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# Exegesis 18: Receiving the Holy Spirit

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*Paul Brown*

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*Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:5*

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In a passage full of consolation and encouragement for believers, this verse stands out as particularly significant. At least two reasons make it suitable for special consideration; firstly the content is tightly packed<sup>1</sup>, and secondly it deals with a most important subject, the assurance, considered both objectively and subjectively, which Christians have for the hope they claim. It is also a verse which has important implications for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

## The Love of God

We begin with the phrase “the love of God”. Luther<sup>2</sup>, following Augustine, understood this to mean love for God, but Calvin<sup>3</sup>, while acknowledging this as a “devout sentiment”, says that this is “not what Paul means”. In line with the majority of commentators today he takes it to mean God’s love for us as the source of salvation. Several reasons can be given for understanding the phrase in this way.

Firstly, as Leon Morris indicates<sup>4</sup>, this is the way in which the phrase “the love of God” is usually used in the New Testament. The only probable exception to this is Luke 11:42, “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” Paul’s use of the phrase in 8:38 is particularly significant, “For I am persuaded that . . . (nothing) . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ.” It is difficult to think that Paul would use the phrase in two different ways in such close proximity and with such a similarity of subject. Anders Nygren<sup>5</sup> expresses himself like this, “When we realise that he never uses *agape* (sic) to express man’s love to God, we shall not think that it is of man’s love that Paul speaks in this verse. *Agape*, the love which God showed us in Christ, is for Paul so tremendous a fact that he regularly refrained from using the same word to express love to God.”

Secondly, the way in which Paul’s thought develops up to this point almost certainly excludes any other option. Paul is giving the reason why hope does not put us to shame<sup>6</sup>. It is highly unlikely that he would be saying, “hope does not put us to shame, because we love God.” This would seem to base assurance on the shifting sands of our own love for God. It is true of course, and this is what Augustine and Luther pointed out, that this love is not rooted in the natural soil of the human heart but is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and is given to us by God himself. However, as soon as we have said this we are half-way to focusing on God and his gift, rather than on its expression in our love for God. John Murray’s words are surely correct, “What is it that gives solidity to this hope and guarantees its validity? It is the love of God to believers, a love that suffers no fluctuation or reverse. Hence the hope which it promises is as irreversible as the love itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, the way in which the next verses develop confirm that this is the right interpretation because Paul goes on to speak of the historical manifestation of the love

of God in the death of his Son. “But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (v 8).

At this point we can briefly notice some of the **implications** of this.

- a) Paul grounds hope in the love of God. There is nothing more basic than this. The love of God is the ultimate source and motivation for salvation in its entirety. A passage which has some strikingly similar expressions is Titus 3:4-6, “But when the kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his own mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour.” Here salvation is also traced back to its origin in the “kindness and love of God our Saviour.” The love which gave Jesus Christ to save us is the love that guarantees the fulfilment of the “hope of the glory of God.”
- b) It is also the love of God that enables us to see that tribulations find a place in the purpose of God and are productive of good. Calvin says, “I do not refer this (the love of God poured out etc.) to the last phrase only, but to the whole of the two preceding verses.” He adds beautifully, “Being thus shed abroad through every part of us, (the love of God) not only mitigates our sorrow in adversity, but like a sweet seasoning gives a loveliness to our tribulations.”<sup>8</sup> We can, as it were, allow the love of God to shed its light back on verses 3 and 4. “We also glory in tribulations”, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts; and we know “that tribulation produces perseverance” etc., because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts.
- c) Between the objective truth of peace with God in v 1 and the subjective sense of the love of God in v 5, comes the phrase “and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” This rejoicing is based on the status of peace with God which we have by justification but as it is a rejoicing in hope it also derives its certainty and impetus from the love of God shed abroad in the heart.

### **. . . has been poured out**

*. . . has been poured out in our hearts.* “Poured out” is probably the best translation of *ennechutai* as the verb when used literally is used of liquids. At the same time the AV translation “shed abroad” has taken on its own meaning from its use here. Presumably deriving from the use of “shed” as in “shed tears” or “shed blood” (see 3:15 where the same verb is used) its sense seems to be more akin to “shed light on a thing” and perhaps “shed abroad” suggests the love of God shining into the heart as the sun shines in its brightness and warmth all over the countryside. A sense of abundance, the overflowing nature of the love of God, arises from the use of the word “poured out”.<sup>9</sup>

It is probable that Paul used this verb here because of its close association with the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> (cp Titus 3:6.) This follows the use of the same word in Acts 2:17, 33; 10:45; which in turn arises from the LXX of Joel 2:28. However, BAGD<sup>11</sup> points out that “generally what ever comes from above is connected with this verb” (it illustrates this with “grace”, “mercy” and “wrath”). Attempts to read the words in such a way as to make the Holy Spirit the subject of “has been poured out” seem highly artificial.

Cranfield<sup>12</sup> notes that the verb “is used much more often in the LXX (and also as a matter of fact in the NT - nine occurrences in Rev 16) of the pouring out of God’s wrath.” Paul began his exposé of the sin of Gentiles and Jews in 1:18 with the words, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of

men. . .”, and wrath is also mentioned in 2:6,8; 3:5; 5:9. It is impossible to know whether Paul associated *ennechutai* with the wrath of God, and thus consciously used it here of the love of God by way of contrast. In view of its other associations this seems unlikely, yet this possibility does remind us that it is against the background of wrath revealed from heaven against man’s sin that God has poured out his love into our hearts.

Morris has an interesting note on the tense of the verb, “The perfect points to a continuing state after a past action, and Godet finds this the reason for the preposition *en* (“in”) rather than *eis* (“into”). This verb is usually followed by *eis* or *epi*; this is the sole use of *en* with it in the New Testament.”<sup>13</sup> Both tense and preposition seem to suggest that the love of God, having been poured out, continues residing in the heart.

It is the heart *kardia* in which the love of God has been poured. Cranfield says of the word, “Paul uses *kardia* to denote a man’s inward, hidden self as a thinking, willing and feeling subject”<sup>14</sup> and Barrett says, “‘Heart’ is one of Paul’s most important psychological terms, and has a wide range of use. . . it is the organ of thought (10:6), but also of feeling (9:2). It is essentially inward, hidden (2:29; 8:27).”<sup>15</sup> In its use here both the intellectual and emotional elements are important. The mind understands and grasps the truth that God loves us and the emotions are stirred and gripped by its reality. However, what is particularly important is that this takes place in our hearts. Believers are assured that God loves them. This is clearly something direct and personal. It is not a deduction.<sup>16</sup> Because the love of God has actually reached out into the heart and experience of believers, they know that God loves them.

## The Holy Spirit

. . . by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Unlike “poured out”, “given” is in the aorist tense and thus “indicates a single, decisive act”.<sup>17</sup> It might be argued that this is a reference to Pentecost; the Spirit has been given, once, decisively, and it is through his activity now in the Church and the believer that the love of God is poured out in the heart. (The same possibility arises in Titus 3:6 where the phrase “poured out on us abundantly (richly)” certainly suggests Pentecost, and is at least intended to evoke the richness of the Pentecostal experience into which believers have entered.) However, it seems much more natural to take this as the Spirit given directly to believers, and the position argued for here is that this is the Holy Spirit given and received, in conversion.

a) This fits in with the way in which Paul speaks of the Spirit being given and received.

In ch 8, which contains Paul’s most extensive and detailed teaching on the Spirit, he says in v 15, “you received the Spirit of adoption”, and in Gal 3:2,3 he says, “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh?” 1 Cor 6:19 says, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God. . .”

b) It also accords with the words of Peter on the day of Pentecost itself; Acts 2:38,39, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”<sup>18</sup> While the promise of the Father had a historic, definitive fulfilment at Pentecost, new believers subsequent to that event enter into the reality of the promise themselves when they receive the gift of the Spirit upon repentance and faith in the name of Jesus Christ. (It would take us too far afield to try and relate this to baptism

also!<sup>19</sup>) This is seen in Acts in 5:32, 9:17, 10:44-48, 11:15-18, 15:8, 19:2.

- c) The same note is found in John's writings. In John 7:39 the author comments on Jesus' words, "But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive." Other references include John 14:16,17; 1 John 3:24.

It is probable that many evangelicals, perhaps especially those of a Reformed persuasion, tend to emphasise regeneration at the expense of the gift of the Spirit. It is interesting to note, for example, that in Hoekema's *SAVED BY GRACE*,<sup>20</sup> while he has a long chapter on The Role of the Holy Spirit, and another on Regeneration, he has no section on receiving the Spirit at conversion. But there are important differences between regeneration and the gift of the Spirit. Regeneration is a **work** of the Spirit within human beings granting them new life and all that flows from that; it effects a change within **them**. But receiving the Spirit means receiving him as a **person** so that he permanently indwells the believer.<sup>21</sup> If with Hoekema we recognise that "regeneration has causal priority over other aspects of the process of salvation",<sup>22</sup> we suggest that regeneration leads to repentance and faith, which in turn leads to reception of the Spirit, as in Acts 2:38. While it is commonplace to affirm the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Christian, it is probable that this is often not adequately linked with receiving the Spirit, and so the effects of this for the Christian life are understated. This may be partially responsible for doctrines which tend to lay the emphasis on a reception of the Spirit subsequent to conversion. To lay too much emphasis on regeneration, which is a **work** of the Spirit, may tend to leave the door open for a later reception of the Spirit as a **person**.

It is interesting to note that we have a correlation in these verses between faith and justification, on one hand, and receiving the Spirit on the other. Verse 1 begins with justification by faith which brings us peace with God. Then the discussion moves on through rejoicing in hope, to rejoicing in tribulations also because these develop hope, and hope does not put to shame, because the love of God is poured out through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. The whole discussion is in a certain sense circular. Having been justified by faith certain consequences follow for us, and these are underwritten because the Holy Spirit was given to us. The logic of the passage demands that justification and receiving the Spirit belong together in the experience of conversion.

### **How are they related?**

At this point it could be asked how receiving the Holy Spirit relates to the love of God being outpoured in the heart and bringing a knowledge of the love of God? At least **four** answers could be given, all of which are probably involved together.

- a) The coming of the Holy Spirit is itself a manifestation of the love of God. He is a gift, and a very great gift too. It would be possible to conceive of salvation in terms of forgiveness or regeneration without the personal coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit at all. Moreover he is the Spirit of God and of Christ, and his coming establishes fellowship with the Father and the Son, John 14:16-23; 1 John 1:3.
- b) The gift of the Holy Spirit means that God who is love indwells the believer. All the attributes of God are made real by his presence through the Spirit.
- c) The Holy Spirit is the revealer of God's will and the teacher of God's people (Eph 7:17ff). This aspect needs to be considered further when looking at verses 6-8 in relation to verse 5.
- d) The concept seems close to the witness of the Spirit in 8:16. The witness is to an objective truth, "God loves me", and yet it is a subjective sense of the reality of that.

Before we go on to the next verses we will pause slightly and digress from the text to a **pastoral question** which it seems to raise. The question is this. If all believers receive the Spirit at conversion, and if through the Spirit the love of God is poured out in their heart, why is it that not all believers have a sense of that love, and all too often have only a tenuous hold on their hope?<sup>23</sup> This is a bigger and more crucial matter than can be tackled here. **Three comments** will be made.

- 1 Christians do not often think in terms of the Spirit being given to them. They think of receiving Christ, but not of receiving the Spirit. Of course to receive one is to receive the other. Hoekema says, "When one participates in Christ, therefore, he or she also participates in the Spirit."<sup>24</sup> However, this seems to reverse the order, and may tend to make the gift of the Spirit appear simply as an addendum to receiving Christ. Romans 8:9,10 says, "Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his. And if Christ be in you. . .". the order here suggests that receiving the Spirit means receiving Christ. The whole emphasis appears different. The Spirit when he comes brings **Christ** with him.
- 2 As a result of this Christians have no expectation or anticipation of what the gift of the Spirit will mean. There is a delicate relationship between teaching, expectation and experience which we ought not to overlook. Experience can be stunted, distorted or misinterpreted by inaccurate or unbalanced teaching.
- 3 The search for fruits of regeneration which can serve as a basis for assurance turns attention to trying to discern the Spirit's working, rather than receiving the witness which he brings by his presence. It is true that this type of contrast can easily be overdone, but the need to consider evidences in the life comes in more as a check on presumption rather than as a substitute for assurance based on the love of God.

## **How do we know?**

There is a further question that must be looked at in more detail: is Paul simply talking about an inward impression of the love of God? John Murray enlarges the question, "By what considerations do we know of this love of God, referred to in verse 5 as shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit? This is not an irrelevant or irreverent question. It is the question of the process of revelation and of redemptive accomplishment by which this love of God has been demonstrated. It is the answer to this question that is provided by verse 6." He points to the opening "For" of verse 6, "This is the force of the conjunction 'for' with which the verse begins; it is explanatory or confirmatory."<sup>25</sup>

John Murray's discussion is a very valuable one as a corrective both to any tendency to take the love of God for granted, or on the other hand to an awareness of weakness and ungodliness leading us to doubt the possibility of God loving sinners.

Verse 8 especially focuses on the concrete and historical expression of the love of God in the death of Christ. It is fully consonant with verses like John 3:16, Romans 8:32 and 1 John 4:9,10 in the way it emphasises that the height and depth of God's love is seen in the giving of his Son to sacrificial death. Bringing verse 5 and verse 8 together we can deduce that what the Holy Spirit does in pouring out the love of God in the heart of believers is to make them vividly aware of the extent of that love in the death of Christ. In the conversion experience in which a sinner trusts in the crucified Saviour the Holy Spirit brings home to the heart the overwhelming nature of the love of God in not sparing his own Son.

We ought to note in passing that the emphasis here, as it is generally in Scripture, is on the love of the Father in the death of the Son.<sup>26</sup> This is not to minimise the love of Christ himself (Gal 2:20; Eph 5:25), but it does guard against any suggestion that in the transaction of the cross we see only the wrath of the Father and the love of the Son. It was love beyond understanding that provided the Son to be the propitiation for our sins. One or two features of verse 8 ought to be noticed. First of all the verb comes first in the sentence so that the emphasis falls on it, “**Demonstrates** his own love to us does God, in that...” The verb itself *sunistesin* seems in the context to go beyond the meaning of “commend” to “demonstrate, show”, or to “bring something out”,<sup>27</sup> see Rom 3:5; 2 Cor 7:11b - “in all things you demonstrated yourselves to be clear. . .”; Gal 2:18. The verb is in the present tense, or rather, the present continuous. The once-for-all death of Christ (*apethanen*, aorist) is an ongoing, perpetual demonstration of the love of God.<sup>28</sup> The death of Christ still, today, demonstrates the love of God to us; indeed in that death God brings his love out before us so that we can see it clearly. Further it is “his own” love that God demonstrates to us, as if Paul wished to leave his readers in no doubt that the origin of and motivation for the death of Christ is nothing less and nothing other than the love of God. Finally we must notice the crucial position of “in that while we were still sinners”. The love of God is not simply seen in that Christ died for us, but particularly in that **while we were still sinners** he died for us. This is fundamental for the assurance that is being given in the whole passage, and prepares for vv10,11. It is a sense of sin and unworthiness which seems to call assurance into question, but if God loved us and Christ died for us while we were still sinners, our hope is absolutely secure.

## Concluding Comments

- 1 Paul’s thinking, as his letters so often bear witness, is inextricably trinitarian. Here salvation is rooted in the love of the Father. It could be argued that it is the love of the triune God which is being referred to, and there is a sense in which it would be perfectly true to speak of this. Yet Paul seems here, as elsewhere, to be speaking of the economy of salvation in which each person of the Trinity has a distinctive part. Salvation is accomplished by the death of Christ, and it is the Holy Spirit who is the agent by which the love of God, who gave his Son to death, is poured out.
- 2 The link with verse 8 reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit’s particular ministry to glorify Christ and take of the things of Christ and declare them to God’s people, John 16:14,15. Paul’s writing here bears testimony to the fact that this was a part of the Holy Spirit’s ministry taken for granted among the early Christians.
- 3 Further, the Holy Spirit is the one who witnesses to objective truth and brings home the power and reality of it to the heart. It is not just a feeling which is poured out in the heart; it is a sense of the objective love of God, a love which is expressed concretely in the cross of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth.
- 4 Going a step beyond this, the love of God, and the death of Christ, are expressed in words in preaching and in writing. Word and Spirit thus belong together. We do not stop when we reach Romans 5:5; in reading on the Holy Spirit enables us to view, receive and respond to that love which, in the death of Christ, God demonstrates to us. The love of God being poured out in the heart is not therefore an experience which bears no relation to the Word, it is one which is integrally related to the preaching and writing which speaks of that love and of its expression in the death of Christ.

## References

- 1 John Murray, THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1967: "One of the most condensed statements in the epistle." p 164
- 2 Martin Luther, COMMENTARY ON ROMANS, trans J Theodore Mueller, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1976, p 92
- 3 John Calvin, EPISTLES OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE ROMANS AND TO THE THESSALONIANS, trans Ross Mackenzie, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1972, p 108
- 4 Leon Morris, THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, IVP/Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Leicester, 1988, p 221
- 5 Anders Nygren, COMMENTARY ON ROMANS, Muhlenburg Press, Philadelphia., 1949, p 199
- 6 Both Robert Haldane, THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1958, and D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, ROMANS, EXPOSITION OF CHAPTER 5, ASSURANCE, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1971, argue strongly that the first clause in the verse does not mean that hope will not be disappointed at the last, but rather that, in the present, hope does not put to shame or does not allow someone who has it to be ashamed. The present tense of the verb *kataischunei*, together with the fact that it is the love of God experienced in the present that keeps hope from being put to shame, suggest that this is correct. In this case we may have here an example of litotes; far from being abashed by tribulations and allowing them to count against our hope, we rather rejoice and exult in it because the love of God etc.
- 7 op cit, p 165. So also C E B Cranfield, THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, ICC, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, Vol 1, 1977; "A statement of the fact of God's love for us is a more cogent proof of the security of our hope than a statement of the fact of our love for him would be. . ." p 262
- 8 op cit, p 107, 108. Cranfield, op cit, p 262, adds after the quotation above, "(it would also be more suitable as an explanation of why we exult in our tribulations, if this clause were connected with v3a, rather than v5a)".
- 9 James Dunn, ROMANS 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary, 38A, Word, Dallas, 1988, speaks of "the vivid metaphor of a cloudburst on a parched countryside", p 253, while, more prosaically, Cranfield says, "The metaphor (poured out) may well have been chosen in order to express the idea of unstinting lavishness." op cit, p 263
- 10 Dunn, op cit, p 253: "...association with the Spirit in the present context... strongly suggests that the verb had already become fixed within Christian terminology as a reference to the founding event of Pentecost."
- 11 Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker; A GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1979
- 12 op cit, p 263
- 13 op cit, p 221
- 14 op cit, p 118
- 15 C K Barrett, THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, Black's New Testament Commentaries, A & C Black, London, 1975; p 37

- 16 Dunn, op cit, p 252, "What is striking about this first reference to God's love in Romans is that Paul should speak of it in such vivid experiential terms - God's love not simply as something believed in on the basis of the gospel or the testimony of the cross (cf. even v8), not simply the certainty of God's love (Kuss), but God's love itself (Althaus) experienced in rich measure..."
- 17 Morris, op cit, p 221
- 18 Dunn says, "Luke probably intends Acts 2:38 to establish the pattern and norm for Christian conversion-initiation in his presentation of Christianity's beginnings. At the close of the first Christian sermon the leading apostle sets the precedent for the instruction of inquirers." BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, SCM Press Ltd, London, 1970; p 90
- 19 Ernst Kaesemann reflects the view of some others also when, referring to the Spirit being given, he says, "What is in mind is probably the baptismal event in which the Spirit is imparted, according to the common view of primitive Christianity." COMMENTARY ON ROMANS, SCM Press Ltd, London, 1980; p 135. It is hardly necessary to point out that there is no indication of this in the passage whatsoever and in the most primitive Christianity the gift of the Spirit was by no means tied to baptism, eg Acts 10:47.
- 20 Anthony A Hoekema, SAVED BY GRACE, Eerdmans/Paternoster, Grand Rapids/Exeter, 1989
- 21 cf Lloyd-Jones, op cit, p 92, "There is no receptacle in the natural man to receive the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is only the new nature that can receive Him. The work of regeneration is preparatory to the coming of the Spirit to dwell within us."
- 22 op cit, p 14
- 23 Lloyd-Jones emphasises that the Spirit is given to all believers, but maintains that not all believers have had the love of God poured out in their hearts, "All Christians have not had this experience, but it is open to all; and all Christians should have it." op cit, p 85. It is difficult to believe that the syntax here allows of such a distinction. Dunn says, "There is no question of distinguishing the initial experience of God's love, of which the perfect *ennechutai* speaks, from the initiating gift of the Holy Spirit. For Paul they are one." BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, p 139
- 24 op cit, p 29
- 25 op cit, p 166
- 26 Dunn, ROMANS, p 257; "It is important to note that Paul thinks of Christ's death as a demonstration of God's love (elsewhere particularly 3:25 and 2 Corinthians 5:19.)"
- 27 BAGD, LEXICON
- 28 Dunn, op cit, p 256; "the present tense complements the perfect of v 5 and probably reflects the perspective of the preacher who referred back to the death of Christ as a timeless proof of God's love."

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