

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part sixty-four
Sunday, December 6th, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.
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THE DEEPER THE THEOLOGY, THE PURER THE WORSHIP

Romans 16:21-27 - “Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. [22] I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. [23] Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you. [25] Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages [26] but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— [27] to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

We’ve come to our last session in the book of Romans. We’ve been studying this great letter for well over a year - sixty-four weeks. How does Paul sign off? He does it in a way that recycles some of the main concerns and themes of the whole letter. There is nothing accidental about this great closing:

1) **PAUL EMPHASIZES THE UNITY OF THE BODY OF CHRIST**

Romans 16:21-23 - “Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. [22] I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. [23] Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.”

Paul sends greetings from people who had met *him*, but had probably never met *any* of the Romans to whom he wrote. Why does he do this? What would be accomplished by sending greetings from *Erastus*, the city treasurer in Corinth? Why would these Christians at Rome need to know that Paul’s co-worker, Timothy, sent his greetings?

These seem like insignificant gestures of politeness, but they’re more. These Christians in Rome were having quite a tough time of it. News of their persecution had spread abroad. And when you’re under the heat of trial your world *shrinks*. You forget that there are horizons beyond your own pain and loss.

So Paul introduces the Romans to Christians *outside* the framework of Rome. The work of Jesus and transforming power of the Spirit extend beyond the boundaries of Rome and the

power of the emperor. God's work is a **big** work. They may not **know** these Christians whom Paul names in his greetings to them, but they are all **brothers** and **sisters** in God's family. Nothing can erase or diminish that reality.

Remember the big work of God. Especially when times are difficult, call to mind the billions of lives in whom God is building His kingdom. Remember those who are suffering right now in ways you and I can't even imagine. And remember all of these people are your brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. This kingdom is growing and the gates of hell won't stand against it. Our confidence in the gospel is reinforced with each disciple transformed by God's amazing grace.

2) THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TERTIUS' INSERTED GREETING

Romans 16:22 - "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord."

I know this is a short verse, but I think we need to pause over it for a minute. We know Paul regularly wrote his letters with a secretary of some sort - an **amanuensis**, is the more technical term. We know this because at least four times he tells us he signed off his letter **"in his own hand"**, implying that the rest of the letter was written with someone else's hand writing (1 **Corinthians 16:21, Galatians 6:11, Colossians 4:18, 2 Thessalonians 2:17**).

Yet, in spite of this fact, Paul still regularly begins his letters saying **he** is the author. The words and ideas are **Paul's**, and not those of someone else:

1 Corinthians 1:1-2 - "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,[2] To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...."

Galatians 1:1-2 - "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— [2] and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia...."

Colossians 1:1-2 - "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,[2] To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and

peace from God our Father.”

Romans 1:1,7 - “*Paul*, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God....[7]....To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And the idea I find forming in my mind is this: the will of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the text continues so sovereignly that it isn’t diminished by whose hand holds the pen. In other words, the ideas are no less Paul’s just because a secretary held the pen. Paul still considers the words and ideas ***his own***. Tertius writes his own greeting with the blessing and supervision of Paul.

And in just the same way, the words of the text that ***Paul*** uttered are the words of the Spirit of God, even though expressed through the person of ***Paul***. So thank God for an inspired Bible!

3) **JUST AS WE CAN’T INITIATE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE ON OUR OWN, WE CAN’T BE STRENGTHENED IN IT ON OUR OWN EITHER**

Romans 16:25 - “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ....”

The sentence Paul begins in this verse actually continues right to the end of the chapter, so we’re breaking it down into its component phrases. And the idea of this first section is stuffed with importance.

How shall we continue to grow in the faith? That’s the issue. And certainly there are things we must ***do***. We know most of them from years of church, Bible study, and Sunday School. And Paul, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, is quick to point out the human maintenance portion of sanctification. But that’s not the message here.

The emphasis here is ***“Unto him who is able to strengthen you....”*** And we immediately hear echos of Jesus’ command, ***“Abide in me....For apart from me you can do nothing!”*** Not nothing in the sense of not being able to tie our own shoes or earn a living, but ***nothing that can***

generate spiritual life. We can do nothing to grow our own souls.

So here is Paul's reminder. We are so quick to create systems and create mechanical procedures. Organized religion can be death-dealing to spiritual life. Paul urges **ongoing dependance** on the Holy Spirit.

Please remember that for all our emphasis on the importance of sound teaching and doctrine and learning, there will always be this portion of discipleship that is never **learned** in any final sense. This Jesus called, **"becoming like little children."**

There is a fleeting time in childhood when parents can't go anywhere or do anything without hearing those words, **"Can I come?"**, or, **"Can I help?"** I remember whenever my dad went anywhere in the car he would have to virtually sneak out of the house. I just wanted to go wherever he was driving. Of course, there were no seat-belt laws back then (or seat belts!). I would stand in the back - on the hump in the middle of the floor - and put my hand on dad's shoulder.

Or I can remember like it was yesterday, when we first moved to Newmarket. Our kids were just around 3 and a half and 1 and a half years old. We lived in a rented house on Kingston Road. And everyday when I came home from the church I would see Melissa and Laurel's faces in the front window, waiting for me to come home.

I think that's the heart Jesus was calling for. He was dialing in on children **longing to be with Father God.** Paul says we are constantly in need of being **divinely strengthened - Unto him who is able to strengthen you....** (25). Do not let the whole day go by without some time of **drawing near** to God through Christ Jesus. His closeness will be your strength in a way nothing else can be.

4) **THE LENGTHS TO WHICH GOD GOES TO DRAW OUT OUR TRUST**

Romans 16:25b-26 - "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages [26] but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic

writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith....”

Because God is absolutely sovereign, He could have accomplished redemption *instantly* rather than by, to use Paul’s words, *unfolding a “mystery.”* In fact, **verses 25 and 26** almost appear contradictory. **Verse 25** talks about the *“revelation”* that has been disclosed in the gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ. Then **verse 26** says this mystery has been spoken about for centuries through the *“prophetic writings.”* And you feel like saying, “Which is it, Paul?” Is this news *old*, or is it *new*?

And the answer is, it’s *both*. Perhaps the apostle Peter gives the clearest statement as to how the mystery is both *new* and *old* at the same time:

1 Peter 1:10-12 - “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, [11] inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. [12] *It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you,* in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

The prophets knew they were writing for a later audience (**12**). They knew they had great *news*, but didn’t have a full picture of the *details*. They wrote with *anticipation*. We read with the full accomplishment of *history* and *gratitude* rather than *guesswork*.

And what that means is we should glorify God all the more because of our *understanding* of the full scope of divine revelation. Consider the revelation we have of the *patience* of God. We can see how He waited with all the blunders and failures and unfaithfulness of His people. Yet He *still* sent His Son, Jesus, at the appointed time.

And then there’s God’s *faithfulness*. We see His hand revealed over and over again - through centuries - when it looked like nothing would ever come of the promise made to Abraham.

Or consider the revelation of just how **central** the gospel is in the plan of God. Everything, from the temple to the priesthood and the sacrificial system, found its ultimate meaning in the person of Jesus Christ and His substitutionary redemption for you and me. This was not some small afterthought in the plan of God. This was the goal of all of creation.

So, Paul reminds the Christians at Rome, and us as well, that God not only **accomplished** redemption, He **prepared** the world to recognize it when it took place. Behold the love of God for us! We are given enough preparatory revelation through the prophets to look back and see that the accomplishments of Christ Jesus weren't just a **coincidence**. God was unfolding the meaning of creation in a way we could recognize.

5) **GOD ALONE DESERVES GLORY BECAUSE HE ALONE IS WISE**

Romans 16:27 - "....to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Immediately we're called back in our thoughts to Paul's biting description of human sin in **Romans 1:22-25** - "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. [24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

Sin is giving **glory** to someone else, or something else, rather than God. The depth of human sin is measured by what elicits your admiration and praise. What makes your jaw drop defines your worship. And fallen people worship things and people **like themselves** - "....and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...."(1:15).

Paul says only God deserves worship. And then he picks one attribute out of many - **wisdom**. It's to the "**only wise God**" that glory is due (16:27). And the reason Paul singles out God's **wisdom** is, I think, profound. Wisdom is the capacity to **know the meaning, the purpose** of something. It's more than **knowledge**. It really has to do with the **goal** of something, the **end** or

direction to which something is designed and intended.

God deserves all glory because God - and **only** God - knows the purpose of all creation. God is the polar opposite of the self-destructive tendency of mankind to **fail to see the purpose of our own existence** in our confusion of worshiping the **creature** rather than the **Creator**.

When we glorify God understanding His **inexhaustible, unsearchable wisdom** - when we **worship** Him with that attribute fixed in our minds - we will **order our lives properly**. We will **line up our lives and our worlds with His divine purpose**. We will not complain or second guess. We won't fill our lives with trinkets and distractions. We won't follow empty examples. We won't blindly live for the moment, turning our back on God's plan for eternity.

Our God is the only **wise** God. In a world where people clamor after blank substitutes for God, He alone is wise. He knows what He is doing in and through Jesus Christ. His revelation is certain. And the better we grasp this - the deeper our **theology** - the purer will be our **worship**. This is what makes Romans one of the most profitable studies going. Read it over and over. Then bow your head in doxology.