justified through faith. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have

gained access by faith into this grace. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings.

And verse 5: “Hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given to us.”

When I am going through suffering I must know that God loves me. Not the whole world, me! That the letter that God addresses to my life in times of crisis is not written “Dear Occupant”. That God, in the Bible, is not just writing a form letter. That God in the Bible is talking to me.

Do you know that the Bible doesn’t know anything about the love of God that isn’t made personal, that isn’t applied to an individual. It doesn’t select out. God sets his love on individuals and not “occupants” and humanity. Jesus says that he gathers his sheep one by one, calling each by name. John 10:3. God knows you by name because that is what love is all about. It is intimate and personal. See, a Christian is someone for whom the love of God has become personal.

The Saints in the past used to say that if you were the only one on earth who was ever created, God would have sent his Son to die for you. He would have gone to all the trouble of sending his Son for you alone. It is not just that he would have done that, but that he did do it. Your name and your sins are written on the cross. You and your sins were paid for by Jesus on the cross.

You know to be a Christian, a real Christian, a biblical Christian is to be able to say, “For me, he died. For me. Not just for the whole world, not just for the crowd, not for everyone and I am just lumped into the mix of that, but that God especially selected me and set his love on me. He died for me. This is love. It treats each one of us

uniquely. Can you say that from your heart? If I were the only one in the world, God would have sent his son to die for me.

Let me read you some text from the Old Testament about the selecting nature of love. There is a wonderful text in the Song of Solomon 6:8-9, where the lover is speaking to his beloved and he says:

“Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines and virgins beyond number, but my dove, my perfect one is unique. The only daughter of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her.”

There may be, in other words, lots of beautiful women, but you my beloved are my standard of beauty. You are all together unique. You are special. You are favored.

Do you feel that way from God? That in his eyes, you are unique and that you are favored and that you are special? That to God, each one of his children is his favorite? That is what love is. Do you know God’s love to the extent that you are not just part of a crowd? Oh well, sure, God loves everybody. But God loves you. God constantly in the Bible chooses people to set his love on them. He chose Abraham and called Abraham by name. And then Paul says in Romans 4: “By faith we become the children of Abraham.” We become the chosen, selected people of God. Do you know God’s love to that extent in your life?

That is normative Christianity. Not only that God loves. Not only that God loves me. But in times of difficulty I must know that God loves me. How can I know that God loves me?

Let’s go back to that illustration of the suspension bridge and finish up. There are two large towers that we stand between, the tower of the first coming of Jesus and the tower of the second coming. We live on the bridge between the first and second comings

of Christ in the already of his first coming and the not yet of his second. Why is it that the bridge doesn't fall into the sea? Because it is being suspended in the air between two great cables of God's love. What we hang our life and our hopes on is God's love. Not on relationships; not on the fact that people won't betray us; for as the Psalm says, "Though my father and my mother forsake me, yet the Lord will take me up". I rely on the love of God to keep me going. Well, these two cables are two ways that God shows love to us.

I said there were two cables that hold up the bridge, two cables of love, one is objective. It is based on certain historical facts. It has the objectivity of clear doctrine and clear thinking. That cable of love is found in verses 6-8:

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

How do I know God's love? Verse 8: God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. I look at the cross. And there are several things that are mentioned here that I don't have the time to go into, but he says that at just the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for us. God's love reaches out to us at just the right moment—the fitting time, the time of our great need, when we are powerless and totally unable to help ourselves.

I think of those old movies where a woman is tied to a log by a villain and the log is just about to hit the buzz saw and she is just about to be cut lengthwise by this great gigantic saw. We hear this rotary saw screaming and the saw dust flying and she has her head up and the saw is just about to go through her body, but at just the right moment,

before she is cut in two, the hero breaks down the door and unties her and sweeps her into his arms and they kiss. She is saved.

God's love comes to us just like that. Not when we are restored, when we have cleaned up our acts, when we promise to be better, when we are in good shape. God's love comes to us at just the right time when we are tied to the log, helpless, hopeless and in great need, threatened to be sawn in two by our sin.

And God's love doesn't just come to us at the right time, but is demonstrated even more by going beyond the bounds of any human love. In verse 7, Paul concedes that there are situations where people will go the distance and perform the supreme act of self-sacrifice by laying down their life for another person, but always when we are speaking of men and women, the self-sacrifice is drawn out by some quality on the part of the person being rescued. Fathers and mothers will throw themselves in front of a car to save their children or run into a burning house to save one of their babies. Or a man might lay his life down for his country. Soldiers have died throughout history for the love of home and for the love of family and the love of country. People will die for a noble ideal.

Jesus said, "Greater love no man knows than this: That a man lay down his life for his friends." No man or woman knows any greater love than laying down his life for his friend. That is the highest a man or woman's love can go. But Paul says that God's love goes so much farther. God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, opposed to him, enemies of God, ungodly, Christ died for us.

We are talking about a Jew in the Auschwitz concentration camp throwing himself in front of bullets meant for one of the Nazi guards. We are talking about an American throwing himself on a hand grenade meant for a Japanese guard at a prisoner

of war camp. We are talking about a Palestinian who throws himself in front an exploding car meant for Israeli soldiers.

God being all that God is gave up what was most valuable to him, his Son, for us being all that we are. Where there is no loveliness in us, no loveliness, nothing that would naturally draw forth or logically draw forth sacrifice. You look at yourself and say, “Why would God ever love someone like me? Someone with all my flaws, my sins and my helplessness, my powerlessness?”

God loves us not because of what we are and not even for what we could be. God loves us because of what he is. Because he is love. His very nature and essence is love.

I know that God loves me when I look at the cross and see what God was willing to do for me at the time when I was most ungodly. That’s the objective cable.

And the second cable is subjective. I know that God loves me because he has poured out his love in my heart. He has selected me out by the Holy Spirit, and I can feel his love.

There was an experience of this just the other evening in my kinship group, which is a small group we have here at the Vineyard. Here we break down in over a hundred small groups during the week where people meet together to get to know each other and to worship together and to pray for each other. People open up their homes all across central Ohio to host one of these meetings for folks from the church and for their friends and guests.

The other evening at our kinship group, we had a time of prayer and there was a word of revelation, a word given that someone in the meeting had a desperate fear of bees and wasps. A woman at the meeting raised her hand and said, “That’s me.” When she was being prayed for, she began to cry and she said, “I have just been really asking the

Lord these last few days to deliver me and set me free from my fear of bees and wasps. It has just dominated my life and I want to be free.” And then she made the really wonderful comment, she said, “You know, what is really wonderful about that word that was given in the group is I know God loves me. That he would pick me out of a crowd and by the Holy Spirit communicate to me that I am special.”

You say, “I have never had that experience. I have never felt God's love. Or it has been a really long time since I've experienced that warmth and comfort of God's love in my heart.” Sometimes the reason we don't feel God's love on a continual basis is we haven't asked to feel it. We have not because we ask not, James says. Here's what I'd like each one of you to do – pray the prayer that Jesus promised God would answer. In Luke 11:13 Jesus says, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Ask for a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit. Ask for God to pour out his love into your heart. Ask to feel his love. I challenge you to ask until you know that God loves you.