

## Prayer

Glory be to You O Lord, for You lead us onwards, when all things seem impossible to us. You give us what we need to keep going; You offer us peace, power, strength, love, humility, and those gifts of the Holy Spirit necessary for us to live and work in the world. May we always be open to Your generosity and love, and may we always yield to Your wisdom and authority, for our own sake and for the sake of Your Kingdom; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Whatever you have prayed about today, make every effort to put into practice what God has been saying to you through your prayers.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for those whose lives are threatened by commercial expansion:** pray for underprivileged people in India who do not have the opportunity to develop economically or socially.
- 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.
- Give thanks to God and pray for charities that offer help for children in need

## Meditation

We must surely aim high, and be like Jesus  
Who lived for others all the time, and not for self:

We seek a heart with empathy for others,  
and ears that listen carefully to everything we hear;

We seek a mind that searches for the truth,  
and feelings that inform, not dominate the mind;

We seek a body that is reliable and strong,  
and a will to use all our strength to do right;

We seek a sense of what is right and wrong,  
and a memory that recalls in true proportion;

We seek a spirit that delights to do God's will,  
and eyes that see the whole picture as well as detail;

Is this not all too much? An impossible dream?  
No! For this is the work of God's Spirit, within.

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## Bible passage - Romans 15:7-13

<sup>7</sup> Accept one another, therefore, just as Christ has accepted you, to show the glory of God. <sup>8</sup>  
For I tell you that Christ was made a servant of 'the circumcised' in order to confirm the truth of God's promises made to the forefathers, <sup>9</sup> and also that the Gentiles might give glory to God for His mercy. As it is written,

'Therefore I will acknowledge You among the Gentiles, and sing praises to Your name';

<sup>10</sup> and again it says,

'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people';

<sup>11</sup> and again,

'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let everyone praise Him'.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah also says,

'The root of Jesse will come, the One raised up to rule the Gentiles; in Him the Gentiles will hope.'

<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may have an abundance of hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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## Bible Study

### Review

When you write an email or a letter, you may well add a brief summary at the end, certainly, if it has been lengthy. After this, you will sign off in a characteristic manner, maybe 'yours sincerely', or 'all the best'. Our passage today reads just like the end of a letter, with Paul summarising the letter's message (15:7-12) and drawing it to a conclusion with a characteristic blessing; '*may the God of all hope fill you with all joy and hope in believing ...*' (15:13). However, we already know that this is not the true end, for there is at least one chapter of Romans still to come!

Historically, some scholars have reckoned that Paul did indeed conclude the letter at 15:13, and come to some interesting theories about why more was added, and when. The full range of possibilities is explored in the 'going deeper' section of this Bible study.

Looking more closely at the contents of the passage, the first three verses are a summary of Christ's work of salvation, highlighting God's intent to take the message of His love beyond Judaism to the Gentiles. Paul's letter to the Romans has been a long theological treatise explaining the Gospel. It is a source of great inspiration to Christians today, but it is easy to lose track of why Paul wrote as he did.

The letter to the Romans was written by Paul to a new church that had not yet had an apostolic visitor, but a church that would soon become the most significant and powerful within the known world. Paul certainly wrote very carefully, as if trying to put down exhaustively everything he knew about the faith, rarely challenging the Roman Christians directly as he does in letters such as 1 Corinthians, or Galatians. If God was going to use the church at Rome for great things in the future, then Paul knew that they needed both a clear account of the Gospel and also a clear explanation of why the church was independent of Judaism, and the dominance of early Christians by the church at Jerusalem.

Paul wrote this letter in the years just before the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70. Christians do not remember this date with much interest today, but they should. From that date, the fellowship of believers at Jerusalem ceased to exist, a fellowship dominated by the disciples and the Christian Jews who lived there. Paul's work was visionary in so far as it paved the way for the early Christians to realise that they did not depend upon a 'mother' church at Jerusalem, as the apostles had done in the first few decades after Christ's death (see Acts 15). God's entire purpose and plan was that His church should operate without prejudice across the Gentile world. This is the point he makes here at what is undoubtedly the climax of his letter.

There can hardly be a more emphatic collection of quotes, and Paul 'pulls out the stops' to make sure that anyone who knows the Scriptures can be in no doubt that the Gospel of God is designed for all people, that is, for the Gentiles. Paul uses quotes from

1. The Law; the quote in verse 10, '*Rejoice O Gentiles with His people*' comes from Deuteronomy 32:43
2. The Prophets; the quote in verse 12, '*The root of Jesse will come ...*' comes from Isaiah 11:10
3. The Psalms; the quote in verse 9, '*Therefore I will acknowledge You among the Gentiles*' comes from Psalm 18:49), and the quote in verse 11, '*Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles ...*' comes from Psalm 117:1.

Together, this impressive array of quotes has one consistent and theme. It is and has always been God's intention to make Himself known to all the world, and He does this through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

To wrap everything up, Paul concludes with a classic verse of praise to God, commonly called a 'doxology' (15:13). This is one of the great 'benedictions' of Scripture, and is a formal blessing used frequently in church liturgies to dismiss people at the end of services. It expresses supreme confidence that God will in fact do what He has promised, and make Himself known to the whole world.

## **Going Deeper**

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

- Theories about the end of Romans
- The message 'accept one another'
- The message that Christ is for Jew and Gentile
- The message of the doxology

## Going Deeper

Firstly, we will look into the intrigue of the final chapters of Romans, and why it appears that Paul finishes his letter only to add some more (15:14-16:27). There is plenty for us to look into beyond this. Paul begins by writing about 'acceptance', emphasising the need for all God's people to be in fellowship with each other. Jew and Gentile is no longer a major division in most churches, though once it was. Unfortunately we have other divisions instead! Lastly, the final doxology is a magnificent summary of the hope of all God's people.

### **Theories about the end of Romans**

To understand this point, we should read through the rest of Romans to spot the other great 'benedictions' that may be found. Firstly, there is one at the end of chapter 15 where Paul says 'the God of peace be with all of you; Amen' (15:33), and then in chapter 16 which has the phrase, 'Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.' (16:16 – see 2 Cor 13:12). Elsewhere in Paul's letters, he only refers to such a 'kiss' at the very end of a letter, but even this is not the end here! Then, after a few more verses, Paul says 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.' (16:20), and this is still a few verses before he finally completes Romans with these words; 'to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen!' (16:27). It looks as if Paul attempted to finish his letter around five times!

Since the earliest of times, scholars have argued over this, some suggesting that Romans was a composite letter, put together from several others and with the ending of each one included. Of course, as with the rest of the New Testament, no one possesses the original letters (Gospels etc.), and we depend on the evidence of copies written, in some cases, centuries later. All manner of theories have been suggested, some say that Paul wrote all the 'endings', and yet others reckon that they were added later by people who wanted their names in the great letter (see the great number of people named at the end of Romans, in chapter 16).

The most important textual evidence of Romans is an early copy of Romans written on papyrus around a hundred years after the letter was written, and this shows no signs of it being anything other than a copy of one whole and complete letter. For this reason, I have always believed that various so called 'endings' to Romans are likely to have arisen because of a habit of Paul's to go back to it and add more! He did not have the luxury, as we do today, of being able to re-write, or delete and copy. Once written, it was written, and amendments could only be made by additions. If we look into other letters of Paul, he demonstrates this tendency on more than one occasion (e.g. Philippians 3:1, where Paul writes '*finally, my friends ...*' but carries on for two more chapters!).

### **Accept one another**

In verses 7, Paul repeats the advice given so often by the New Testament. We who claim to be disciples of Christ must copy Him in our treatment of others. 'Accept one another ... just as Christ has accepted you' is so close to the great command of Jesus about love in John's Gospel, it is almost impossible to believe that Paul did not model this commendation directly on these words of Jesus; 'love one another, as I have loved you' (John 13:45, 15:12).

The value of what Paul says is that it is sometimes helpful to hear an important truth conveyed in a slightly different way, because it adds to our understanding of it. In this case, the truth lies in the command of Jesus 'love one another ...', and this call of Jesus has always begged a few questions about how we do this. Now, by using the same phrase structure as Jesus but inserting the word 'accept', to make 'accept one another ...', Paul helps us understand that in order to love one another, we must unconditionally accept one another.

Some translations of the Bible have the word 'welcome' instead of accept in verse 7. This reminds us that the word in Greek originally had something to do with the action taken upon receiving a guest at the door of a house. The guest was either welcomed ('accepted' or 'received') or turned away. This is helpful because it reminds us that Jesus has made us welcome into God's presence, and we are called to act in the same way towards all who profess the Lord's name. The very action of acceptance and welcoming is not just 'loving', but because of the work of Christ, we know that it shows the very character of God; something the Bible calls the 'glory of God' (15:7). The conclusion of this is that when we accept our brothers and sisters in Christ with unconditional love, we do God's work, and demonstrate His glory in the world. What greater incentive could there be!

### ***Christ for the Jews and the Gentiles***

Firstly, Paul felt it necessary to conclude his letter with a reminder of the love of God which has always lain at the heart of the whole Gospel. His second concern was to summarise what for him was one of the most important parts of his letter. This was his belief that the work of God since the dawn of time was consistent and true. For this to be the case, then the Saviour of the world had to be the Messiah of the Jewish people, someone who fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures and accomplished His work within Israel. This is what Paul meant by saying 'Christ was made a servant of the circumcised' (15:8). As far as Paul was concerned, it was incomprehensible to think that God would not honour the promises He had made to the forefathers of the Jewish race, even if they were achieved only through one Jew, Jesus Christ. In addition, the work of Jesus and the preaching of the Gospel had to be consistent with what God had said through His servants, the Prophets.

Paul picked four Old Testament prophecies to make his point. Firstly, he used one of the concluding verses of praise to God from Psalm 18:49 (15:9). This psalm was a Psalm 'of David' which celebrated his final triumph over Saul and the bringing of peace to God's people after years of division and war (equating to the first few chapters of 2 Samuel). David had established the first 'Kingdom of Israel' in the Promised Land, and Paul noticed that the Psalm which celebrated this included the universal theme of the praises of God throughout the world. He therefore used it to celebrate the new Kingdom of God established on earth for all people, through Jesus.

The second quote (15:10) comes from Deuteronomy 32:43, which, if you look it up, reads 'rejoice, O heavens, with His people', but there is some scholarly confusion even to this day about the correct translation of this text. Indeed, Paul's version of it could well reflect a more ancient version of the text than we have in our possession! Nevertheless, Paul used it because it was a quote from one of the famous books of 'Law' in the Old Testament. Here, in the mouth of Moses, and from his famous last great speech, was a prophecy of a day when all the people of the world would be able to worship the Lord! And this had come true in Christ.

Thirdly, Paul chose Psalm 117:1 (see 15:11), from the famous 'shortest chapter of the Bible', a verse which astonishingly describes the Covenant love of God given to His own people through Abraham, as made available to all peoples and all nations! And lastly, we hear from Isaiah 11:10 (15:12), the great prophet who wrote unceasingly about how the Messiah would be brought into the world and achieve His task, the rule of God in the whole world. It was Isaiah who specifically prophesied that the Messiah would come from the 'root of Jesse', in other words, He would be of the Jewish lineage of David.

For Paul; all these texts proved that Jesus was God's Messiah not just for the Jewish people He came to serve (15:8), but for all people for all time.

### ***The doxology***

There are many 'doxologies' within the Bible (1 Chronicles 16:36, Psalm 148:13, Phil 2:10,11 etc.); brief and succinct verses of praise to God which were probably memorable and well known before they were included in the Biblical literature. Paul, however, occasionally shows signs of making up new doxologies with traditional themes of the praises of God Almighty, but bringing out certain themes which give them a distinctive flavour.

Here, the doxology (15:13) includes within the praise of God, joy, peace and the power of the Holy Spirit. However, the whole verse would be meaningless without the theme of 'hope'. At this point in his letter, Paul was conscious of addressing not just Jews and not simply the people of the church at Rome to whom the letter was written. It is possible he knew that his letters were taken from church to church even in his own lifetime, and read from one congregation to another, passed around for the common good. He spoke of 'the God of hope' and 'an abundance of hope by the power of the Holy Spirit', and he did so in order to leave this encouragement with His readers. After all his agonising over the question of Jewish integration into the eternal work of God (chapters 9-11), and his deep concern about division in the church (chapter 14), Paul wanted to leave a message of hope.

## Application

Much of the Jewish / Gentile theme in this passage has been well covered in previous studies in Paul's letter to the Romans. However, the themes of acceptance and hope are interesting at this point in Paul's letter. We often hear it said that we should 'accept people as they are', because God does. True, and there is plenty of Scripture to back this up. However, the picture painted above is of acceptance as being like 'welcoming into a home', or an initial contact which has a deeper purpose. This is important because it is always necessary to recognise that God accepts us as we are in order to draw alongside us and begin the processes of change whereby we may be transformed by His love. God does not 'accept us' unconditionally

just to keep us as we are, but to move us on into His perfect purposes for us. We may not recognise this or the need for it, but this is what God does.

Hope is one of the great themes of the Christian Gospel which does not get the attention it deserves. Hope is essential to the human heart and spirit, which is something Paul recognises elsewhere, for in his famous 'hymn to love' (1 Corinthians 13), he speaks of 'faith, hope and love' as a trio of qualities which 'abide', or 'remain' when this world comes to its end. In this sense, hope is confidence in God; something that is built up in our souls through our earthly lives and is complete when we are with Him in glory! Hope is integral to the growth of the human spirit on the path of discipleship, which is why Paul says 'may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may have an abundance of hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

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## Discipleship

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

1. How easy is it in reality to accept everyone else who is part of the church? Is anyone made to feel unacceptable? Why might this be?
2. How easy do you find it to recall passages of Scripture which illustrate your thoughts about God? How can you get to know more?
3. Discuss in your group what you mean by 'Christian hope'. Is it possible for us to be disappointed in our 'hopes'? Why?

### **Personal comments by author**

*All of us need to ensure that our hopes and dreams for the future are compatible with the Kingdom of God, so that we do not set before ourselves hopes that are not godly. For example, if we hope for complete reconciliation between all those with whom we have strife, then our hopes are dependent on what others do or do not do, and such hopes may not be fulfilled. If our hope is to be complete before our maker, then this will be achieved in Christ; this is true Christian hope.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Acceptance of others is not necessarily easy. Ask yourself whether you have been as accepting of others as perhaps you should be! If you can think of people you have not easily 'accepted' within the fellowship of your church, pray about what you should do to rectify this.*
  - *Memorise or write down verse 13, so that when you have a bad day and feel down, you can say these words to help you look 'up'.*
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## Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty. You enable us to keep going when everything seems impossible. You enable us to show love when we do not feel very generous, and you place hope within our hearts even when the future looks dim. Complete Your work in us we pray, for Your name's sake: AMEN

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