

Experiential Christianity

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If you would, open your Bibles to Romans 5. The fifth chapter of the book of Romans. I want to read beginning in verse 1, though our text will focus on just a single verse together tonight. Well, let's read Romans 5:1-8. This is the Word of God. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die, but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Let's pray. Father, throughout church history You have been pleased to take the preached Word and arrest the consciences of men, transform lives, birth people into the Kingdom, do all manner of good to the saints. And I pray that tonight, the Scriptures would come alive to us. That we would taste and see that the Lord is good; that every hearer present would be gripped by the text and what it is communicating and be changed. Pour out on us mercy tonight as we hear. Draw near to us as we worship You through preaching and hearing the Scriptures proclaimed. Thank You, Father, for this day You have given us. This evening, continue to magnify Yourself and the great love that You have for us. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Experiential Christianity: Do We Want It?

Well, this evening's message will focus entirely on verse 5. Romans 5:5 It will be more of an extended meditation on Romans 5:5. And I'll make an effort to commend to you a greater pursuit of what I refer to and will refer to throughout the sermon this evening as experiential Christianity. God willing, each one of us will walk away from the meeting tonight with a deep and abiding hunger to personally and increasingly experience the love of Jesus Christ. I don't have to ask for a show of hands. If you're a believer here, you want that. God wants you to want that. I want to want that more. And I want you to want that more. So I'm trusting that the Lord by His Spirit that is active in His people, I'm trusting the Lord to stir up the psalmist's reality in you and me: "As the deer pants for flowing streams..." Can you finish that? "...So pants my soul for You, O Lord." Along with this meditation on Romans 5:5, I will cite numerous instances of saints throughout church history who experienced the reality of what Romans 5:5 speaks to us about. And I want you to let what those men and women say compel you and encourage you to seek after what those men and women of God experienced. I do not want you to walk away from this evening's sermon discouraged at your possible lack of experience, but rather walk away hungry for more.

The opening phrase in Romans 5:5, "And hope does not put us to shame..." is certainly worth noting. It will not be our focus. But I think what Paul is doing in the midst of offering these arguments of why the believer should be assured of their salvation; why the believer should be assured of the love of God for them; I think what he's saying here is this: How can we know our hope in God, our hope in salvation won't just fall apart at the end? How do we know that it won't just unravel when things get difficult? When we come to the appointed day of our death? How do we know what we believe is real and not just some figment of our imagination? How do we know that our hope isn't false hope? And in the end, we will actually stand before a holy God and He will consume us in wrath? How do we know these things? Paul is saying in this verse right here that we know because God has taken steps to assure us of His unchanging and immeasurable love for us. That's how we can know. The very love spoken of here in Romans 5 that He abundantly, generously, graciously pours into our hearts. So no, the Christian will not be put to shame at the last day. The Christian's hope will not be dashed against the rocks. Because our hope is a real hope. It is an abiding hope. And it stands on objective grounds. Our hope will not fail us in that day because God will not fail us in that day. He loves us and He makes that abundantly known.

God's Love Poured Into Our Hearts

Now, before we get into the heart of the matter, there's a couple of clarifying comments that I think are necessary to make. First, the question: Is the love of God that is poured into our hearts - is that God's love for us or our love for God? It's a valid question. And most of the English translations of Romans 5:5 leave some degree of ambiguity. You could maybe read it and read it either way. But there is an answer to the question and the answer to the question is that is indeed God's love for us that is being spoken of here.

There are two primary reasons for that. Number one, it is God's love for the believer that undergirds their hope that is spoken of in 5:5a. This is the understanding Paul was emphasizing here in verse 5 as well as the six verses that follow. Really, the rest of the chapter. You see, if it's my love for God that upholds and undergirds my hope, my hope would often be very weak and flimsy. But if it's God's love for His people that makes hope firm, then firm it will ever be.

A second reason. And it's the context. It's the verses that immediately follow on the heels of verse 5. It's verses 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 that point so wonderfully, so powerfully, so clearly to the objective love of God for us displayed in Christ dying for us. That's what we see in 6, 7, and 8 especially. "Even while we were powerless..." Even while we were sinful; even while we were ungodly, at the right time, Christ died for us. There is no love like that love. So, it's God's love being displayed and demonstrated that is in view here, not our responsive love back to Him.

Next, and it's another thing I consider important to note, the verb that is used in Romans 5:5. "Poured." Some translations maybe read: "shed abroad." This word is used elsewhere in the New Testament. In Luke 5:37, we see it in the context of wineskins bursting and the liquid contents spilling out. In Acts 2:17, "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh." That's a clear connection to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. More graphically - even gruesomely - in the 1st chapter of Acts, verse 18, speaking of Judas who hung himself there and died, the language is used that his bowels then gushed out, the ESV says. So, spilled out, poured out, gushed out - the literal meaning of the word is to bestow

liberally. The way Thayer's lexicon treats it, it says to distribute largely. And I kind of like that. This single word is crucial here if we're really to grasp what Paul is communicating to us about the Christian's experience - this inward experience, this subjective experience of the love of God. Paul is pointing to the reality of the lavishness with which God floods the soul with a sense of His love. That's the essence of Romans 5:5.

Howell Harris, the Welsh evangelist, said, "Love fell in showers on my soul so that I could scarcely contain myself. I had in that moment no fear and no doubt of my salvation." John Howe, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, in the 1650's he said, "I sensibly felt the bounty of God and the most pleasant comforting of the Holy Spirit on October 22nd, 1704. It far surpassed the most expressive words my thoughts can suggest. I experienced an inexpressible melting of the heart, tears gushing out of my eyes for joy that God should shed abroad His love so abundantly." Thomas Goodwin, the English Puritan, "There is light that cometh and overpowereth a man's soul and assures him that God is his and he is God's, and that God loveth him from everlasting. It is a light beyond the light of ordinary faith. It is the next thing to Heaven. It is faith elevated and raised up above its ordinary rate. It is the electing love of God brought home to the soul."

The Scottish Puritan William Guthrie: "It is a glorious, divine manifestation of God to the soul, shedding abroad God's love in the heart. It is a thing better felt than spoken of. It is no audible voice, but it is a ray of glory filling the soul with God as He is life, light, and liberty." One commentator said, "Like an overflowing stream in a thirsty land, so is the rich flood of divine love that is poured out and shed abroad in the heart." That is the experience that Paul is commending to you and me today. He wants us to experience more of God's abounding and abiding love.

D.L. Moody, the well-known American evangelist, had such an experience it seems. He rarely spoke of it, but on this occasion he did, saying, "One day in the city of New York, oh, what a day! I can't describe it. I seldom refer to it. It is almost too sacred an experience to name. I can only say that God revealed Himself to me. And I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand. After that, I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different. I did not present any new truths, and yet, hundreds were being converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world. It would be but dust in the balance."

Five Observations on Romans 5:5

Well, now that a few things have been clarified, and I hope your spiritual appetites have been stimulated, let's get to the heart of this meditation. There are five observations on Romans 5:5 that I hope will encourage you this evening.

Experiential Christianity Comes Through the Holy Spirit

Observation number one: This experience comes to the Christian by the Holy Spirit. That should be straightforward enough. It's right there in the text, isn't it? "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." It is the Spirit of God that births this experience in us. We could say with all assurance that this experience comes down to us as Christians from above. This is not something that we stir up within ourselves. It is divine in origin. It is an experience that is entirely supernatural. We don't make this happen. We

can't make this happen. The Holy Spirit alone accomplishes this in us. But I take that thought and I say that means that all Christians can and should at times experience this outpouring of the love of God into the soul. Wealthy and poor Christians should experience this. Encouraged Christians and discouraged Christians should be experiencing this. Those from a good family and background, those from an ungodly family and background. The babe in Christ to the mature in Christ. Why? Because it isn't dependent on your status or your degree of sanctification. Are you in Christ? Are you indwelt by the Holy Spirit? You see, this is a sovereign work of the Spirit.

Subjective Experience Is Rooted in Objective Truth

Observation number two: Subjective experience. I recognize I'm talking a lot about experience tonight. Feelings. Subjective experience, however, is always (double underline always) rooted in objective truth. We cannot read Romans 5:5 and deny that what Paul is saying here in our text is experiential. We are talking about Spirit-inspired experience. But we're not talking about sloppy experience. We're not talking about experience that is untethered from Scripture. We're not talking about extra-biblical experience. No. This is experience that is deeply rooted in the objective realities of the Gospel. The first word that follows Romans 5:5 is "for." "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." Immediately after Paul commends the inward and subjective experience of God's love to the church at Rome, he runs to the objective beauty of Christ's sacrifice for sins. Because Romans 5:6 is true, because it is objective knowledge - yes, fact - then believers should know that they can and will experience the Spirit's flooding of the soul with God's love at various times and in various degrees. As much as Romans 5:6 is true, Romans 5:5 is true. You see, verses 6-11, they capture Paul unpacking the great self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for powerless and ungodly sinners. Paul is putting the magnifying glass over God's love to sinners so that we can rest assured that if God loved us when it was hardest to love us, He will certainly love us still. Objectively, according to verse 8, God shows or demonstrates or commends His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. This is the objective realities of the Gospel. If you're a believer here, you've embraced these things. But have you embraced what is at the heart of Romans 5:5? Because in our text in verse 5 God is simply showing us, demonstrating, commending to us His love subjectively. This is the heart of experiential Christianity. I like how John Piper puts it. "It is not an experience like electricity. It is a mediated experience. It has factual content. And therefore, when it comes, it isn't like some vague New Age out-of-body experience or some hypnotic state or some ecstatic condition produced by emptying our head. It is being filled with the glory of the love of God shown in Christ Jesus who died because of our sins." The subjective experience of the Christian must be always tethered to the objective truths of the Gospel.

All Christians Will Have Some Measure of Experience

Observation number three: All Christians will experience this in some measure. How could I be so sure? It's in the text. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." There are a couple of pronouns in Romans 5:5 that really help us here. It is the "our" and the "us." And when reading the text, we need to take note that the

"our" and "us" happen to be the same group of people - the same group of people that have received the Holy Spirit also experience God's love being poured into their hearts. Well, who then receives the Holy Spirit? Answer: Christians receive the Holy Spirit. John 14:7, "The Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees Him nor knows Him, you know Him for He dwells with you and will be in you." Or, Paul writing in Galatians 4:6, "Because you are sons God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying, 'Abba, Father.'" Of course, we know this. We recognize this. It is only Christians who have the indwelling Spirit within them. So, just as Christians - only Christians - partake of the indwelling Spirit of Christ, so all Christians partake in some measure of this particular Spirit- birthed experience - the pouring out of God's love into the heart. Every regenerate person knows God's love for them factually and feelingly. And don't be scared of that word.

We Should Not Fear Such Experiences

Observation number four: We shouldn't be afraid of such experiences. In recent decades, there's been a genuine overreaction in the reformed camp against the abuses of the charismatic movement. But it's never good when the pendulum of correcting theological errors swings all the way the other way. But what is settled in the hearts and minds of many reformed believers is a tinge of fear, an awkwardness in regards to any kind of spiritual experience. There's so much nonsense in the earth today, it's easy to fall into this trap. I get it. But I read Romans 5:5 and I want to get that. Someone begins to testify of an experience they had with God, and those listening immediately put them into the charismatic box. And sometimes I've heard it done - even question their salvation. It's an extreme instance, but it happens. It's sad, but it's true. More often however, what takes place even in churches like those represented at a conference like this is that Christians are simply wary of speaking much about this topic. You don't hear Christians enjoying fellowship with one another speaking about how God had manifested Himself to them in recent days; how they so abundantly were overwhelmed as they were praying that morning with the love of God for them. We've grown a bit standoffish to spiritual experience. We don't want to be seen by others in the reformed camp as being too subjective. We have become more or less "stick to the facts" Christians, afraid of what a little subjective experience might do us. But the Apostle Paul isn't afraid, dear ones. He is emphasizing something wonderful. He is commending something wonderful. Christianity isn't just the acceptance of certain theological presuppositions and statements and confessions. It is a relationship with the living God. And the call to us today as believers is relate. Relate. Relate to the living God. That's what the text is calling for.

A.W. Tozer warns in saying, "We Christians are in real danger of losing God amid the wonders of His Word. We have almost forgotten that God is a Person, and as such can be relationally cultivated as any person can be." In Ephesians 3, we have the Apostle Paul telling the church that he is praying for them. That what? They would have the strength to know, to comprehend, to grasp, to understand, to acknowledge the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Surpasses knowledge. Yes, it is a love to be experienced as much as it is a love to be understood. So please, brethren, do not fear what you should not live without. John Flavel, the English Puritan, speaking of Romans 5:5, he said this, "Ecstasy and delight are essential to the believer's soul, and they promote the believer's sanctification. We were not meant to live

without spiritual exhilaration. And the Christian who goes for a long time without the experience of heart-warming will soon find himself tempted to have his emotions satisfied from earthly things and not as he ought from the Spirit of God." He goes on to say, "The soul is so constituted that it craves fulfillment from things outside itself and will embrace earthly joys for satisfaction when it cannot reach the spiritual ones. The believer then is in spiritual danger if he allows himself to go for any length of time without tasting of the love of Christ and savoring the felt comforts of a Savior's presence." That is quite the statement and warning.

Did you hear him? When was the last time, brothers and sisters, that you laid there in bed at night and your thoughts began to muse upon the love of Jesus Christ for you? And you began to think as Paul was thinking in Galatians 2:20 that that's my Savior who loved me and gave Himself for me. And there in the dark of the night you began to be stirred. You got a little emotional, and you began to be overwhelmed at the notion: why me, God? Why me? And there you lay relishing, delighting in the love of Jesus Christ for you. When was the last time? Fear not, little flock. It's the Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom and according to Romans 5:5, it's the Father's good pleasure to pour out His love into your hearts.

Experience Should Be Pursued

Observation number five (the last one): This experience varies in frequency and fullness from person to person. But it should be pursued by all. There are two important phrases worth comparing in the text. It's a little hard to see this in the English translations. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." The two phrases are: "has been poured into our hearts" and "has been given to us." You see, in redemption, the Spirit of God comes to us and makes His home in us. That is a once-and-for-all-time reality. That is the unchanging reality to the believer in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit. He is resident and forever abiding in us. He won't leave us. He won't forsake us from that point forward. Yet, the other phrase: "has been poured into our hearts" - it doesn't carry the same sense. Rather, this experience of God's love being poured into our hearts comes to us again and again and again. The reception of the Spirit as a newborn Christian happens once. Once and for all time. But the outpourings of God's love into our hearts happens over and over again. How else can we be sure that this is the case? Well, again, in Ephesians 3 we have Paul telling the church - the church that he's praying for regularly - oftentimes we know in his epistles he said, "I remember you always." He's praying for the church at Ephesus that they might have strength to know, to comprehend the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Again and again, the Apostle Paul is saying, "I pray for you, church, that you would understand, comprehend, know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." Elsewhere, the church at Thessalonica, 2 Thessalonians 3:5, "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God." That's Paul's prayer for the church at Thessalonica. The apostle is regularly praying for these churches. Why? Because Paul desires for Christians to have their hearts full of the love of God; to have their hearts directed - constantly directed to the love of God; that there would be this heart movement, this heart yearning for God's abounding love. Paul is praying that God would give your heart and my heart the proper prescription glasses so that we could see the lavish love Jesus Christ has for us. Because only such views of God and His love for us can satisfy our hungry, searching soul.

Examples from History

John Flavel whom I quoted earlier, he had such an experience of this one day on a journey while he sat down by a well. And he called it "one of the days of Heaven." And he said that he understood more in that moment of the life of Heaven by just that single experience than all the books he had ever read on that topic. Edward Payson, the name familiar probably to us all, he said this: "To think of the love of Christ is like trying to conceive of existence which has no beginning, and of power which can make something out of nothing. Tongue can not describe it. Finite minds cannot conceive it. Angels faint under it. And those who know most of it can only say with inspiration that it surpasses knowledge."

Mack had mentioned the 1904-1905 Welsh Revival in his sermon this morning. One of the leading figures, Evan Roberts, in that revival described an experience he had while in one of the meetings. "I felt a living force come into my bosom. This grew and grew. And I was almost bursting. My bosom was boiling. And what boiled in me was that verse: 'God commendeth His love.' I fell on my knees with my arms draped over the seat in front of me, the tears and perspiration flowed freely." These experiences, brothers and sisters, are not something we should shy away from. They are something that we should desire and something that we should pursue. If our desire, if our hunger is little; if our desire is weak, what do we do? We ask God to increase our desire for such manifestations. Because these outpourings come to believers at various times and in various capacities we should only then set our hearts to seeking after more. If it's not just a one time experience, if God's love can be made known to us in special and spectacular ways, then we should seek for it all the more. Not just so our emotional tanks can be filled, but so our sanctification can be hastened along; so that our usefulness can be more manifest.

George Whitefield cites an occasion. "After the evening sermon, I began to pray and gave an exhortation. And after about six minutes, one cried out 'He has come! He has come!' and could scarce sustain the manifestation of Jesus to his soul. The eager crying of others for the like manifestation obliged me to stop, and I prayed over them as I saw their agonies and their stress increase. At length, we sang a hymn and then retired to the house where the man who received Christ continued praising and speaking of Him till near midnight. My own soul was so full that I retired and wept before the Lord under a deep sense of my own vileness and the sovereignty and greatness of God's everlasting love. Most of the people spent the remainder of the night in prayer and praises. It was a night to be remembered."

So dear ones, be bold to go to God with such requests asking Him for the outpouring of His love into your heart. We can be that specific because Romans 5:5 is that specific. We can pray with Jacob: "I will not let You go until You bless me." We can pray with Moses in Psalm 90, "Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love." May God help you and me to be more about this. Jesus, on the last day of that great feast in John 7, He stood, after really being behind the scenes and not noticed. And He stood up, the text says, and He cried out: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me as the Scripture has said, 'out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Jesus is entreating us to come to Him and drink, that out of us might flow rivers of living water.

Let me close with a few journal entries from the pen of the wife of Jonathan Edwards, Mrs. Sarah Edwards - a dear sister in the Lord. And then a brief exhortation from the "Heavenly

Doctor" - the Puritan Richard Sibbes. Here's what Sarah Edwards writes in her journal entries, and this is a small portion of what she writes about such experiences in her journal. "I cannot find language to express how certain this appeared. My safety and happiness and eternal enjoyment of God's immutable love was durable and unchangeable as God is unchangeable. Melted and overcome by the sweetness of this assurance, I fell into a great flow of tears and could not forbear weeping aloud. It appeared certain to me that God was my Father and Christ my Lord and Savior. He was mine and I His. Under a delightful sense of the immediate presence and love of God these words seemed to come over and over in my mind, 'My God, my all, my God, my all.' The presence of God was so near and so real that I seemed scarcely conscious of anything else. God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ seemed as distinct Persons, both manifesting Their inconceivable loveliness and mildness and gentleness and Their great and immutable love to me." She writes on another occasion while singing an Isaac Watts hymn, "My mind was so deeply impressed with the love of Christ and a sense of His immediate presence that I could with difficulty refrain from rising from my seat and leaping for joy. I continued to enjoy this intense and lively and refreshing sense of divine things accompanied with strong emotions for nearly an hour, after which I experienced a delightful calm and peace and rest in God until I retired for the night."

One more occasion from the pen of Sarah Edwards. "Thursday night, January 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. 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. With an inexpressibly sweet calmness of soul and an entire rest in Him, I seemed to myself to perceive a glow of divine love come down from the heart of Christ in Heaven into my heart in a constant stream of sweet light. At the same time, my heart and soul all flowed out in love to Christ so that there seemed to be a constant flowing and re-flowing of Heavenly and divine love from Christ's heart to mine. And I appeared to myself to float or swim in these bright, sweet beams of the love of Christ."

If that sounds foreign or strange to you, I want you to get to a place where it becomes more ordinary. Because Jesus has promised these manifestations not only in Romans 5:5, but John 14:21, "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." That's a promise, saints.

Now I promise to close with an exhortation from Richard Sibbes and here's the exhortation: "Beloved, get love. It melts us into the likeness of Christ. It constrains. It hath a kind of holy violence in it. No water can quench it. We shall glory in suffering for that which we love. Nothing can quench that holy fire that is kindled from Heaven. It is a glorious grace. Get love."

Prayer

Let's pray. Father, if ever this will be profitable to us, You must work. You must visit us with understanding. You must visit us with grace. You must visit us with a manifestation, an outpouring of Your love into our hearts. And I pray, Father, gracious as You are, good as You are, that You will indeed do this for us. If fathers among us being evil know how to give good

gifts to their children, how much more will our Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to them that ask. Energize us to be asking, Father. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.