

Prayer

Thank You, great and merciful Lord God; for You have broken the power of evil before the eyes of the whole world! May we always rejoice in the power of the Cross of Jesus Christ; in His death upon the Cross, in His removal from the Cross to the tomb, and in His departure from the tomb in glorious life-affirming victory! All praise be to You great and mighty God of Miracles and Salvation! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Take time today to lift up to God the leader of your church, and also your own attitudes towards him or her. People can feel very deeply about what they expect of a minister or priest or pastor, but bring these things to the Lord in prayer.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the fellowship groups in your church.** *Pray that God's Spirit will come upon His people to energise them and empower them as they meet together and enjoy fellowship*
- *Pray for Japanese families throughout the world who have been affected by the terrible events in the country. Pray for the Japanese churches as they seek to be a means of compassion and goodwill to those who are suffering.*
- *Give thanks to God for the many people who work hard to ensure that your streets are safe at night*

Meditation

Lord God Almighty:

Grant us days of joy;
when we are happy with life and content in You

Grant us days of mercy;
when our hearts go out to all who need Your love;

Grant us days of faithfulness;
when we will not let other people down;

Grant us days of grace;
when we look with favour on those around us;

Grant us days of kindness;
when our actions speak louder than our words;

Grant us days of patience;
when we know we can trust You, come what may;

Grant us days of blessing;
when we are a help to others, and they to us;

Grant us days of peace;
when all is well with us, and we may rest in You;

Lord God Almighty;

Grant us to know true godliness,
so that we come to live it, each and every day.

Bible passage - Romans 16:17-27

¹⁷ I urge you, dear friends, to watch out for those who cause dissensions and trouble, contrary to the Gospel principles you were taught. Avoid them. ¹⁸ For such people do not serve our

Lord who is the Christ. They serve their own greedy agendas, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the innocent. ¹⁹ For although your obedience is known by everyone, so much so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and open about what is evil. ²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

²¹ Timothy, my fellow-worker, greets you; as do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my fellow-countrymen. ²² I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord. ²³ Gaius, host to me and to the whole church here, greets you. Erastus, the city clerk of works, and our brother Quartus, send you greetings. (²⁴ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you; Amen.)

²⁵ Now to Him who is able to establish 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 past ²⁶ but is now revealed, and is made known to all the Gentiles through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the everlasting God for them to obey by means of faith; ²⁷ to God who alone is wise, be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Bible Study

Review

We have at last reached the end of Romans! Our passage today consists of three simple sections of Scripture. Firstly, Paul gives a blunt warning against false teaching (16:17-20). Secondly, he sends greetings to the church at Rome from the people with him when the letter was written, including a reference to Tertius, the man to whom Paul dictated the letter (16:21-24). Thirdly, he finally concludes the letter with a substantial benediction giving glory to God (16:25-27).

The first interesting thing about this passage is the character and tone of verses 17 to 20, which appear somewhat stern. Why should Paul write a harsh warning at the end of a letter which in almost all other respects is positive, and which sets out the Gospel in a comprehensive manner? The answer is probably that Paul wanted the Roman Christians to know the dangers of dissention and strife. Paul was insistent that the truth of the Gospel was unchanged and would remain unchanged, and the worst enemy was doctrinal division. He therefore sought to eradicate this both by his bold teaching of the Gospel and also warning the church against dissention. Of course, Paul's writings have now become the sacred 'scriptures' themselves, and they are a warning to us.

Despite problems in the church, the passage shows that Paul was confident in the 'Gospel principles' (16:17) on which the church at Rome was built. Perhaps this was due to the work of Andronicus and Junia, two people who were already in Rome, who Paul praises as 'apostles' (16:7). Paul was always confident of God's victory (*'the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.'* - 16:19), and his letter rightly concludes not with a warning but on this note of optimism.

In verses 21 to 24, Paul sends greeting from those with him to the church at Rome. These include Timothy, his long term companion, together with other travelling friends and the copy writer Tertius. It also refers to a man called 'Erastus' (16:23), who was the city 'clerk of works' at Ephesus, the city where Paul wrote Romans. This is an interesting aside, indicating the way in which the Gospel was beginning to affect the lives of significant people in the Roman Empire. It was a trend that was to continue for three centuries before the Roman Empire finally became Christian under Constantine in 323 AD.

Another intrigue is found with the words of blessing; *'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you'* (16:20,24). In modern translations, these words appear in either or both verses 20 and 24, but in the most ancient copies of the letter, they are found only in one or other verse but not both (which is why I have included them in verse 24 in brackets)! We really do not know exactly what Paul wrote here!

Finally, the benediction at the end of the letter is something of a mystery, because although it is a wonderful passage, it is written in a completely different style to that of most of Paul's letters. Paul may have used a benediction that was well known, but since the second century, some have suspected that this was written by a man named Marcion. The language is very similar to some of his other writings, and he had a well-documented habit of re-writing some of Paul's letters to include his own opinions, especially about 'mysteries' and 'revelations' (16:26)!

Whatever the origins of this great benediction, whether it was written by Paul or Marcion, it makes a powerful conclusion to this great letter, and it's words never differ from the Gospel it contains. The style may be different but the substance is clear. It confirms the unique power of God at work in salvation, establishing

His church by the '*preaching of Jesus Christ*' (16:25), and a secret once hidden but now revealed '*through the prophetic Scriptures*' (16:26). It praises God and also reminds us that the Gospel is not something for us to play with, it is God's. Salvation is not something for us to argue about, but to believe in and receive. It is based on truths written in God's word and it requires our obedience. Thanks be to God!

Going Deeper

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

- Paul's warnings
- Paul's greetings
- The benediction

Going Deeper

We will now look at each of the three sections of this passage in turn and address some of the features mentioned in the review. If you were to read a scholarly commentary, you would find a great deal of contention about some of the issues raised, but there is no need for us to be carried away by problems, because there is plenty of godly truth to be found in the text.

The warning

Despite the fact that most of the letter to the Romans was written positively about the meaning of the Gospel and what it means in terms of practical Christian living, Paul knew from his experience that Satan was capable of getting into the church and creating trouble. He had spent his life founding churches such as that at Corinth, only to be placed in a position in later years where he had to write later on to counter speculation, and also the teaching of people who had a personal agenda or an understanding of God and the work of Christ which was far removed from that of the teaching and experience of the disciples and the early apostles, including himself. A read through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, or Colossians or Philippians, for example, will show this clearly. He had little regard for such dissent from classical Christian faith, and used words about such teachers which implied their motives were greed and personal gratuity (16:18).

It is no wonder that Paul adds to the end of this great letter a general warning, and his advice is classic Christian teaching. He tells God's people to hold firm to the historic truth of the Gospel and avoid all who lead people away from this standard. In the midst of this advice, Paul talks of those who by 'smooth talk and flattery deceive the hearts of the innocent.' We could assume that there will always be Christian people who are 'innocent', and in some places within the Bible, 'innocence' is regarded almost as a virtue. However, what was in Paul's mind was the great need for God's people to 'grow up' in faith and not remain theologically underdeveloped. In Romans 12:1f. Paul called for God's people to grow in faith and be 'renewed' in their minds. Paul knew that such renewal by the power of the Holy Spirit was available for all people. The disciples were not chosen by the Lord because they were intelligent or extraordinary people; they had a little faith (Matt 8:26), and were made into amazing people by God. The same can be true of all who place their trust in Him today. We are not all called to be theologians, but we are called to use our intelligence to know the difference between the genuine Gospel of Christ and the imitations of it used by people who try to lead God's people astray.

This is why God's people need to read the Word and pray; and be armed against Satan's temptations to build religions rather than the Kingdom of God through Christ (16:20).

Greetings

With Paul at the time of writing the letter were Timothy, Paul's long time companion and chosen 'heir' in leadership. Paul's letters to Timothy testify to the close relationship between these two, which began when Paul met the young Timothy in Derbe, near Lystra (Acts 16:1). We know little about Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, the other three people mentioned (16:21).

The passage becomes more interesting when we hear of Tertius, the man responsible for writing this great letter to the Romans. It is obvious from other letters of Paul that he wrote by dictation (see Galatians 6:11), nowhere else do we get to know the name of the person who wrote. It is suggested, and quite probable that after writing verse 22, Tertius handed the pen over to Paul to complete the letter. Something similar happened at the end of 2 Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:17). To write the last few sentences of a letter in his own handwriting would be like a 'signature' of authenticity, verifying that the contents of the letter were genuine.

Of the remaining names in verse 23, two are interesting. It is reckoned that 'Gaius' is the same person as the man named as 'Titius Justus' in Acts 18:7. In the Acts story, Paul was given refuge in this man's house after being rejected by the local synagogue in Corinth, and he appears in 1 Cor. 1:14, named as 'Gaius' and one of the first converts in Corinth. Clearly, Paul was a guest at the house of Gaius Titus Justus when

writing the letter to the Romans, and his name is therefore included in the list of greetings (though we need all three references to ensure that this is the one and same person we are talking about!)

The other interesting name is Erastus (16:23) who is designated as a 'clerk of works' in this text. If you read other translations of Romans, you will find that he is sometimes called 'city treasurer' or 'commissioner of works'. So who was this convert to Christianity? At the time of the writing of Romans (perhaps in the late 50's AD) he was a city employee involved in public works, and the word which describes him in Greek ('oikonomos') gives us no reason to say any more. However, a group of archaeologists uncovered a pavement in Corinth in 1929 which has an inscription which implies that one 'Erastus' of high public office, had a pavement laid at his own expense and for the good of the people of the city, around 30 to 40 years later! Because of this finding, it is reckoned that Erastus the Christian rose through the ranks of public service professions in Corinth and became a wealthy and influential man. Paul certainly lived with people blessed by the Lord not only in their faith, but in their public life as well!

The Benediction

The interesting part of the benediction is the way that Paul talks of the Gospel as a 'mystery ... kept secret'. Paul's language here is similar to that used in Colossians (Col 1:27f.) where Paul was attempting to argue against heretics who tried to make Christianity sound like a 'mystery' religion, popular in the Roman Empire of those days in which people progressed through the ranks of the religion by being told different degrees of 'mystery' which would lead them ultimately to the 'truth'.

Paul would have none of this, which is why he spoke of the mystery as having been 'revealed'. Some people have thought this passage very strange because Paul talks about a mystery kept secret for 'long ages' (16:25) and presumably revealed in Christ Jesus, but what he says is this 'but is now revealed ... made known to the Gentiles through the prophetic Scriptures ...' The problem is this. How can the Gospel be a mystery revealed in Christ Jesus, when it was available previously through the prophets?

If you think about this from a Biblical perspective, however, and also with some knowledge of the words of Jesus, then the answer is obvious. Jesus made it clear that the prophets were essential to an understanding of the Old Testament Scripture (e.g. Matt 13:14f.) etc. which revealed God's eternal purposes for the Messiah and the salvation of the world. Indeed, it was essential to Jesus' ministry that He explain to His own people that Moses was not final arbiter of God's law as had been assumed, but it was the prophets who explained God's purposes in the law and in the rest of Scripture. Paul, as is clear in this passage, clearly understood this aspect of Jesus' teaching. Also, it was the Old Testament prophets who realised that God's purposes would be fulfilled throughout the whole world (not just the Jewish nation, but including the Gentiles) by the coming of the Messiah. Unfortunately, it is something that is not fully understood to this day.

Paul finishes by giving glory to God. No other ending is fitting for such a work of power and theological significance.

Application

Discord and disharmony is the enemy of God's people, the church, and Satan will use every means to create unhappiness and division amongst God's people to this very day. In each of Paul's letters there are words of warning which are direct and need to be heard at least as much as the more famous 'nicer' parts, such as 1 Corinthians 13, or Romans 8 or 12 for example. Paul's warnings in each of his letters are highly direct and expose a great deal of false religious practice in the life of the church today, as well as his own day. It is quite possible that Paul was aware his letters would be kept and preserved in some form, and he may well have understood that what he wrote would have a prophetic role in the church, with each part of what he said having some value that God would use for future generations. In almost every warning of Paul's, he cautions God's people to beware those who teach anything other than the historic truth of the work of Jesus Christ and the Gospel as passed on by the disciples to the early church. Our task today is not to 'get back' to this original form of Christianity, but to receive the truth that has been passed on to us and give it to others who will follow.

Lastly, it is worth noting how Paul concludes his letter with a blessing from the Lord. This practice asks us to consider whether we honour God sufficiently within our speech, manner, conduct and writing to each other today. There are simple ways of doing this, but many of our conversations, emails, letters and other forms of communication, even within the church, make little effort to give thanks to God or offer blessing. Some have abandoned all honour of God except what is done formally on Sundays! Surely there has to be a way in which we give glory to God more naturally and honestly in the midst of the everyday features of life, whether in writing of emails and letters, or in speaking or telephone conversations. After all, we do owe our whole life and being to God!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What should the church be warned about today? Is there anything within Paul's words in this passage which are particularly important?
2. How relevant is it to have 'important' people in the life of the church today, and what contribution can they make to the Gospel?
3. Discuss things that Christians can do to give blessing to each other and honour God in everyday life.

Personal comments by author

The end of Paul's letter to the Romans brings a feeling of having studied a great work. There is so much within this letter, it bears reading over and over again. I have studied this reading many times, but I have never plumbed its depths; I feel I am scratching at its surface. However, unless I do this I know I will never understand the Gospel, and I am drawn back to it time and time again.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you were asked to write down what you regarded as the essential Christian faith passed on through the ages, what would you write? Perhaps this is a task that you could do over a week, read it through and assess your own response.*
- *Another way of assessing what you have considered would be to talk about it to someone else, and another important way of looking at this would be to pray.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ. You hold the secrets of the whole world, and You have revealed them to us through Your life and death. We look for the physical secrets of the world, its artistic richness, and the psychological complexity of your creation; but You have revealed yourself to us spiritually by love; and we are content with this amazing revelation! Thank You Lord God; AMEN
