

# FOR I AM PERSUADED

## *Romans 14*

*“For I am persuaded that your love is established forever...”*

*Psalm 89:2a Book of Common Prayer*

Persuaded is an interesting word. Somehow, somehow, God has persuaded the Psalmist that his love is everlasting. It is, as I have said before, *hesed*.<sup>\*</sup> To know this deeply in your mind, your heart, indeed in your bones, is what Paul has been driving at throughout Romans. Do you remember some of those “gem verses?” Verses such as “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” (paraphrase of 8:39)

It is this foundational idea, the foundation of God’s love with Jesus as the cornerstone, which is the basis of all we have read in Romans. It is this confidence in God’s love that allows chapter 14 to shine. I have before used the image of mountain climbing. We are almost to the top, and I find this chapter as a bit of a resting plateau. For my mind when you consider just how much you have read and understood in Romans, it is as if you can look down at all we have scaled, we can look up at the small bit that is left.

Standing in this position, what attitude do you assume? Do you assume one of superiority, or one of humble assurance? As we stand on this plateau I want to remind us that this is a letter to the Church. For those of us inside the Church, it seems like we can argue about almost everything. This is not new. Paul, says with great confidence that some of our behaviors are irrelevant when compared to our relationships with other followers of Jesus.

Chapter 14 may seem like it is about food. Well, in one way it is, but in another way it is about something much bigger. Food is a

big deal in Paul's day because food was often offered to an idol before it was eaten. In other words, the eaters were giving thanks to an idol for the food. Sometimes that would happen in the marketplace. Sometimes you would go to someone's home and have leftovers from the offering. As a follower of Jesus, how could you know, and if you went to someone's home as a guest, could you eat it, or did you need to be one of those rude Christians? As you might imagine, there were any number of opinions about how Disciples of Christ were to behave.

Paul, rather than take a side goes "upstream" to relationship. Paul is not being political. Paul is not afraid to speak up. After all, Paul has been beaten, stoned, whipped, shipwrecked, and more. Paul knows the love of Christ, and he knows that behaving in a way that helps other followers witness that love to the world trumps some important issues. Please appreciate that eating food offered to idols is not some small item, as I said it was a big issue of the day. Paul concludes, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself." (Verse 14.) Another persuaded person and it is his persuasion, his confidence, that tells others not to worry about rituals if those rituals will cause another to stumble. It is interesting that he does not suggest condoning offering food to idols. He is drawing a difference between condoning, and how to respond. What is important is living in a way that communicates real confidence in God's everlasting love found in Jesus Christ.

I find understanding chapter 14 fairly straightforward. Maybe I am getting used to the climbing. Here is the catch, though: While I understand that I am to behave as to not let a weaker brother or sister stumble, do I actually behave that way? It is easy to make all

sorts of things too important. What is important? It is all that Paul is driving at—full confidence in God.

\*See appendix on Heseb.

## HESED

Psalm 13 is one of those Psalms for when you are really struggling and down and out. “How long, O Lord...” begins the Psalm and then the author goes deeper in his lament. We have all been there, those moments of darkness, those moments of doubt when we are so beat up, or so beat down, or so discouraged, that we are not sure it will ever get better. But then like all but one of the Psalms it ends on a positive statement, not about us or humankind, but about God: “But I have trusted in your steadfast love.”

The Hebrew word that we often read or translate as “steadfast love” is *hesed*. I am not a Hebrew scholar, but as I read them they create a rich tapestry of words which seek to describe *hesed*. The *hesed* of God is this kind of amazing, divine, never-ending, never-failing love. It is the love of God that is always there, even when we cannot feel it or see it, but we believe in it because we believe in God. *Hesed* can make all the difference. It is the one strand that you can hold onto when all else has been stripped away.

You might ask, “Why? Why can I hold onto the idea of *hesed*?” The answer is because of all you have read about God, and all you know about God. If you have been reading the Bible, then ponder a few things. How faithful were the Israelites? Not very faithful. Yes, there were seasons, but on the whole they often walked away from God. How many times did God walk away from them, when they would call out to him? Answer: Zero! Why? Because of God’s *hesed*.

Take for example the story of a few of the kings, who after they sinned would have a prophet come to them and call them out. Some of the kings (e.g., David with Bathsheba and Hezekiah)

would repent and seek God, and God would immediately, immediately show up. Why? Because of God's *hesed*.

I could go on, but let me just cut to the chase and ask what does Jesus show us. God's *hesed*. He came and gave and healed and taught and loved. And in return we, humanity, killed him. Did he come back with wrath? No, he came with *hesed*. Even when we are fools God will restore (Psalm 14).

*Hesed* challenges the world, it challenges all that we chase, including those idols. Abandoning our following and chasing of idols can cause problems. In Acts chapter 15 there was "no small disturbance" (you have to love that language). And then we read about how "not small" it was. The issue is that following Jesus, following the One True Living God, means all our other idols are dethroned and torn down. We no longer need to stroke the fears of our hearts because we know the *hesed* of God. In Ephesus we learn that the culture of the day had quite an industry as they were the great temple keepers of the god Artemis, a god that was dethroned. Not buying all the idol trinkets was bad for the economy!

We may not have a Temple of Artemis, but we have our own idols that we have put on thrones: money, youth, sex, success, and more. The problem is just like Artemis they are false and they fail us. God does not fail and he never leaves for he is a God of *hesed*.

I came across one definition of *hesed* I consider to be a good, working definition: "The consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, furious love of our Father God!"

And now, may God's *hesed* envelop you.