

The Other Side
March 1980
Issue 102
Volume 16

I realize now that Romans 8, without my knowing it, has inspired all the research I've done for the last fifty years

By Jacques Ellul

■ Reading the eighth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans was a watershed in my life. In fact, it was such a totally decisive experience that it became one of the steps in my conversion. And for the first time in my life, a biblical text really became God's Word to me.

I had often read the Bible. I had found it to be of great religious and intellectual interest. I had discovered admirable poetic texts. I'd found historical knowledge—and subjects worthy of reflection. I'd even found—in the Gospels, for example—some elements to nourish my young faith.

But until that decisive, watershed experience, I'd never been *seized* by a written text. Never before had a text so suddenly transformed itself into Absolute Truth, truth beyond debate, truth like a blinding light.

I can't even describe what happened then. Nor do I think it could possibly be explained psychologically. But this eighth chapter of Romans, which I'd already read many times, suddenly became many things for me. It became the answer to so many of the questions I'd been asking. It became the place where I simultaneously encountered the Absolute and Eternity. It became a living contemporary Word, which I could no longer question, which was

beyond all discussion. And that Word then became the point of departure for all my reflections in the faith.

■ I'd like to underline three essential themes of Romans 8: freedom, the sufferings of the present time, and the salvation of the world.

First, let's look at freedom. "The law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ," Paul writes, "freed me from the law of sin and death" (v. 2). Life and freedom, freedom and salvation, that's what Paul is

writing about in this chapter. The salvation he speaks of is not merely that of the soul but of the whole of life. The liberation he speaks of is not merely that of the spirit. It's a salvation, a liberation that puts me on *the path of freedom*.

Modern psychology is more and more demonstrating that all of human life is dominated by the feeling of death, conditioned by it. Death represents bondage, obligation, fatality. Death is the final, inescapable reality of human life. And death is tied to sin, in

How I Discovered Hope

that sin (this isn't merely a matter of morality!) is a break with God. Since God is the Living One, a break with God inevitably leads to death.

All of us have broken with God. We are all therefore given over to fate, to necessity. We are conditioned, whether biologically, culturally, socially, economically, or by political dictatorship.

And here's where the work of God in Jesus Christ comes in, because of what God has done we're no longer inevitably subject to that law. A freedom is possible, which will express itself in all of our bondages.

To live according to the Spirit is to move at all times in the direction of human liberation. Now certainly it's a mistake to confuse political liberation with the liberation which is in Christ! But the liberation which Christ gives to those who believe *must* also express itself in the struggle for the material, economic, and political liberation of the rest of humanity. That isn't the most important thing, but it is the way faith expresses itself.

What's most important is to transmit this faith which liberates. What's most important is to transmit this Spirit which permits us to become detached from "things of the flesh." People who are materially or physically liberated always end up re-creating the constraints, obligations, and dictations which formerly bound them. So it's necessary that all people know and practice the liberation of the Spirit—and then diligently seek the full liberation to which the Spirit drives us.

One further point: it's wrong to imag-



A Nation in Cages

If all the people in prisons in the U.S. were to form their own nation, they'd have a larger population than twenty-one countries in the United Nations. *Jericho*

A Divine Amusement

"If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner and hear what he had to say and make fun of it." *Thomas Carlyle*

Under Age

More than half of the world's refugees are children.

ine that liberation in Christ is a permanent state or condition. We constantly lose it. It must constantly be given to us anew. And so I have often found myself needing to re-learn what it is to be free in Christ.

■ But let me go on. For the salvation Paul is speaking of, the text reminds us (in strong fashion), can't be just a personal affair. Although "my salvation" has preoccupied Christians for years, that's a terribly egotistical way of looking at things. Salvation is far more than an individual matter. And if you will read Romans 8:18-24, you will see that Paul throws us into solidarity with the whole of creation. The creation's sufferings, he tells us, arise out of human sin—out of my sin. The world and I are connected!

This was an answer to the many questions I'd had about the injustice of the world. This was the text which led me to become politically and socially involved. Suddenly I saw that my personal solution was connected with things larger than myself. It was connected to the whole of creation.

The creation had been "subjected to vanity"—or futility—because of human sin. Like us, the creation is destined to death, destined to have no further

meaning.

And if all is connected, I came to see, then I can't be saved alone. If I've been saved in faith, then that concerns the whole of creation. I can't be liberated or emancipated by myself.

■ Now in these same verses (Romans 8:18-24), Paul also connects the themes of freedom and hope. The world, he says in verse 21, will be set free from its bondage to corruption.

In this desolate, meaningless world, where evil and injustice always win, it always seems that one life cannot exist except by the death of others. The best of human intentions always seem to be turned around and made into evil. The world consists of darkness. No light remains.

But at the heart of this dark world, Paul tells us, hope is nevertheless to be found. There's nothing *but* hope, but there *is* hope. It is there for all—in every life, in each birth, in each act of charity, in each dawn, in each light (even that of the sun!). In all of these, we see signs of hope. And this hope is not merely human. It comes from the One who allows this suffering creation to continue to exist, and permits it to wait.

The creation—and humanity—don't know exactly what they're waiting for. Still, they wait—with the certainty that "All this will change." And the voice of God answers, "Yes, they have good reason to wait."

What they're waiting for, Paul says, is for "God's children to be revealed" (v.19). Let's be careful here. It's impor-

tant to understand what this *doesn't* mean. It does *not* mean a judgment where certain of God's children will be damned while others are declared to be God's children. No what's told us in verse 22 is that *all of creation* is involved. The revelation that the creation is waiting for is that *all* are God's children.

Now that's something that can heal the sickness of creation. All of creation—humans, animals, things—*all* are promised salvation, reconciliation, new birth, new creation

■ Finally, I want to share what grasped me in a radical way. When I read Romans 8:32-39, I saw with blinding certainty that, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" How is it possible for anything (even myself—my doubting spirit, my attitude of rejection) to separate me from God?

God's gift of the Son is *proof* that God loves us. Paul tells us that there is nothing in God but this love. Except for such a love, God wouldn't have had to deliver himself, in the person of the Son, to death.

This love I speak of is nothing less than the love of God, the *Almighty*, the *Eternal*, the *Universal*. From this point on, God is not going to allow anything to exist outside of that love. Outside of God only "Nothing" (nothingness!) remains. And since God *is* Love, then *all* is in God's love. And since that love is the love of the *Almighty*, what could ever be mighty enough to detach us from it?

I go through all the miseries of the

world carried by this hope. And this hope gives me *power*, because I know that both those who know of it and those who don't are walking together to meet their Lord and their Savior.

Today, as I reread this text, I realize that Romans 8, indirectly, without my knowing it, has inspired all the research I've done over the last fifty years. One day, many years ago, it gave me an *indestructible* certainty. And I see now that these words of Paul—and the certainty they gave me—were the kernels of ideas brought to fruition only later in my life.

Truly, Romans 8 has been God's Word to me.

■ *Jacques Ellul, a professor of sociology in the University of Bordeaux (France), was active in the Resistance during World War II. He has continued to combine a ministry of social involvement and biblical teaching. (Although we disagree with parts of Ellul's interpretation of Romans 8, we're publishing this article for the important insights it gives into his extremely valuable social critique.) Ellul's most famous sociological work is The Technological Society (\$2.95). Among his biblical expositions are Presence of the Kingdom (\$3.95), False Presence of the Kingdom (\$3.95), Hope in Time of Abandonment (\$4.95), The New Demons (\$9.95), Apocalypse (\$10.95), and The Ethics of Freedom (\$13.50). (To order any of these books, see the ad on page 16.) This article, written by Ellul especially for theOther Side, was translated by Alfred Krass with assistance from Martine Wessel.*