

## THE COMPASS

# What Love Is Like

## *Postcards from Paul, Part 1*

Doug Brendel

You've got mail! From God!

If you open a Bible you'll find that a big chunk of it is mail. Correspondence. Letters. These are situations where God inspired one person to write to another person, or to a group of people, and help them deal with their issues.

But knowing that we would be dealing with the same issues 2,000 years later, God ordained that these letters would not simply be sent and received, open and read, and tossed in the trash—

but rather, they would be preserved, handed down, and incorporated into our Scriptures, so that we could benefit from them too.

Most of the letters preserved in the Scriptures were written by the apostle Paul.

And he wrote most of his letters to his friends in various cities or communities.

He traveled all the time, and he would be in one place, and he would hear about a problem in another place — maybe a city where he had previously visited — and he would whip out his laptop and fire off an email ... sort of.

Actually he would whip out his quill pen and dash off a parchment scroll, or in some cases, when he got old and feeble, he would dictate, and someone else would do the physical writing.

Someone would hand-carry the scroll to the destination, the people in the churches would open the scroll, read it aloud, hand it around from group to group, study it, pray about it—

and invariably, deep inside their hearts, the Spirit of God would confirm that what Paul was saying to them was really true.

It was truly inspired by God.

It was truly reflective of his design for their lives.

In these 7 sessions, we're going to go on a wonderful tour, and land our plane at each one of 7 cities Paul sent letters to.

And right now, to begin our tour, we'll sail to Italy, and touch down in beautiful Rome.

**[Travel agent clip promoting beautiful Rome?]**

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, Rome was the center of the universe.

Capital of the Roman Empire, and the Empire stretched from Western Europe to the Middle East, with about 54 million people total.

Rome had fabulous architecture — palaces, temples, monuments, amphitheatres. It had circuses, baths.

There was the Colosseum — this is where, within a few years, Christians would be thrown to the lions.

There was Circus Maximus, where they held the big races like the famous one in *Ben Hur*.

In the winter of the year 57 A.D., Paul was over in the Greek city of Corinth, staying at the home of a wealthy friend, hunkering down through the winter. He had time to sit and think and pray and write, and he wanted to express to the Christians in Rome kind of an overview-explanation of the entire Gospel. So Paul's letter to the Romans is the longest of his letters — it's about 10,000 words; if you received it via the Internet today, it would be a 123K email — and it's the most like a college lecture. It's a detailed explanation, with lots of logical reasoning. It's complicated and sometimes difficult to wade through. It's heavy with theology and references to ancient philosophy. It's a rich, beautiful articulation of God's design.

What Paul wanted to get through to the Romans, and what God wants to get through to us, is the truth about how he loves us. In this letter there are 3 great truths about God's love, and if we grasp these truths, it will actually change the way we think, the way we talk, the way we live.

But frankly, I'm not in the mood for a graduate school lecture. I'd like to go to the other extreme. I'd like to make this as user-friendly as possible. Let me boil down Paul's letter to the Romans into the simplest possible terms.

Here's the idea:

***God's love is like water.***

God's love is like water in 3 crucial ways.

First: **Everyone needs it.**

We can't live without water.

We're designed to crave water.

Our bodies are infused with water.

The human body is more than 60% water.

Your blood is 83% water.

Your muscles are 75% water.

Your brain is 70% water.

Even your bones are 22% water!

You can live quite a while without food.

Your body will use up the fat you've stored from all those trips to Krispy Kreme.

After it runs out of fat it will start using up the protein in your muscles.

This process can take a number of weeks.

But just four days without water, and you're close to dead.

A week, and it's over.

You have absolutely got to have water in some form, to survive.

The same is true of God's love, although we normally don't think in these terms.

Some of us tend to think of God's love as if it's kind of a shrug-of-the-shoulders, take-it-or-leave-it deal.

Maybe I need God's love today, maybe I don't. Not really thinking about it? No problem.

Maybe I can make it on my own.  
I'm good enough, I'm smart enough.

But Paul says to the Romans, you're wrong. You need God's love. You're going to thirst to death without it.

And you know why? The way he puts it in **Romans 3:23** is, "**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**"

There's nothing less popular in our culture today than to talk about "sin," but sin is just the old-fashioned word for busting God's ideal, contradicting the way he designed you to live.

This means you fall short of the fabulous potential that God dreamed up for you when he first dreamed you up.

The sense of peace, the sense of joy, the contentedness and fulfillment that your heart longs for — God wants you to have all of that.

He wants to give you all of that.

He knows that the way he designed you, you crave that stuff.

But he also knows, the way he designed you, you can only get it from him.

I can't get real peace and joy and contentedness and fulfillment from buying a new Lexus or scoring a promotion at work or finding the perfect marriage partner... in the same way that I can't quench my thirst by looking at a photograph of Niagara Falls, or by touching my tongue to the outside of a bottle of Evian.

I have to have the water.

I have to have God's love.

It is not an optional life-accessory that you can choose to pay extra for or go without. My spirit craves true love. I am designed to be infused by God's love.

My spiritual self starts to wither if I'm less than 60% God's love.

My spiritual muscles get weak if they're less than 75% God's love.

I need to be in a love relationship with God. Nothing else satisfies the cravings of my spirit.

People don't realize that they're living on water; your body doesn't feel like 60% water, it doesn't slosh around when you move.

And people don't realize that they're living on God's love; we are only able to survive thanks to God's grace.

Paul doesn't just say "everybody's a sinner" and leave it at that.

"**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" isn't even the end of the sentence — there's a comma there.

Paul says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God **AND ARE JUSTIFIED FREELY** — In other words, we've blown it, but we get away with it. We're guilty, but we're declared innocent.

How does it happen? Paul goes on immediately to say we "**are justified freely BY HIS GRACE.**"

Grace is unmerited favor. God does it because he loves us.

God's love is like water: everyone needs it. And God makes it totally, freely available to us.

God's love is like water in a second way: **Nothing can stop it.**

The islands along the northern coast of Washington state are gradually disappearing; the ocean waves are slowly, relentlessly, pulling them bit by bit into the Pacific. There's a country called the Maldives; it's made up of 1,196 islands in the Indian Ocean.

The country is literally vanishing. The ocean is taking more and more land every day. The Marshall Islands are shrinking. World War II graves are being washed away. The Outer Banks islands of North Carolina are being eaten away by the Atlantic. Water is a relentless force in nature. We think we can master it, but all we're really doing is temporarily negotiating.

Scuba divers can tell you that at 33 feet down, there's 29.4 pounds of pressure on every square inch of your body.

Water is strong. Water is heavy.

Anybody who's had a leaky basement or a leaky faucet can tell you: Water leaks. It creeps and seeps.

Water wants to be where it wants to be.

You can run but you can't hide. You can delay it but you can't stop it.

The moment you weaken, the moment you relax, water rushes in.

You get in a fight with water, the water eventually wins.

Paul says to the Romans, and God says to us, his love is like water: nothing can stop it.

We tend to think of God's love as being on a toggle switch.

I do good things, God flips on the love.

I do bad things, turn out the lights, the party's over. Gotta do good things again before the love comes back on.

Or we look at our circumstances, and we gauge God's love according to how comfortable we are.

Things going good? God loves me!

Things going bad? Waah! I thought God was supposed to love people!

But God's love is constant. It is inescapable. It is relentless.

God loves me when I'm good and when I'm bad.

He loves me when I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm mad.

The way Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans is:

**Romans 8:**

**35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...**

**37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors** *[through the power of positive thinking? No. Through observing the proper assortment of religious regulations? No. Through the latest pop psychology guru? No...]* **through him who loved us.**

**38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,**

**39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to**

**separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

My problem isn't that God stops loving me from time to time.

My problem is that I stop loving God from time to time. I don't always live as if I'm loved.

A lot of the time, I live more as if I'm unloved. As if I'm not the object of his affection. As if he's not in the picture at all. As if he didn't make a plan for my success in life.

As if he isn't available to help me. As if I'm on my own.

You know what? That's nuts. What a waste. What foolishness. What can I be thinking, when I ignore God's love? It's there! He's there for me! He's committed. He refuses to quit loving me. He won't give up, no matter what a dope I am.

God's love is like water. Nothing can really stop it.

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And finally, God's love is like water in a third way: **It changes everything.**

It's the nature of water to make things different than they were before they came in contact with the water.

For one thing, you get WET. But it's more than that.

Water gets in between the molecules and expands things.

It cracks rocks open.

Water seeps in and leaves marks to show where it's been.

It leaves a ring on your coffee table.

It brings a droopy daisy back to life.

Water isn't static; it's a change agent.

And God's love changes everything.

He doesn't just love us and leave us alone.

His love doesn't just land on us like the beam of a flashlight.

God's love changes what we are. It makes us different. It empowers us to live differently.

Just like water, it can get in between the molecules of your life and enlarge you.

When I truly understand God's love, and truly live in it, there's energy in my life that I didn't have before.

There's a spring in my step, you might say; I have a more hopeful outlook about each and every day than I did before.

Just like water seeping into stone, God's love can crack open the seemingly immovable rocks of our lives.

When I am truly living on his love, truly thriving on him the way I was designed to, the power of that love can explode my addictions, it can break the grip of my destructive habits, it can crack open that seemingly impossible situation.

It's not magic. It's just that God's love changes me. Changes my perspective. Maybe gives me a new approach to my situation. Maybe gives me the stamina to outlast the problem. Maybe gives me peace in the middle of the storm.

Just like water leaving its mark, God's love marks us permanently, makes us different forever.

I can never look back over the years of my life and say God's love didn't make a difference.

His love is part of my history. His love altered the course of my life. There's no going back.

His love has led me to this day, to this place, to the work I'm doing and the fun I'm having and the challenges I'm facing and the victories I'm scoring.

My friend Heidi Reese Barnes grew up in Spokane eating at a wooden dining room table.

It had been her grandmother's dining room table, then it was her mother's dining room table.

Three generations of Reeses sat around that table. It was covered with water marks. When company was coming over and they needed the table to be bigger, they would go to the closet and get out the leaf, put the leaf in the middle of the table.

But the leaf didn't have any water marks at all.

It was for visitors, outsiders, people on their best behavior, people you get out the coasters and cloth napkins for.

But the regular table, the little table, the table that the family had sat around for three generations, was marked.

It had circles and splotches and variations in color.

All those water marks were a permanent record of the love and the laughter that this family shared around that table all those years.

Love marks you.

God's love has left indelible impressions on you.

And just like water on a thirsty house plant, God's love can bring the wilted parts of our lives back to life.

Ask my friends the Lewises about how God's love brought their marriage back to life.

They were down to D-day. They were on what was scheduled to be the final day of their life as husband and wife.

God's love intervened. God's love revived that relationship. God's love brought new life, and God's love has sustained them.

Here's what I take away from Paul's letter to the Romans.

I don't have to live the way I've been living. God's love can change me.

Maybe I've been going through life wanting, aching, thirsting. But I don't have to.

I don't have to avoid a certain grocery store because I might run into someone I'm having a fight with. God's love, flowing into me and back out of me to that person, can change that conflict.

I don't have to be enslaved to my credit card debt because I have to buy everything I see. When I'm conscious of living in God's love, I can see how completely he's meeting my needs.

I don't have to jump every time the phone rings because I'm afraid it's bad news. God's love can cover my fear.

I don't have to worry about my Internet pornography addiction being exposed. I can lean on God's love, and God can overpower that addiction, break that bondage.

I don't have to toss and turn at night because my business is making me crazy.

Recognizing how much God loves me, I can release my business to him —  
God's love, then, can give me peace.

I don't have to try to exercise control over my situation and burn a hole in my stomach  
because I can't. I can trust God's love for me instead.

I can get in the flow of God's love, and I can be changed.

I can relax. I can trust God to take care of my situation.

My life can be different. My life can be better.

God's love changes everything it touches.