

*Jonny Gumbel is one of the most thoughtful and engaging leaders I know. The message of this book is something he has lived, prayed and preached over many years. I welcome the theme of course – how desperately we all need to know, deep within, that we are loved by God – but I also welcome Jonny’s approach. Utterly rooted not just in Scripture but in the book of Romans, this message is substantive and convincing, carrying the weight of Scripture in a way that anecdotal explorations of a similar theme never can. It is a chaotic age and I find my soul longing more and more for the shelter of God’s love and the anchorage of his word. I can’t think of a better person to articulate this message in precisely this way.*

PETE GREIG

Founder of 24-7 Prayer International and Senior Pastor of Emmaus Rd Church, Guildford

*Jonny’s hallmark humour is revealed through the mundane minutiae of ordinary life, presenting a clear case that our need to be loved and to love has already been met, and is waiting for us to receive. Its accessible simplicity doesn’t diminish the deep analysis of this life-changing love, and what helps or hinders our experience of it.*

SAMARA LEVY

Author of *Rebuilding the Ruins* and CEO of Samara’s Aid Appeal

*Loved is an incomparably clear and fantastically fluent meditation on the central theme of book of Romans – of the profound power of the love of God. Jonny Gumbel does his awesome subject justice ...*

JAMES MUMFORD

Author of *Vexed: Ethics Beyond Political Tribes*

*What a wonderful book! Glorious and timeless truths told in a fresh and engaging way, brilliant insights into the letter to the Romans and laced with wonderful stories and illustrations that cause the magnificent reality of God's love to come alive. This book will both renew your mind and cause your heart to sing.*

MIKE PILAVACHI, MBE  
Senior Pastor of Soul Survivor Church, Watford

*Paul's letter to the Romans is the Mount Everest of the New Testament. How are we to ascend its shoulders, traverse its glaciers and summit its peak? A gifted preacher, Jonny Gumbel in his fresh new expository commentary offers the route of Divine Love. As one who has studied Romans for decades, and who teaches it to an intern class every week, this has given me a whole fresh and wonderful route and vista for this book. I really recommend this book for personal reading, group study and preachers seeking inspiration.*

SIMON PONSONBY  
Author of *Amazed by Jesus* and *God Inside Out* and Minister of St Aldates, Oxford

*I have known Jonny Gumbel for many years as someone who is deeply thoughtful, warm and wise. He wears his knowledge lightly, and writes with clarity and honesty. He knows from personal experience the power of God that is made perfect in weakness and the love of God that casts out fear. This is a book well worth reading and savouring.*

THE RT REVD DR GRAHAM TOMLIN  
Bishop of Kensington and President, St Mellitus College

*Jonny captures something wonderful in these pages, revealing the glory of God's love ... he writes in a way that is accessible, which elicited in me a desire to both read on and also to celebrate all that God has done. I heartily recommend this book.*

REVD RUSSELL WINFIELD  
Dean, St Mellitus College

*It's great that someone at a St Peter's church should write a book inspired by St Paul! Like Peter and Paul, Archie Coates and Jonny Gumbel have also been partners in the Gospel, and this book emerges from their amazingly fruitful ministry in Brighton. God has given Jonny many gifts: the unfolding of profound truth in simple terms is one of them. This book started life as Sunday sermons that speak to every aspect of our life and times. It will make you laugh and cry as it makes connections with faith in Jesus Christ that take you by surprise. How does Mr Incredible get a mention, alongside George Eliot and Martin Luther King?*

*The first Apostles faced incredible challenges: today's Apostles still do. Loved is an affirmation of our condition of service; it is a gift for this generation.*

THE RT REVD MARTIN WARNER  
Bishop of Chichester

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Jonny Gumbel

Foreword by Archie Coates

Knowing the love of God and how that  
changes absolutely everything



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Pearl

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*Show me the wonders of your great love*

PSALM 17:7

## FOREWORD: *LOVED*

I confess to feeling a little uncertain when Jonny picked out the first few verses in Romans and announced he was starting a preaching series for the church, grinning that he wasn't quite sure when he'd be finished. Romans is wonderful of course, but strong meat, and I wasn't sure how we'd all cope.

Over ten years, Jonny and I shared most of the preaching Sunday by Sunday at St Peter's, Brighton. Sometimes we took a theme or book in the Bible and divvied it up between us; but I quickly realized that the greatest impact seemed to come when Jonny was simply released to preach whatever God laid on his heart for our community in a particular season, and I tagged along filling in with bits and pieces.

In the event, Jonny preached through Romans once a month over three years, and it transformed our church. We became a more secure-in-Christ, light-hearted, purposeful and loving community.

Greeting church members on Sunday mornings, I would be asked, 'Is Jonny preaching today?', with my response eliciting either elation (and relief) or a brave 'well never mind, let's make the most of it' kind of expression in the face of disappointment. His unique ability to help every kind of person – whatever their age, background, intellectual ability or Christian experience – understand and apply theology, bringing the Bible alive and showing its relevance to every part of life, changed our church family and the non-churchgoing friends they brought along.

I am delighted therefore that Jonny has gone to the trouble of using what he preached as a basis for this precious book, so you too can benefit from his insights and wisdom. Please understand,

these chapters are not a transcript of the sermons he delivered, as some books are. For a start, that would be quite impossible because much to my awe (and envy), Jonny preaches without notes. But more importantly, Jonny is an ‘organic’ communicator: he speaks and writes as a fellow pilgrim, moving through life with an open heart, humbly figuring out stuff as he goes along. Sermons were still in the process of being written moments before he stood up to deliver them, not because he was disorganized and started them late, but because he’d started them early and was still marvelling at the insights God gave him and working out how best to pass them onto the rest of us. Likewise, this book has been worked on over countless rewrites and edits, so that we can understand and grab hold of the marvellous truth that we are loved by God.

Jonny’s great achievement here is to make the book of Romans accessible, and the love of God fresh, his clear explanation helped by a wonderful array of profound, touching and very amusing illustrations. Here we have biblical truth applied and relatable with the help of references to social science, history, literature, film, sport and family life. From Karl Barth to a story about sewage (I’ll let you find that one), there really is something for everyone.

The quality of our lives is determined by how much we know we are loved by God. Our challenge is not the theory of this – we’ve heard ‘God loves you’ so often it’s almost a cliché. Our challenge is to know deep down in our hearts that God loves us, so that it overflows and makes all the difference. The love of God is not something to believe once and then move onto other things. The love of God is what we feed on our whole lives long. May the Holy Spirit enlarge your understanding and ignite your heart as you read these chapters.

One tip. This is a book to take your time with. Let God speak to you as you read. Its bite-sized format is to be savoured more than consumed, and I have found it helpful to write my reflections into

a journal as I go along, to more properly process and absorb. As I’ve done this, I’ve discovered a greater awe, richer joy and deeper inspiration to live well.

**Archie Coates**

*Vicar Designate, Holy Trinity Brompton*

2022

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will always be grateful to Archie and Sam Coates: for including Tara and me on their adventure to Brighton in 2009, for letting me take three years to preach through Romans about the love of God, and then repeatedly encouraging me to write this book.

To all those who helped me with this book. To Ali Verheul for turning twelve hours of talks into the start of a manuscript. To Tobias and Hannah Lancaster, Martin and Anna Smith, Steve and Jodi Luke and Terry and Maria Scard for providing prayer-filled and often snack-filled spaces for me to write in. To those who read the manuscript in the early stages and gave me feedback: Keir Shreeves, Sam Stephens, Phil Gladwin, Henry Gumbel, Archie Coates. To Chris Tilling for helping me with my theological questions. To Robyn Butler for drawing the diagrams for me and to James Mumford for doing his best to teach me how to write. And to Stephanie for reading the manuscript, being willing to publish it and for being enormously encouraging from start to finish.

Finally, I want to thank all those who have taught me about God's love through the years, particularly Mum and Dad (who instilled in me a confidence in a God who loved me from the very beginning), Becc (who inspired me that God's love enables us to be brave), Benj (who always insisted that God's love makes everything possible and therefore that every problem has a solution), Henry (who has never let me forget that every solution is itself also a problem and that God's love secures us enough to ask the most difficult questions) and Luigi (who inspired me that God's love is enough and worth giving up everything for and who pointed me in the right direction when I most needed it). And, of course, to Tara, and Albie, Titus, Iscah and Ettie for loving me and allowing me to love them, and for teaching me more than I can express about what it means to be loved. To those who had heard that I was writing a book on 'The

Romans' rather than Paul's letter to the Romans, I would like to apologize for the disappointment. Maybe next time.

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# PROLOGUE

You are loved. Specifically, you are loved *by God*. (You may be loved by lots of other people, or no one, but you are certainly loved by God.) This is the most important thing about you. It is the answer to the deepest longings of your heart and has the potential to change your whole life in every possible way.

Our first and most fundamental need is to be loved. We arrive in this world needing to be wanted and cared for, and then as we grow up we want to be accepted and affirmed. We seek companionship and intimacy. We fear loneliness and isolation. In some ways our whole lives could be described as a search for love.

And in many ways, and for many people, there is a lot of love around us. Parents, partners, friends, even strangers. And yet our experiences of love – even the best ones – are always somehow inadequate. Even the best parents don't love us perfectly. No group of friends, or romantic relationships or level of popularity ever seems to be enough.

Christianity claims to have the answer to this problem. For Christians have always believed that at the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that God loves you and me. We hold that this is the message of the Bible. And that God's love for us is the solution to our search for love, that whether we know it or not, we are all looking for this divine love. Human love is a beautiful thing, but it does not compare to being loved by God, for human love is always imperfect, partial and temporary, whereas being loved by God means that we are loved perfectly, totally and eternally.

Christians claim that the proof of this love is found in the life of Jesus, and particularly through his death on the cross. We hold that the crucifixion of Jesus is a sign of God's love, and the definition of what it means to love. And that the Holy Spirit gives us a personal

experience of this love. So, this is a love which is apparently both demonstrated and felt, which is known in our hearts and in our minds.

But what does it really mean for God to love us? And what difference does it make to our lives? What should we do about it?

This book is my attempt to answer these questions. It's a book about what it means to be loved by God: the nature of this love, the consequences of this love and our response to this love. If you're already a Christian, this is an attempt to describe this love that you have begun to experience. If you're not yet a Christian, this is what is on offer if you choose to put your faith in Jesus. I highly recommend it.

Although the whole of the Bible speaks of the love of God, I'll try to describe this love by looking at just one book, Paul's letter to the Romans, and what it teaches us about the love of God.

The Apostle Paul was one of the first Christians, someone whose life had been turned upside down by an experience of the love of God. He started a number of churches across the Roman Empire and wrote lots of letters to these churches and to others which he hadn't founded. Romans is his longest letter, and many would say his most important in terms of the impact it has had through the centuries.

We will work our way through it, following the order of the letter, starting at the first verse and finishing with the last, but there will be plenty that I skip over. This is definitely not an attempt to write a book about Romans. (As my father helpfully pointed out to me, 'There are already some very good books on Romans,' and I would recommend reading some of them.) Instead, it is a book about the love of God, and what the book of Romans might have to teach us about this love.

I have very few qualifications to write this book. I've studied a little theology, but I'm not a theologian. Once a month for three years I preached on this letter at St Peter's, Brighton, but I am

certainly not an expert on the book of Romans, and there is a lot of it that I still don't understand. I have not done anything very impressive in my life thus far, apart from marrying someone 'out of my league' and having four children. And I'm certainly not a writer, coming from a family that competes as to who is the most dyslexic, and indeed wouldn't know how to spell 'dyslexic' without some help. My only qualification is that I am one who is, like the Church in Rome, 'loved by God,' and I've been trying to live in this love for most of my life. These are a few things that I've been learning along the way.

So, let's start, as Paul does in his letter, with the question of your identity. For the first thing that God's love means is that you can know who you are.

*Chapter 1*

# IDENTITY

*... to all in Rome who are loved by God*

ROMANS 1:7

‘Now that we know who you are ... I know who I am. I’m not a mistake! It all makes sense.’

ELIJAH PRICE

You are loved by God. This is who you *are*. It is your identity.

Being a Christian is not just about what you think, though it involves the transformation of our minds. It is not only about what you feel, though it involves an experience of God himself. Nor is it about what you do, though it radically alters the way you live. It is not even about the group to which you belong, though it redirects and reshapes your relationships. Being a Christian is about something even more fundamental than this: it is about your identity. It redefines who you are.

Socially, nationally, politically, we are always needing to address questions of identity. And individually, we are all trying to work out who we are. We can find ourselves forging our identity on any number of things from our race, our politics, to our relationship status. Or we might define ourselves based on our personality, our sexuality, or our work or the opinions of others. Some markers are external – our relationships, roles within a community, our culture. Others can be internal – our desires, ambitions, character.

\* *Unbreakable*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Touchstone Pictures, 2000.

Our attempts to define our identity are often based on comparisons, which can lead to pride or insecurity (if we define ourselves above or below other people), or division and hostility (if we define ourselves against the people around us).

And these various identities are often fragile. If we put our identity in being clever, and then fail an exam or say something stupid, then we lose our sense of self. If we put our identity in our work and then lose our job, we suddenly find we don't know who we really are any more.

This tendency to place our identity in something fragile is illustrated in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where the evil Sauron pours all his power, malice and self into one ring, so that if that ring is destroyed, so is he. In similar ways, we can find ourselves pouring ourselves into our work, or a relationship, a project, or an image of ourselves to such an extent that if it were to be taken away, we would find that there was nothing left of us.

I found myself forced to deal with this question of identity in my early twenties. After feeling particularly tired over a long period, I discovered some lumps in my neck, which turned out to be evidence of glandular fever. No matter how much rest I had I didn't seem to feel any better. After a few months I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, or ME. I had to drop out of university, stopped seeing any friends or playing sport, and for about a year did very little other than lie in bed hoping I would eventually recover. It was a time of intense confusion (because I couldn't work out what was going on), frustration (because I couldn't see the friends I wanted to see, read the books I wanted to read, or do any of the things I loved doing), and anxiety (because I couldn't see how this would ever end).

At a real low point in this period a friend (who is a Benedictine monk) came to see me. We walked a little through the streets near my home, and then, exhausted, I sat on the pavement to get some rest, feeling close to despair. He looked at me kindly, and then

suddenly said, 'I'm glad this is happening to you, Jonny.' This didn't seem to be the most sensitive or encouraging thing to say. But then he continued to say that he thought that this was going to be an important period of my life. Then he looked at me again and said, 'You do not know who you are, but you are about to find out.'

He was right. During those painful months I was confronted by this vital question: who am I when all the normal markers of my identity have been taken away? If I am without my friends, or my studies, or my hobbies, or my health, who am I?

I began to realize that I had a choice. Either my identity would become my illness, which I knew would be disastrous, or it could be the one thing that no illness or disappointment could ever take away from me, which was that I was loved by God.

This was the life-changing revelation that emerged during that time. It wasn't dramatic or sudden. It emerged slowly, but consistently, in my heart and mind as I tried to listen to the voice of God over those months of doing almost nothing. The answer to the question of who am I if everything was taken away, was this: I am one who is loved by God.

Paul's letter to the Romans starts, like any other letter in the ancient world, with the question of identity. It begins by establishing who it's from and who it's to. At that time the standard formula for a letter would have been to have the name of the person writing the letter, then the name of the person or group it's written to, followed by a greeting. 'Paul, to the Church in Rome, greetings' would have been a perfectly adequate way to begin.

But the opening of this letter is unusually long, because Paul wants to communicate a few different things, one of which is to redefine the identity of those who were part of the Church in Rome. He addresses them very simply, 'To all in Rome *who are loved by God* and called to be saints' (1:7).

Paul could have mentioned all kinds of things about the Christians living in the capital of the most powerful empire the

world had ever known. He could have addressed them as the world rulers, law-makers, those at the centre of culture, power and civilization. Alternatively, he could have addressed them as those in a city known for cruelty, violence, corruption and immorality. But for Paul the most important things about them are not their achievements or failings, their strengths or weaknesses, but that they are loved by God. They are in Rome, but they are not defined by Rome; they are defined by being loved by God.

This was true for the Church in Rome. It was true for me lying in bed unable to do anything. And this is true for you too. You are loved by God and this is the fundamental building block of your identity.

The love of God is so significant that it not only changes the way you think, feel and behave, but also changes your very identity. The love of God shows you who you are. You are not defined by your past, or your family, or your personality, or your sexuality, or your gender, or your job, or your marital status, or by your friends or the opinion of other people; you are defined by being loved by God. Descartes famously said, 'I think therefore I am,' but to be a Christian is one who knows, 'I am loved therefore I am.'

Knowing this secures us and sets us free. It is unshakeable. For whether you succeed or fail, whether people reject you or accept you, you are loved by God. You do not need to compare yourself or compete with others. You don't need to prove yourself or pretend to be something you're not. You don't need to try to impress anyone.

So many of the other markers of our identity are there to define us in contrast to other people, to explain our difference, or our superiority. And many of the world's conflicts have been caused by antagonism which has its roots in the question of identity. But this identity is one that unites. Paul was writing to a community that was divided along racial lines (Jews and Gentiles), but here was an identity that brought these two groups of Christians together.

Whether they were Jewish or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, they were loved by God.

The process of coming to know this love is often uncomfortable. God wants you to know this love which shapes your identity, so there may be times when he deliberately challenges or removes the things which you've held on to as the markers of our identity up till then. This is what God seemed to be doing during my time of illness. Having put my identity in all kinds of unhelpful things, God removed them one by one so that I might know that I was simply one who was loved by God. I might not be doing anything, seeing anyone, achieving anything, but I knew that I was loved by God.

The journey of the Christian life is one in which our identity becomes more and more defined by the love of God. The author of John's Gospel, writing near the end of his life and recording the stories of his three years with Jesus as a disciple before Jesus ascended into heaven, never refers to himself by his name. He mentions the other disciples by name, but the author, who seems to have had a particularly close relationship with Jesus, simply refers to himself as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.'" Here was an Apostle, a leader of the early Church, one of the key eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, and yet for him the only thing that mattered about himself was that he was loved by God.

So the love of God is the starting point for discovering who you are. But there is another element of these opening lines of Romans that is worth noticing, which is how Paul introduces himself. Normally one would state one's name and credentials, but Paul gets sidetracked. He writes:

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of*

\* John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20.

*holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*

ROMANS 1:1-6

He could have easily stopped after 'Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,' but he gets distracted by the one he serves, Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, a descendent of David, who was resurrected from the dead, our Lord. For Paul it appears that the identity of Jesus is much more significant than his own identity.

This makes sense when we remember Paul's own story. Paul once had had a clear sense of his own identity and the identity of the Jewish people, so when this Christian movement started up within Judaism it shook him, and he found himself wanting to destroy these Christians before it could get established. But Jesus met him dramatically on the road to Damascus and Paul found himself asking, 'Who are you, Lord?' And Jesus replies, 'I am Jesus.' Paul's life was transformed by a revelation of who Jesus was and is. And when he understood who Jesus was, he began to understand his own identity.\*

And who is this Jesus? Among many other things, he is the one who is loved by his Father. When Jesus first appears in public it is for his baptism, and he hears a voice from heaven saying, 'You are my son, whom I love, and with you I am very pleased.'\*\* At this point in his life he has not done any miracles, or cast out any demons, or raised anyone from the dead. He has not taught anyone, or gathered a community of disciples, or challenged the authorities. He has not yet died for the sins of the world, conquering sin and suffering and death. He has done nothing worth recording in the Bible (other

than being born, and then running away from his parents briefly when he was twelve) and yet his Father loves him and is pleased with him. He has known this love from eternity, and he starts his public life totally secure in his identity as the beloved son of the Father.

We may not have known this love from eternity, but to be a Christian is to be one who is brought into this relationship with the Father who loves us. And so, for you too, before you have done anything, achieved anything, tried or failed at anything, you are loved by God. If everything else were stripped away from your life, this would remain: you are loved by God.

This was the starting point for Jesus' ministry. This is the starting point for Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. This is our starting point too. You are loved by God. This is your identity.

Elsewhere in the Bible, in 1 John 4:8, we read that 'God is love'. God is love: that is his identity. And you are loved: that is yours.

But if the love of God is your identity, then we need to understand what this love actually *is*. We need to understand the nature of the love of God.

\* Acts 9.

\*\* Mark 1:11.