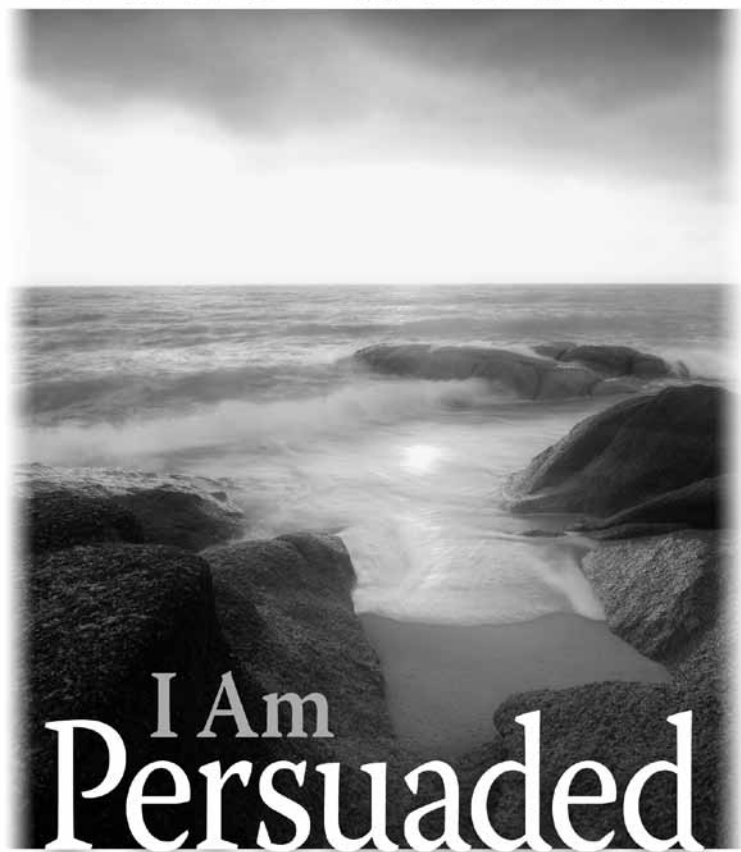


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Contents

Introduction: A Letter of Love	5
The Power of God: Romans 1	11
“The Goodness of God”: Romans 2	18
“Being Justified Freely by His Grace”: Romans 3	25
“The Troubling Gospel”: Romans 4	31
Grace Abounded Much More: Romans 5.....	38
The Wages of Sin: Romans 6.....	44
Wretched Man That I Am: Romans 7	50
No Condemnation: Romans 8	56

Introduction

A Letter of Love

Have you ever encountered a Bible passage that grabbed hold of your soul, held on, and wouldn't let you go until it had totally transformed your life?

I have.

And I want to share that text and the chapters that surround it, from one of the greatest love letters ever written—the New Testament book of Romans.

I'll tell you in a moment just which Bible verse seized me by the heartstrings and taught me to sing an entirely new song. But right now, by way of introduction, I want to share another verse—one found right at the heart of Romans. It's one that I quote often on *Voice of Prophecy* radio broadcasts. It's Romans 8:38, 39, which I usually recite from the good old King James Version. It goes like this: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This verse contains

- the assurance of God's love for me;
- the assurance that God's love extends to everyone who will receive it;
- the assurance that God's everlasting concern for planet Earth is founded on nothing less than the life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

I Am Persuaded

It's that assurance that has become the bedrock of my faith—the bedrock of my life. It is the hope by which I live, and the message that I proclaim to the world.

But it's not the verse that originally transformed my life.

I'm going to keep you waiting for that.

First a little background.

I was raised by loving, Christian parents, but I was raised in an era and a community where religion—at least as I experienced it—tended to focus more on behavior than on faith.

Now, don't get me wrong. Religion ought to include aspects of behavior. A religion that doesn't change how you live is nothing more than a philosophy.

But it's easy for some people to get so focused on good behavior—even using religious motivations to try to change other people's behaviors—that faith and grace get lost in a huge pile of performance expectations. And the result is that religious people end up carrying around a tremendous sense of guilt and inadequacy—a sense that you can never keep all the rules precisely enough to please God.

Have you ever felt that way?

I did.

And for a time, I rebelled against that feeling of guilt by turning a deaf ear to religion. I didn't reject it totally. I just put it off to the side and tried not to think about all the things I was doing wrong—or at least not doing well enough.

But still, niggling away at the back of my mind, there was a tremendous sense of inadequacy. A sense that I could never be good enough, that the requirements of the gospel went far beyond what I could ever fulfill. And somewhere, hidden in the clutter of secular thoughts, there was still that feeling that I ought to be trying harder, ought to be doing better, or I was going to lose my soul.

A Letter of Love

Sound familiar?

If so, if you've ever felt that way, I have really, really good news for you. And it's found in the verse that transformed my life.

But there I was, as a young man, feeling condemned; feeling that I could never be religious enough to please God.

And then God started talking to me.

Not audibly. But I could hear His voice. I could hear His call.

And do you know what He was saying?

Fred . . . Fred . . . Fred . . . It was almost like when He called Samuel in the Old Testament. Now, I'm neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. But I could hear the call of the Lord.

And He was calling me: the guilt-laden, weighed-down prodigal who thought he would be happier if he could completely tune out any spiritual influence in his life.

He found me in a rock music radio station, playing the top forty hits at top volume, and He told me in that still, small voice; He told me—the one who didn't want to hear His voice—that He wanted me to become a preacher and proclaim His message to others.

Frankly, I wanted to do anything but that. And I tried every way I knew to put off that call. But finally, there came a day when I told God, "All right. I'll go to the seminary, but here's the deal. If this works out OK, I'll be Your man. If not, You get off my back and leave me alone!"

That's the attitude I started the seminary with.

And in all honesty, I probably was hoping for option two—that God would quit bothering me, and I could get on with living life "My Way."

But then, in the second quarter of the seminary, I took an elective course on the book of Romans. In class I met Dr. Ivan

I Am Persuaded

Blazen. And I met God in a whole new way.

It happened while we were studying chapter 3.

Today, looking back on that experience, I can see that my life can be divided into two eras: *Before Romans* and *After Romans*.

Before Romans I had a wonderful sense of Christian ethics, of right and wrong, of dos and don'ts. But I never experienced any of the joy, the peace, or the hope that a Christian ought to have.

Before Romans I knew I wasn't good enough to go to heaven. No matter how hard I tried, I always fell way short of what God wanted. The harder I tried, the harder I fell. And with each fall, it was harder to get up. Finally, I was tempted to *give up*, not *get up*.

Before Romans I might have looked good on the outside, but inside I knew I was lost.

Then, in the seminary, I read the book of Romans, and a flood of light poured into my life.

Today, I'm thankful to tell you, I'm living in the *After Romans* era. The book is still shining light into my life! Never does a day go by that I don't claim the promises, the hope, and the assurance that is so powerfully portrayed in Romans.

The great Reformer Martin Luther thought that everyone should memorize the entire book of Romans. But if you're not any better at memorization than I am, he had a suggestion for you as well. He said that, because there is so much wonderful light shining from its pages, we ought to at least read something from it every day.

Read something from Romans every day. Just think how that would brighten up your life!

And that's something I *can* do. How about you? Wouldn't you like to have such great light shining into your life every day—maybe when you first get up in the morning?

In this book I want to share the light that means so much to

A Letter of Love

me. I will focus my attention on the first eight chapters of Romans, for that is where my soul found a deep revelation of the love that God has for me.

These chapters begin by illustrating the trouble that humanity is in apart from the salvation found in Jesus Christ.

For example, read Romans 3:10, “There is none righteous, no, not one.”

No, not one, and that includes Mother Teresa and your kindly grandmother and the young heroes who give their lives for their countries. No exceptions.

But the good news is that Romans doesn’t end on that hopeless note. It also offers the solution. It offers just exactly the hope that my guilt-worn heart needed.

The great theme of Romans is that, yes, I am not good enough and never will or can be good enough to be righteous before God. But Jesus Christ, who represents the righteousness of God Himself, is good enough, more than good enough. And by faith I stand covered in His righteousness and claim it as my own.

And now to the verse that seized me by the heartstrings and wouldn’t let me go. It follows one of the most-quoted verses in the Bible. But I don’t believe I had ever heard it mentioned in a sermon or in a Bible class in my entire life.

The verse I had heard—the one that preachers liked to wax eloquent on—was Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (NIV). I knew that verse by heart.

I knew that verse *in* my heart.

But somehow verse 24, the very next verse, had escaped me. It had never been brought to my attention.

Here’s what it says, “And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (NIV).

My heart, weighed down with a load of guilt I could never

I Am Persuaded

get rid of, almost leaped out of my chest when the weight of that verse landed on it. Because that verse is as light as a feather. It's as light as a feather but strong enough to lift all the other garbage that I was storing in my heart, and throw it clean away!

That day I discovered that I could have a clean heart. And my heart leaped for joy. I wanted to sing with the psalmist, "He has put a new song in my mouth—Praise to our God" (Psalm 40:3, NKJV)!

How did the redemption—this cleanness of heart—come? Did it come by our good works, by our acts of obedience, or by our faithfulness to God's commands? No, it came "by Christ Jesus." The King James Version reads, "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption *that is in Christ Jesus*" (emphasis added).

Where is the redemption found? In me? In my good works? In your good works? In Paul's good works? No, the redemption is found *in Jesus*. Our redemption is in Him, and in what He did for us, in the perfect life that He lived and that He offers to each of us as a gift.

It's a *gift*! Do you get that? This featherweight relief for your heart's heavy burdens is a *gift*! Given freely by God through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Have you claimed this gift for yourself? Have you felt the burdens being lifted from your heart?

I hope so. And as you continue reading here about the book of Romans, I hope that this will be your daily experience. In the upcoming chapters we're going to explore the depths of the greatest love letter in the Bible, wrestle with some difficult passages, keep our eyes on Jesus, and learn from Him the secrets of eternal life in the kingdom of God.

The Power of God

Romans 1

It was a small story, buried in the *New York Times* on December 21, 1924, next to some ads for furs, Oriental rugs, and pianos. The tiny headline read, "Hitler Tamed by Prison."

Adolph Hitler, once the demi-god of reactionary extremists, was released on parole from imprisonment at Fortress Landsburg, Bavaria, today and immediately left in an auto for Munich. He looked a much sadder and wiser man today than last spring when he, with Ludendorff and other radical extremists, appeared before a Munich court charged with conspiracy to overthrow the Government.

His behavior during imprisonment convinced the authorities that, like his political organization . . . [he] was no longer to be feared. It is believed he will retire to private life and return to Austria, the country of his birth.¹

To be fair, who in 1924 would have ever thought that within nine years a supposedly tamed demagogue would become the Führer, and lead the people into the most destructive war the world had ever seen?

Such a thought would have been inconceivable at that time. It was, after all, just six years since the end of what was then known as the Great War, or "the war to end all wars."

According to the best minds of the time, the twentieth century should have been characterized by peace, harmony, and advancement, not by the two greatest human conflagrations of history.

I Am Persuaded

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the optimism and enthusiasm were so strong they could be felt in the air. People believed that humanity was on an incredible path of moral, social, and scientific progress. The ignorances, the superstitions, and the barbarism of previous centuries were going to be relics of a decrepit past and would have no place in the enlightened future.

Consider the following, taken from a speech given just a decade or so before the twentieth century opened.

Therefore, gentlemen, we will not be shaken in our belief that our research and inventive activity leads mankind to higher levels of culture, ennobling it and making it more accessible to ideal aspirations, that the impending scientific age will diminish its hardships and its sickness, enhance its enjoyment of life, and make it better, happier, and more content with its fate.²

Wonderful, optimistic sentiments.

They were spoken by Werner von Siemens, founder of the well-known Siemens company, in a speech given in—of all places—Berlin, Germany.

How ironic that much of the destruction and violence of the twentieth century's wars came about directly as a result of the advances made in the "impending scientific age" that Herr Siemens thought would usher in a moral and technological utopia.

But the irony leads to my point. Many centuries earlier, the apostle Paul, writing a letter to the church in Rome, gave a description of humanity and human nature that presaged just how futile and misguided all this optimism really was.

If there's one thing that Paul makes clear at the beginning of

The Power of God

his letter to the Romans, it is that humanity is sinful and in need of redemption.

But I don't think we need Paul to teach us that humanity is evil. Just pick up the daily paper or read the headlines on the Yahoo! Web site.

No, we need the apostle Paul to show us just how futile and misguided all attempts at moral progress and salvation are *apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ*.

That's why in Romans 1 (after a long introduction in which Paul speaks directly to the believers in Rome, expressing his desire to visit them) the apostle shares a central truth not only of the book of Romans but of the Bible itself, a truth about human depravity *and* the solution to that depravity—the gospel.

Paul writes,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them (Romans 1:16–19, NASB).

Notice here the first thing that Paul says about the gospel. It is the "power of *God* for salvation" (emphasis added). It's not the power of human reason and intellect that brings salvation. Nor is it the power of human science, as Siemens had hoped. No, it is the "power of God."

Think about what this means. The visible universe, the

I Am Persuaded

universe that we can see, is billions of light-years across in diameter. And yet scientists speculate that this visible universe comprises only a small portion of what is really out there. The rest we can't see.

Now when Paul talks about the power of God, he's talking about the same incredible power that created the universe, the part we can and can't see. That's a lot of power! And the good news is that *this* is the same incredible power that is at work for our salvation.

In other words, salvation is something that God, using His incredible power, does *for us* because we can't do it for ourselves. *If the power that created the universe is working to save us, how could we be lost, other than by our own choice?*

Paul then touches on a core thought in his letter to the Romans. He says that in the gospel "*the righteousness of God*" is revealed (emphasis added). He just finished talking about "the power of God," and now he is talking about the "righteousness of God."

Again, it's all God. The gospel is the power of God for salvation, and that salvation comes through the "righteousness of God," which is revealed in the gospel. And that's because the message of the gospel is salvation for humans *only* through the righteousness of God, which is credited to us—given to us—by faith.

And this leads into the great theme of Romans, the theme that has literally changed the course of history. Now quoting the Old Testament, Paul writes, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

It is by faith that we take hold of the "righteousness of God" as revealed in the gospel. We are sinners, we have violated God's law, and we have no righteousness and goodness in and of ourselves; therefore we are condemned to face the "wrath of God."

The Power of God

In fact, that is what Paul says in the next verse: “For *the wrath of God* is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (verse 18; emphasis added).

Notice, we have seen the “power of God,” the “righteousness of God,” and now the “wrath of God”—all in these few verses. The gospel is the “power of God,” in which the “righteousness of God” is revealed by how He saves from the “wrath of God” all who live by faith in Jesus.

Paul then spends the rest of the chapter depicting the sorry state of humanity and why it deserves God’s wrath. This reality forms the background for the wonderful news that none of us, no matter how deserving of it, needs to face this wrath because Jesus faced it for us at the cross.

Or as the author Ellen White so beautifully put it:

Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His.³

This is the foundation that Paul is setting down in the first chapter of Romans. Read from verse 18 to the end of the chapter. Paul paints a pretty solemn picture of humanity; there’s no optimism about human progress.

Unfortunately, human history has proven his bleak assessment to be correct.

And yet the whole point, beginning with this chapter, is to show that no matter how bad the situation, God has a solution. And that solution is the gospel—“the power of God for

I Am Persuaded

salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

His phrase “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” is just another way of referring to all of humanity. His point is that anyone who believes—regardless of ethnic or national background—who comes to Jesus in faith, trusting in His righteousness, which is the “righteousness of God,” can have salvation.

The solution to the problem is big enough to embrace everyone who claims it by faith. And that’s because the solution is found in Jesus and what He has done for us; it’s never in ourselves and never can be.

Jesus died for us, so we can have eternal life. He died for you and for me. No matter what our lives have been, we can claim His perfect life in our place.

A man who was about to be executed for a horrible crime, admitted, “I’ve lived a rough life.” But then he went on to ask a question I think we all should ask, “I wonder if God has a place for people like me.”

I have to confess.

I’ve wondered the same thing about myself.

It’s not that I’ve done anything I could be executed for.

But still, I know my life isn’t worthy of being extended for eternity!

Is there a place in God’s eternal kingdom for a person like me?

Yes!

But only because of Jesus.

Only because of the gospel, the “power of God for salvation” for people like me.

My only claim to that salvation is my desperate need.

Your only claim to salvation is your utter need.

But the message of Romans is *that is enough!*

The Power of God

That is enough because, as Paul affirms at the heart of this great book,

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38, 39, KJV).

God's grace is enough to save us from our sins, and it's also enough to do something more in our lives, to do something to our hearts. We'll look at just what that is in the next chapter.

1. "Hitler Tamed by Prison," *New York Times*, December 21, 1924.

2. A. Hermann, "Auf eine höhere Stufe des Daseins erheben," 812, quoted in Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 35.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1940), 25.