

## Prayer

Father in heaven, mould us day by day into the likeness of Your Son Jesus Christ, and deepen His life within us. Send us as witnesses of the Gospel into a fragile world of tragedy and strife, and touch the hearts of all who hear its joyous news with Your love. May lives be transformed and may the world become a safer place as the Kingdom grows in our midst. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Look back over the last few days, and if you have been hurt by someone, or by some event, then bring your feelings about this to the Lord. Let the Lord be the judge of your feelings, and seek to forgive any who have wronged is you.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for those whose lives are threatened by commercial expansion:** Pray for people in your own country whose lives are made difficult because of the power of large organisations
- Give thanks to God for those who support you and pray for you; and if you feel that no one does this, then ask the Lord to guide you to find this support
- Pray about the issue of nuclear power, especially in the light of the dangers of catastrophe at nuclear power stations in Japan after the earthquake.

## Meditation

You are everything to me, Lord Jesus Christ.  
May I never turn from Your faithful love,  
but live to receive the benefits of Your grace:

Teacher of Life;  
teach me love, and test my skills;

Divine Physician;  
heal my body, and strengthen my bones;

Perfect Friend;  
stay with me despite my misdemeanours;

Supreme Leader;  
guide me through the paths of life;

Holy Comforter;  
calm my spirit, and grant me peace;

Great Preacher;  
challenge and inspire me again and again.

Lord Jesus Christ; You are everything to me;  
My faith is in the Cross and the empty tomb;  
And the power of Your Holy Spirit, released.

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## Bible passage - Romans 15:14-21

<sup>14</sup> I am fully convinced about you my friends, that you are full of goodness yourselves; filled with all knowledge, and able to teach one another. <sup>15</sup> But as a reminder, I have written to you rather boldly on some matters, on account of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup> to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, and a priest of the Gospel of God so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, made holy by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>17</sup> I therefore have reason in Christ Jesus to be proud of what has been done for God; <sup>18</sup> so I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has done through me to lead the Gentiles to obedience, by word and deed, <sup>19</sup> by the power of signs and wonders, and by the power of the Spirit of God.

Accordingly, I have fully proclaimed the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem even as far around as Illyricum. <sup>20</sup> I therefore make it my ambition to preach the Gospel not where Christ has already been made known, for I do not build on a foundation laid by someone else; <sup>21</sup> rather, as it is written, 'Those who have never been told about Him shall see, and those who have never heard of Him shall understand.'

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## Bible Study

### Review

This passage is part of the end of Paul's letter to the Romans. We read his conclusion in our study yesterday, in which he confirms that the Gospel is intended for all people, that is, the 'Gentiles' (15:7-10), and he follows this with a brief benediction (15:13). The comments we have read today seem like a postscript, attached to the end of the letter, in which Paul gives a glimpse into his own feelings about writing the letter (15:14-16). He also gives us an interesting summary of the work of evangelism in which he has been engaged for several decades (15:17-21).

In his own day, Paul was an interesting yet controversial character, and there is some clear evidence in Scripture that people did not always understand him (2 Peter 3:16). It is therefore not surprising that he was concerned about how his letter to the Romans would be received. He offers a mild apology for being bold (16:50) but insists unashamedly on his right to speak as '*priest of the gospel of God*' (15:16). He then offers a tantalising glimpse of his ministry at that time (15:17-21). He claims his work is entirely dependent upon God (15:17,18), it relies on signs and wonders and the power of God's Spirit (15:19), it is extensive and limited only by the possibilities of travel (15:19, 20), and it is fundamentally original, or to use a well-known phrase, 'going boldly where no one has gone before' (15:20). In this way, Paul paved the way for the entire missionary activity of the church for the next 20 centuries, and his ministry was successful because it was anointed by God for the future good of the whole world, even us today.

There are some wonderful phrases within this passage, particularly about the life of faith and what it means. For example, in verse 14, he writes about the importance of generosity, of knowing the things of God, and of 'teaching' one another (15:14), and he writes about the leading of the Holy Spirit (15:16). But if we want to understand what all this means we must look at it from the point of view of those who first read this.

Imagine what it was like to be a Christian in Rome in the very early days of the church. The Christians there had never been visited by an apostle, and the level of excitement would have been high. On reading the letter, many would have wondered, 'why has he written this to us?' They might well have asked 'why has he said this... or that?' or 'what authority does he have to say this?' In writing as he did, Paul tried to anticipate any criticisms that might come his way, and denied any personal involvement in the direction of the mission; this was God's will, not his (15:17-19).

So when Paul applauds the church at Rome for its goodness, knowledge and ability to teach, he is not just saying nice things about the church (15:14). It was his way of telling the Roman Christians that he accepted their authenticity even though no apostle has ever visited them. From the beginning of his letter, Paul seems to have been conscious of this, and stated his desire to go there and rectify this omission (1:8-15). It certainly seems that Paul had received good reports from others about the church at Rome, including reports about the work of the Holy Spirit, and the integrity of teaching found there.

Of course, Rome was an important church because it lay at the heart of the great Roman Empire, and Paul may have had prophetic insight, telling him that this church would one day play the same central role in Christianity as it did in the Roman Empire. When Paul eventually went there he was welcomed (Acts 28:16f.), but Acts does not say anything about a letter having been received there before Paul came. Perhaps Rome was too large a place for all the Christians there to have met each other and know what was happening.

So by reading this passage of Scripture, we begin to gain a helpful picture of what was happening in the early church in the middle of the first century A.D. It gives us hope for the future proclamation of Gospel, and is a model of love and respect towards other Christians who have never been met.

### IsGoing Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Some concerns about why the letter was written
- The work of the Holy Spirit
- Paul's ambition

## Going Deeper

We will find that many of the verses contain interesting insights into either the Gospel, or Paul, or the activities of the early church at that time. As a 'post-script', it still remains fascinating, as Paul writes with a fair degree of freedom now that he has completed the main body of his letter.

### ***Some comments about why the letter was written***

Paul began by commending the church at Rome, and it is interesting that his measure of its maturity is threefold; 'goodness', 'knowledge', and 'teaching' (15:14). Paul was not commending any individuals when saying this, but the whole church, and it is fascinating to imagine how these measures might be used today! Goodness is clearly something to which all God's people are called, and it is one of the key characteristics of the 'Fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22f.) and could be said to summarise the qualities of love mentioned by Paul earlier in this letter (12:9f.).

Knowledge, however, is something that the church tends to shy away from today, despite Paul's great call in this letter for the 'transformation of the mind' to be a part of the experience of all believers. There is no doubt that Paul believed 'knowledge of God' to be an important part of the heritage of faith for all Christians, and one that should be welcomed and cherished. A believer was expected to learn about Jesus, and in his day, Gentile converts were expected to learn a great deal about the history of God's work in the world by becoming familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. History also shows that when people have become Christians in times of revival, large numbers of people who previously were not interested in reading or learning were changed through reading the Bible, and not only were their lives changed spiritually by the learning they gained, their social and educational status changed to an extent that people who were previously known as drunks became well known preachers, for example, or previously uneducated people became engineers. In every way, their lives were transformed as God used their minds.

It is no wonder therefore that Paul commended the church at Rome as being 'able to teach one another'. If all the new converts were expected to learn about faith, then we can imagine that there would have been considerable debate about matters of faith. The Greek word for 'teach' used here also means 'to admonish' or 'to correct', because no process of learning can take place without people accepting correction due to error! It is something of a challenge to the church today that knowledge and learning within the church was such an open matter in Paul's day. Although many want to be 'taught' the truth of the Gospel, some regard knowledge and learning with suspicion, and miss out on much that God would do with and for them.

### ***The work of the Holy Spirit***

As Paul attempted to explain himself and his calling to his readers, he did so with two very significant references to the Holy Spirit (verses 16 and 19). The first of these is part of Paul's description of his calling, in which he says he is '*a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, a priest of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, made holy by the Holy Spirit*' (15:16). As a description of his calling, this is remarkable, because all the main phrases within the verse are centred upon worship; 'ministry', 'priesthood', and 'offering'. Ministry means one who offers worship and service to God (we mistakenly associate 'ministry' only with 'doing things', today); priesthood is being set aside for the worship of God (which in Christ, is true of all believers); the offering of the Gentiles was Paul's worship (because in the Old Testament, 'offering' was essential to worship). The result of this is that Paul saw all his work as a form of worship God, and the evidence of this was that it was blessed by God and 'made holy by the Holy Spirit' (15:16).

For Paul, the work of the Holy Spirit was the proof of God's blessing upon his work. The Holy Spirit was the evidence of God's blessing upon Jesus at His baptism (Matt 3:13f. etc.) and the evidence of God's blessing and work in power through the disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1f.). Subsequently, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles was the evidence of their faith and acceptance by God, and therefore also the proof and validity of Paul's ministry. Paul did not argue this for himself, for it was the same standard that Peter used when declaring that the first Gentile converts were accepted into the church (Acts 11:15f.). It is therefore no surprise that when Paul wrote a second time in this passage to justify his calling, he claimed it was verified '*by the power of signs and wonders, and by the power of the Spirit of God*' (15:19).

### ***Paul's ambition***

There was no stopping Paul's driving ambition to extend the boundaries of the church and take the message of the Gospel as far and as wide as he could. In describing his work to the people at Rome, he talked about the extent of his work from '*Jerusalem even as far round as Illyricum*' (15:19). In the following passage of Scripture (which we will read tomorrow) we will learn more about the point in Paul's missionary journeys at which this letter was written, but it is interesting that Paul still saw Jerusalem as the centre of the faith, the 'Holy City' where Jesus had died and was crucified and therefore in some senses, still the 'mother church' of Christendom. It was only after the Romans completely sacked and destroyed Jerusalem in AD70 that this ceased to be the case.

There is no evidence in Scripture that Paul preached in Illyricum, which was a region above Macedonia on the Eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea, some way from the towns and cities where the New Testament has elsewhere recorded for us that he preached. This is a reminder to us that neither Acts nor the letters of Paul are a complete picture of exactly where he travelled and preached. Most people reckon that he may have journeyed there possibly during his extensive stay near Ephesus (as in Acts 20f.) on his last missionary journey, but there is no way of knowing whether this was the case. '*Jerusalem ... to Illyricum*' was nevertheless an impressive reach for the activities of the apostle in the first two decades since the death of Jesus. Yet it is eclipsed by the wonder of God's establishment of a church much further on, in Rome, possibly by the movement of Roman soldiers, servants and slaves around the Empire.

Paul's ambition was always to go to where there was no Christian community, and go further than others; he was a true pioneer. Neither should we see in his comment about this (15:20) some fear of competition. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul speaks with despair about the way that competitive attitudes tear the church apart unnecessarily (1 Cor 1:10-17), and his principle was that if there was a church in one place, then there was no need for another, for the 'Body of Christ' was meaningless if split amongst warring factions of Christians (1 Cor. 1 and 12). His vision was that the famous riddle put to Isaiah by God (Isaiah 6:9.10) would be solved in the manner Isaiah had later prophesied (Isaiah 52:15) '*Those who have never been told about Him shall see, and those who have never heard of Him shall understand*' (15:21). He was an evangelist, pure and simple.

## Application

There are a number of interesting points in this text. Most of them are strong challenges to perceptions of the church which we hold today. Firstly, the commendation of the church at Rome because of its 'goodness', 'knowledge' and 'teaching' makes for a demanding test for those who will accept it. The Christian church that can accept the challenge of putting together these three as Scriptural aims and objectives will find that they are not presented as priorities in most programmes of church renewal or revival today. But they remain a challenge to us from Scripture.

Secondly, our understanding of worship today is too strongly tied to songs and preaching in a church on Sundays. True worship is a 'God centred life', as Paul demonstrated and taught, and what Christians do in what we call 'worship' on Sundays needs to reflect such a 'God centred life'. Moreover, the evidence that a person's life is 'God centred' and that any collective act of worship is truly 'God centred' is to be found in the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit both in the believer and in the life of the church.

Lastly, the ambition of Paul to break new ground is a challenge to our mission and evangelism today. In Western countries, vast tracts of society contain people who have never heard the Gospel despite the physical presence of churches in their community, and many exist side by side, appearing to be in competition. There can hardly be a worse platform for the true witness of the Gospel! In addition, there are still many parts of the world where people have not heard that they have a Saviour, and the political structures of the world are strongly resistant to Christians who wish to present their message. We must pray for the zeal of St. Paul to enable us to overcome these apparently insurmountable problems to the preaching of the Gospel. His example can still inspire us to greater deeds of mission and evangelism in our own time.

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## Discipleship

### *Questions (for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group how you might feel, if you were part of the church at Rome, to receive this part of Paul's letter.
2. What do you think is meant by the 'signs and wonders' mentioned in verse 19?
3. How is Scripture being fulfilled in our own day? Can we agree that verse 21 is being fulfilled in our own day? If not, why not?

## **Personal comments by author**

*Living a life that is worshipful to God sounds like a challenge! Yet for those who love their Lord, surely this is a natural product of faith. It is profoundly unhelpful that we associate 'worship' with a specific set of activities, and the sooner we are rid of the notion the better, at least in our own minds. Through prayer, especially, it is possible to live a life in which, through the presence of Christ, all our thoughts and actions become an act of worship and service to God. This is not a council of perfection, but a call to living as we are intended to live, in fellowship with our Maker.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Reflect upon Christian fellowship, and ask yourself whether you are truly receiving Christian fellowship as a member of your church. Some people do not take part in fellowship groups for a variety of reasons, but ask yourself whether you are doing what requires of you to contribute to the fellowship of your church.*
- *What does the world wide church mean to you. Go on the internet and Google some churches in other countries around the world. Find out what they stand for.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord, teach us to be wise, knowing that our days are numbered. You are the Author of our lives and our Saviour from death; may we live in the confidence and peace of our faith in You, reconciled to Your will and untroubled by the cares of this world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN

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