

COMFORTS FROM ROMANS



Celebrating the Gospel One Day at a Time

ELYSE M.
FITZPATRICK

“There is nothing soft or sentimental about the comfort offered in this book. Instead, it opens our eyes to see the miseries of our self-absorption and self-effort salvation and then applies the substantive, solid comfort of abundant grace, imputed righteousness, purchased peace, blessed wretchedness, no condemnation, no separation.”

Nancy Guthrie, author of *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow* and the Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible study series

“Elyse’s gratitude for God’s grace spills out onto every page of this book as she opens the pages of her life and comforts us with the comfort she has received from God’s Word. Her theological precision and her joy in God’s extravagant love instructed my mind and thrilled my heart.”

Susan Hunt, Women’s Ministry Consultant, Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America; author, *Spiritual Mothering*

“Martin Luther called Paul’s letter to the Romans ‘the most important piece in the New Testament. . . . It is purest Gospel.’ My dear friend Elyse captures the purity and power of Romans here. In bite-size, digestible chunks she devotionally and practically unpacks the ‘now-power’ of the gospel, showing that the gospel doesn’t simply free us from the past and free us for the future. It also frees us in the present from being enslaved to things like fear, insecurity, anger, self-reliance, bitterness, entitlement, and insignificance. Being both a seasoned counselor and a top-notch theologian, I can’t think of anyone better to comfort sinners through Romans than Elyse!”

Tullian Tchividjian, Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church; author, *Glorious Ruin*

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INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther called the book of Romans

the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.¹

Ponder those words. Luther said that our hearts should be occupied with the truths contained within the book of Romans “every day.” In fact, he said that it is such an important book that it should be to us like “daily bread of the soul.” My soul needs that *daily* bread because although I go to bed at night believing the gospel, I wake up every morning needing to hear it again. Sure, Jesus loves me. Sure, the gospel is good news. But why did my coffee pot have to overflow today, when I’m already in such a hurry?

I know I should feast on the Bread of Life every morning. But I don’t. Some mornings I have to run out the door before I’ve breakfasted on him. Other mornings I dither away my time, messing about on Facebook or answering e-mails, and then I realize that a good part of the morning is gone and I still haven’t sat down with him.

My guess is that it may be the same for you. The demands of family, friends, and work, the siren call of the Internet, a relentless and futile curiosity about “what’s going on,” all draw me away from the repast my soul needs. Other times it’s just a beautiful day and I want to go to the beach or the pool or the park or anywhere just so that I’m doing something fun!

And so I run out the door hungry. I don’t always remember (or even want to remember) to feast on this Bread. Other times I’ll admit that I’m just not that hungry, at least not for him. And then, inevitably, I end up at the same place every time: working or buying or playing or

clicking more, despairing when I realize that I've tried to fill my soul with something other than him, and all my work or efforts to distract or fill or satisfy myself are not enough to do anything other than leave me starving for more. Oh, for a quieted heart that would simply sit down at his feet and let him feed me every day!

Hence this book. It's my prayer that this book will do three things for us all. First, I pray that it will make us really hungry for the Bread of Life (John 6:35). Second, I pray that the Spirit will use it to nourish our souls on the gospel. And more than anything else, I pray that this little devotional will draw us toward the book of Romans itself and, of course, ultimately, to the great love of God our Father and to the boundless love and incomprehensible labor of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, here's what I suggest: first, I recommend that you begin reading through Romans. Because this little book is not meant to be a commentary on the entire book of Romans but rather a devotional taste of the truths presented in chapters 1 through 8, you could determine to read at the least the particular chapter in Romans I'm referencing so that you'll understand what I'm saying in the context of Paul's thought. If you have Internet capability, my suggestion is that you listen to it online at a website such as this one for the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV): <http://esvbible.org/search/romans>. Reading while you listen is probably the best way to begin to understand, and I personally find it a great help in corralling my distracted thoughts. Of course, you could also read it out loud to yourself.

As I said above, my goal in this book is to make us hungry for him and to begin to present Christ to us in such a way that we will taste and see that he is good. I admit that I have chosen very specific passages from Romans to accomplish this goal. I have not commented on everything Paul presents in Romans, nor have I tried to exegete entire chapters. There are wonderful study books already in the marketplace on this topic,² not the least of which is Luther's commentary on Romans (especially his *Preface to Romans*, which was written in the later years of his life after his theological thought had matured).

You'll see that I've worked a lot in some portions of Romans and only pulled a passage or two out of other ones. Again, I'm not trying to exegete the whole book but rather cull from the book one message: the absolutely shocking message of grace.

I hope that this devotional will create a hunger for more of Romans because, as Luther writes, it is "the very purest Gospel," and whether or not we realize it, the message of the gospel is the message we need to hear. There are so many anti-gospel messages being proclaimed today in our churches, self-help messages about how to work harder and discover your potential and make Jesus proud. All these messages are anti-gospel because they're about you, your work, your goodness, your plans and success, and, yes, even your obedience. They bend you in on yourself. They make you think that everything is up to you and that your performance is all that matters. And they don't train your palate to savor the sweet, humble manna from above. Rather than bending you in on yourself, Paul doesn't even mention your obligations until Romans 6, where he simply tells you to consider what Christ has already done. *You are not the subject of Romans*. He is, and that's how it should be.

Luther wrote that the message of the gospel articulated in Romans can "never be read or pondered too much." We never have to worry about becoming bored with it, as if the gospel were some new fad that will fade into obscurity like some one-hit wonder. Our souls will never grow tired of the old, old story, simply because it is the job of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus Christ freshly delicious to us. I'm convinced that even in heaven, when faith has become sight, when we have perfect faculties for thought, when our bodies are finally able to persevere through weakness, tiredness, and distraction, even then, we won't be able to fully plumb the magnificent truths presented in Paul's letter to Rome and embodied before us. Bored? A flash in the pan? The gospel? Hardly! The truth is that, as Luther writes, "the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes." So, scoot yourself on up to the table and ask the Spirit to absolutely glut you with the gospel from Romans. Is your mouth watering? Oh, I hope so.

Day 1

A RUINED RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus . . . —Romans 1:1

The great apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, established churches, and ultimately suffered martyrdom, didn't deserve God's blessing. He didn't deserve to call himself a "servant," a "bond-servant," or even a "love slave" of Jesus Christ. No, he deserved to be called an "enemy" because, after all, that's the identity he had chosen for himself. You remember that before he became Christ's servant, he was a man who breathed out "threats and murder" against Christ's church (Acts 9:1). A servant of Christ Jesus? Hardly.

Paul gloried in his role as persecutor of the church, because he hated the gospel. Yes, I know: "hated" seems like a strong word, but that is exactly how Paul felt. He hated the gospel so much that he determined to root it out and ruin the lives of those who loved it (Gal. 1:13). But then God ruined him, not by giving him the judgment he deserved but by giving him grace instead.

Don't be mistaken. Aside from his hatred of Christians, Paul would have been just the sort of person you would have wanted for a neighbor. He came from a good home; he always obeyed all the rules. He would have mowed his lawn and voted, and never would have hung around with shady characters. Yes, we would assume that Paul was a great candidate to receive the love of God. After all, who was more zealous for righteousness than he? But our assumption would have been wrong. Of course, God loved Paul but not because Paul was good. No, God loved Paul in spite of his religious goodness, which was the very thing that made Paul repulsive in God's eyes (Isa. 64:6). You see, Paul's problem was not that he was outwardly bad,

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but rather that he trusted in his own goodness and ability to satisfy the law's demands. It was his self-trust that made him the enemy of Jesus. And so one day, on the road to Damascus, God ruined his self-righteousness—*with grace*.

Here's the shocking news: God loves to display his mercy by wrecking "good" people. That seems counterintuitive, doesn't it? We think that God loves to wreck bad people, to strip them of their badness, and, of course, he does. But God also delights in wrecking those who seem good, at least outwardly. Paul's primary impediment to relationship with God was not his irreligion. It was his religion. Don't forget: Paul truthfully boasted that he had been "advancing" beyond all his contemporaries and was "extremely zealous" for the law (Gal. 1:14). Paul saw himself as a champion of the one true faith, and it was this very identity that barred him from serving the God he would have said he was living for. Paul needed wrecking, and Jesus was just the one to do it. So one day, just when we would assume that Paul had gone too far and really blown his chances with Jesus, Jesus knocked him off his feet, blinded him, and introduced him to grace. What a Savior!

Paul's story is good news for those of us who are tempted to put our trust in ourselves, in our own ability to work hard enough to merit God's favor. Grace is so surprising! It's surprising because while it may seem likely that a prostitute would recognize her need for rescue, the homeschooling, bread-baking, devotion-reading mom who attends her local church faithfully (while trusting in her own goodness) will choke on the humiliating message of gospel rescue. Rescue? Why would she need rescuing?

If we are to embrace the message of the gospel and become free, joyous, and zealous servants of Jesus Christ, then all—and I really mean *all*—the work has to be done by him. Why? *So that all the glory will go to him*, so that we boast in the work of Jesus *alone* (Isa. 48:11). "Then what becomes of our boasting?" Paul asks. "It is excluded," he answers (Rom. 3:27). Paul learned how the Father strips us of everything we're tempted to trust in. He confessed that he had finally

given up relying on his own goodness and was instead counting all his religious goodness

as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own* that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Phil. 3:8–9)

Through the good news of the gospel, the Lord graciously strips us of our slavish devotion to our reputation and says, “Count it as rubbish so that you might gain the true righteousness from my Son.” He frees us from the incessant nagging of our inner slave driver and frees us to love others without being slavishly driven by them either. He ruins our pride in our accomplishments, thereby freeing us from the demand that others live up to our expectations.

As our short time today now nears an end, I wonder how you would describe yourself. Do you think of yourself as God’s servant? I would imagine that you do, but what does that servant identity rest on? Paul had formerly assumed that he was serving God because he was zealous and working harder than anyone else, and that perspective made him cruel and demanding. Paul was wrong. He was wrong because he trusted in himself instead of in Jesus. Does your servant identity rest primarily on the work you hope to accomplish today? Or does it rest on the service and righteousness of Another? Are you free to love others who do not live up to your standards? Can you say, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling”?

Day 2

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus . . . set apart for the gospel of God.
—Romans 1:1

There are certain “Christian” words that we can become overly familiar with. Sadly, the word *gospel* is primary among them. After all, our Christian life doesn’t even begin until we hear and believe the gospel; but then most of us go on, leaving it behind with the rest of the trappings of our spiritual infancy, as if we didn’t need it anymore. My guess is that about now you might be wondering if you need to read this today. I mean, after all, don’t you already know the gospel? Even the word itself seems trite, doesn’t it? *Gospel*—really?

Believe me, I understand this response because it’s how I respond too. My heart is so bent in upon itself that it’s easy for me to think that I already get everything that needs to be gotten about the gospel and that I should move on to where the real action is, in other words, me and my day. Won’t you please bear with me, though, while I rehearse gospel truth to you once again? Perhaps it’s the very thing your tired old soul needs to hear today.

The word *gospel* literally means “good message” or “good news.” In this case, it is a message or news report specifically about Jesus—who he is and what he has done. It is not a report about us or how we’re doing. It is a report about how the Son, the second person of the Trinity, left heaven to be clothed with human flesh and become a human being, just like us. Jesus was born in the same way as the rest of us; he lived in a real home with real parents, siblings, and friends. Like you, he felt tired and hungry, and when the desert sun beat down on his head, he perspired and thirsted for a drink. He yawned and stretched, rubbed sore feet, felt the sting when his siblings hit him and friends deserted him. He enjoyed hugs from his mom and dad, a

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splash in cool water, and a good meal. He had to learn table manners and how to read. He grew in his understanding of his identity and calling, all the while perfectly fulfilling every command of the law in our place.

Then, after living in virtual obscurity for thirty years, he began his life's work of publicly inaugurating the kingdom of God: he called disciples, taught the masses, healed the sick, and delivered those who were oppressed by the Devil. He perfectly fulfilled his life's work as he prepared to give himself as an offering for sin. He suffered every day and especially during the final days of his earthly life. He cried in Gethsemane as he became more and more aware of God's impending wrath. Like a lamb, he stood silently before Pilate and the Sanhedrin. He was mocked, scourged, stripped, beaten, and spit upon. He bore the crossbeam up Calvary's hill and was hoisted up between heaven and earth. And then he began to suffer like no one had ever suffered before or would ever suffer again.

His Father poured down an eternity's worth of wrath upon him for all the sins of his chosen ones—in three hours. Then, when he had finished all his work, when he had emptied every drop from the cup of his Father's wrath, he relinquished his life into the hands of the Father he loved, who had just crushed him. His body was taken down and placed in a cave. A stone was rolled in front of the opening. All was darkness. But then, after three days, he was raised to new life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Again he emerged into the dim light of our world, bringing with him the ineffable brightness of a universe remade, having reversed the curse and defeated the power of darkness forever.

For the next forty days he taught his friends about the kingdom of God and gave them deep assurance of his resurrection. With great joy he then ascended to his home and was received into heaven's loving embrace. Gifts of celebration were sent back upon his church, gifts that would remind, preserve, enlighten, and empower his bride as he took up his throne, ruling as King over her until he is, at last, reunited with her. This is the good news of Jesus Christ; this is the gospel.

But the gospel also has a subjective component. It is the *good* news about what Jesus has done, but unlike any other news you might see on television, his work speaks to us personally. It is good news *for us*. The gospel brings us into relationship with him; it transforms and liberates us; it makes us altogether new. The facts about his incarnation, perfection, death, resurrection, ascension, rule, and bestowal of the Spirit change everything. His incarnation tells you that he knows by experience what it is to be you today. Are you walking through a time of trial? He's walked through it too. He understands completely. His death and perfect life mean that not only are you forgiven for your sin, that God has no wrath left for you, but also that his record of perfect obedience is yours—today.

The resurrection demonstrates that just as the power of death has been forever broken, the power of sin in your life has been crushed, too. It also speaks to God's acceptance of Jesus's sacrifice for you. His ascension tells you that the incarnation is ongoing: he continues to wear your flesh and rules from heaven with nail-scarred hands. By sending the Spirit, he assures us that the Father has welcomed him home and that we will be welcomed home one day also. Now, *that's good news!*

Oh, my friends, do you think about this good news every day? Won't you let it inform, enflame, embolden, and cheer you? The gospel? Oh, yeah. We should be like little children screaming, "Again! Again!" when we hear the gospel, and never let our calloused hearts grow tired of it. "Again! Again!"

Day 3

A HIDDEN GLORY

... concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord . . . —Romans 1:3–4

The gospel is good news about Jesus Christ. Paul tells us that Jesus was the expected one the prophets had foretold, the one the Law and the Prophets bore witness to (Rom. 3:21; 16:26); he was Messiah, David's son, who would reign eternally from his throne (Ps. 89:3–4; Jer. 23:5–6). For hundreds of years the nation of Israel had been awaiting the Messiah's coming, but many failed to recognize him when he finally arrived. Why? *Because his glory was hidden in weakness and humility.* He didn't look much like a king. Where were his royal robes? Where was his bejeweled scepter? No one heard his voice in the street demanding allegiance (Matt. 12:19). If he was Israel's king, why wasn't he crushing her enemies under his boot instead of healing the enemies' servants? (Matt. 8:5–13). Paul describes Jesus's humiliation in Philippians 2:6–7:

Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Where was his glory? It was hidden in weakness and humiliation, in questionable ancestry, in poverty and insignificance. Yes, Jesus was the son of David, but not in the way you would expect. He was descended from David "according to the flesh," not according to good breeding, not according to sterling reputation or great political power, but according to the flesh.

Think of that: Paul's first description of Jesus wasn't that he is

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the “Son of God in power,” but rather that he “descended from David according to the flesh.” What was David like? We like to clean him up and think of him as the sweet psalmist, a “man after God’s own heart” (see 1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), and he was that. But he was also an adulterer and a murderer. He was responsible not only for the deaths of his illegitimate child and of Uriah (Bathsheba’s husband), but also for the slaughter of seventy thousand others (2 Sam. 24:15). Jesus identified with David *according to the flesh*. He identified with David, the murderer, the sinner. He isn’t ashamed to be called David’s brother (Heb. 2:11).

Of course, that Jesus was “descended from David according to the flesh” means that he is incarnate, fully human, but it also means that Jesus shares our ancestry. He takes on our humiliation and shame. In order for Jesus to be our mediator, he had to suffer every part of our humiliation, to identify fully with us. He had to start out with a bad reputation—like us. Wasn’t he the illegitimate son? Wasn’t he the son of a loser? Didn’t he hang out with losers?

For our sake, *Jesus had to be fully tempted to see his identity as rooted solely in his earthly reputation*. Then he had to fight to fulfill his purpose as the incarnate Son even *though his glory was (temporarily) hidden*. He had to suffer the humiliation of the thorns, the lash, the robe, the spikes, the insults, and the scoffing. And then he had to suffer the humiliation of being deserted by his Father just when his reputation should have, finally and at last, been fully proved. Instead, at that pivotal moment when he should have been vindicated, we hear him crying out in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Oh, now finally, this is the time for glory, but it comes *after* shame: he “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” For him, humiliation meant being called the Son of David *before* he was proven to be the Son of God with power. “The Gospel, then, is the joyous message of Christ, the Son of God, who first humbled Himself and then was glorified through the Holy Spirit.”³

Ah, here's power and glory on display. But it doesn't come the way we think it will. It flows out of great weakness. In fact, it comes *because* of the great weakness, humility, and submission of Jesus. He would not have known the power of the resurrection, the majestic name "Son of God with power," if he had not first known the humiliation of death. "*Therefore* God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9).

The gospel takes everything we think we know about getting ahead and turns it upside down. It shows us the power of weakness and the glory in humiliation. I admit that I hate humiliation. I don't like feeling weak, and in every way that I continue to try to hang on to my good reputation and fight against God's humbling, I militate against the gospel and the work of Jesus. I forget that God "resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5; see also James 4:6). I always want the crown without the cross. Is it the same for you? The good news is that Jesus walked through humiliation perfectly so that even when we succumb to our pride, we have his good reputation—a reputation of sweet humility and perfect submission to God's will. We have his identity now: we are his royal sons, crowned with his glory and honor, or as Stuart Townend sings, "All the blessings he deserved [are] poured on my unworthy soul."⁴

Day 4

LOVED BY GOD

. . . including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints . . .

—Romans 1:6–7

On any given day, what thoughts float through your mind about who you are and what God thinks of you? Do you ever think, “I hope that I obey today so that God will love me”? Perhaps you don’t say those exact words; maybe what you feel is something more akin to an uneasy sense that the Lord is just a tad irritated with you and waiting for an opportunity to set you straight. Yes? You’re not alone. As I’ve spoken to Christians around the country—and observed the workings of my own heart—it seems that rest in God’s absolute love and welcome doesn’t come naturally to us.

It’s interesting that Paul introduces his masterpiece on the gospel with this thought: “You belong to Jesus Christ. You are loved by God. You are saints.” He begins by briefly introducing the Messiah, then he describes his own identity, and then, finally, ours. Before he gets to the whole world being guilty before God, before he speaks of double imputation (Christ’s righteousness for our sin) and how we should respond, he tells us that we are loved by God and are his possession. He tells us that we are his saints, his holy ones.

Why would Paul start here?

Of course, I don’t know exactly why the Holy Spirit had Paul write what he did but I can guess. Perhaps people in the Roman world needed to hear that they were called, loved, and welcomed by God just as much as we do. The ancient culture in which they lived was hyper-religious, and terrible fears bred suspicions that at any point one might offend some capricious god or fail to please an all-powerful emperor. Disease, tragedy, and death lurked around every corner. There were

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hundreds of gods—gods for every occurrence and difficulty, gods you had to appease or suffer the consequences. They were impetuous, angry, and jealous. In addition, their emperor, who claimed to be a god, was demanding, wicked, and cruel. The rules were constantly changing, life was out of control, without rhyme or reason, and while the gods seemed to help make it more manageable, in another way they made it more terrifying because you could never be sure that you might not be offending in some way.

Can you see why Paul might have started his letter as he did? The Roman Christians needed to know that their God wasn't like the gods of the culture that surrounded them. We need to know it too. At first blush it might seem that we're nothing like the ancient Romans, but aren't we? Did you ever see anyone knock on wood or throw salt over his shoulder or shudder when a black cat crossed her path? These are pagan constructs, fresh from Roman daily life. Even as Christians, in some ways we're just as superstitious as they were. We just run our superstitions through a religious grid. Did we have a flat tire on the way to work? It was probably because we didn't take time to do our devotions today. Did our washing machine overflow? Maybe God is irritated with us and trying to teach us a lesson. Do you ever say, "It's just going to be 'one of those days'"?

Christianity stands completely apart from all other religions because it's not up to us to work our way into our God's favor. We do worship a holy God who demands loving obedience, but he's unique because he took all the judgment for our failure onto himself. He's already done everything for us. This is the scandalous, incredible Christian message of the incarnate God becoming man and dying in our place to bring us to himself. And it's the message that we need to hear over and over again because we're never completely convinced of it. That's not to say that we don't believe it at all; it's just that there always seems to be some sort of lurking suspicion that he's not as good as he says he is. He declares his love for us in the most lavish manner, and still we wake up wondering if he'll like us better today if somehow we can get our act together.

Even so, he patiently continues to assure and reassure us of his love. He's already demonstrated it in the most outrageous way: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). He absolutely delights in demonstrating his mercy and love. Rather than our failures frustrating him, our sin simply serves to make his mercy more beautiful.⁵ We can believe in this love and rest in it, or we can try to figure out what makes him tick and then make a list of rules we need to obey to keep him from punishing us. Either we can believe in his love and welcome, or we can move back to ancient Rome in our hearts.

What do you have to do to be a recipient of this kind of love? Simply believe. Believe that it is true. Don't worry: you don't even have to remember it perfectly to continue to be a recipient of it. Why? Because Jesus always remembered it perfectly in your place. He's given us grace and peace, not superstitions and lists. We are loved by God, and we live in his world—not in a world of fate or luck or karma. Oh, glorious, shocking, transforming truth! We are loved by God! We belong to him! No superstitions, no lists, no getting our act together to make him love us. Simply believe.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

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 for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”
—Romans 1:16–17

How much righteousness do you need to be saved? How much law do you have to obey in order to gain salvation? Will good intentions or sincere efforts suffice? No, good intentions and sincere efforts will never be enough. *Absolute perfection at all times* is what is required. Every person must fulfill every single law in the entire Bible at every moment of every day of their life, no matter what their circumstances or abilities. When Jesus said that our righteousness had to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20), he wasn’t using hyperbole. He said, “You must therefore be *perfect* as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

Oh, and by the way, it’s not just an outward obedience that’s required. No, the only acceptable obedience is one that comes from the heart, with the sole motivation being pure love for God and neighbor. This kind of obedience is not about feeling better about yourself or doing unto others so they will return the favor. Jesus summarized God’s requirements in this way: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39). All of our righteousness is tethered to our loving God and man perfectly—and none of us does.

In light of these truths, the difficulty that is before every person is this: *How am I going to obey and gain life and salvation? Am I going*

COMFORTS FROM ROMANS

to rely on my ability or on the ability of Another? That's not just a question for unbelievers. It's a question for believers, too. You may have been saved thirty years ago, but you still need to answer that question every day. Upon whom does your salvation, your welcome, your adoption, and your forgiveness rest?

Believers need a powerful reminder of the answer to this question because in our heart of hearts we know that even though we are saved, we're not making the grade. The incessant demand for perfection continues to plague us. While at heart we know there's no excuse for our selfishness and self-centeredness, for our unbelief and idolatry, year after year we fail to live up to the demands of our conscience and God's law. So we numb ourselves through some sort of self-indulgence or determine that, by golly, this year we're going to do better. Maybe we'll even get really serious and buy one of the hundreds of "How to Get Your Act Together" books churned out every year (thin pabulum for our guilty, enslaved conscience) only to find that at year's end, we remain weak, despairing, and fatally flawed.

Oh, is there any hope for us? Our hearts echo Paul's cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). Is there any power that can free us from the law's demand and our failure? Is there any salvation, any way to breathe without transgressing the Lord's requirements? Oh, yes, and thank God! The answer from heaven is the powerful remedy. It is a resounding yes that shatters all our fears and insecurities. It frees and assures us; it delights and empowers us. And it is the only voice with enough weight to silence every accusation once and for all. What is that answer? The gospel, of course.

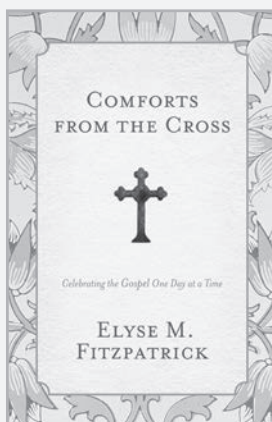
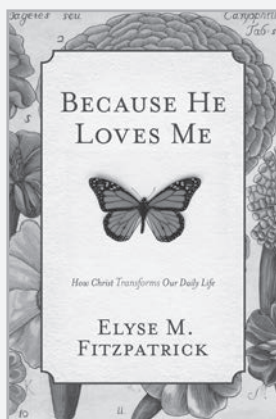
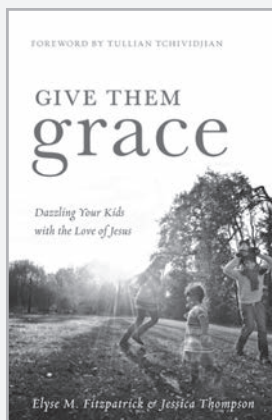
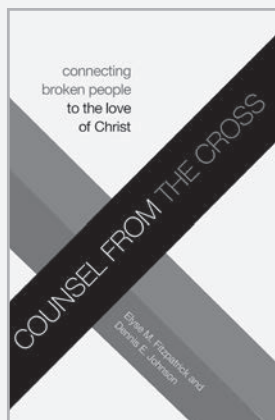
The gospel is the power of God for our salvation. It is the good news that the "righteousness of God" has been lived out in the person and work of Jesus Christ and that, if we believe, this perfect righteousness and record is ours—*just as it was his*. Think of that! Salvation is ours because Jesus fulfilled every demand of the law from a heart of perfect love, beginning with Bethlehem's ignominious cries all through Calvary's scandalous death. Salvation is ours because God

has determined to provide it for us. It was his power that brought it to pass—his power caused the incarnation; he “overshadowed” the Virgin Mary. It was his power that enabled the Son to live a life of perfect obedience, always doing the things that were pleasing to his Father. And it was his incalculable power that enabled him to pour out fury upon the soul of the Son he loved. Think of the power that it took for him to punish the righteous One! The gospel, not your works, goodness, or determination, is the power of God for salvation.

Ready to hear the good news again? In Christ the righteousness that God requires he powerfully gives to all who will believe! And belief in his utter satisfaction is the *only* power that can free us from shame, assure us of his welcome, and transform us. The gospel is the only good news powerful enough to cleanse and assure us.

So today the questions you must ask yourself are these: Who will you rely on to fulfill the law? How will you answer your conscience’s demands? Will you rest in the righteousness of God bestowed on you simply because you believe, or will you determine to try harder so that you can approve of yourself and earn God’s favor? If you believe, the righteousness of God is yours—now. Will you rest in his power alone?

Other books by
ELYSE FITZPATRICK



Although we may go to bed at night believing the gospel, we wake up every morning needing to hear it again. Yet most of us don't have time to dive into a lengthy commentary on the book of Romans—the book Paul wrote in order to showcase the glorious riches of the gospel.

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