

God's Compassion

The most common verb used in the Greek New Testament to refer to God's compassion is *splanchnizomai*. This verb is used twelve times. Once it is used of the Samaritan's compassion for the wounded man (Luke 10:33). The other eleven uses refer to God's compassion. In two separate parables Jesus uses this verb to refer to God's compassion in saving and forgiving sinners (Matt. 18:27 and Luke 15:20). The remainder of the uses of this verb all refer to compassion as the major motivation for Jesus' healing and miracles. So in nine out of eleven occurrences where this verb is used of God's compassion it refers to the compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ as his motivation for healing!

What is the meaning of *splanchnizomai* when it refers to God's compassion? The nominal form of this word originally referred to the inner parts of a man, the heart, liver, and so on. It could be used of the inward parts of a sacrificial animal, but it became common to use this word in reference to the lower parts of the abdomen, the intestines, and especially the womb (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971] 7:548).

Some theologians have felt that this term was too rough or graphic to be used in reference to God's compassion. Using the word for "intestines" to refer to God's compassion is akin to our using the word "guts" for courage in modern English, as when we say, "He really has guts." However, I think the New Testament writers meant to do exactly this. They were impressing on the readers the power and the force of God's compassion. They may also have had in mind a physical feeling associated with compassion. Sometimes a sharp pain in the abdomen will accompany intense feelings of compassion or pity for those we love. The choice of such a graphic word served to impress the New Testament Christians that God's compassion for them was rooted in his deep love for them and his sensitivity to their pain.

Surprised by the Power of the Spirit, by Jack Deere (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), pp. 279-280.