

“The God of Peace Will Soon Crush Satan”

Sermons on Romans # 37

Texts: Romans 16:17-27; Genesis 3:1-19

At long last we come to the final verses of the Book of Romans. In this remarkable letter, Paul has described the human predicament (bleak as it is), before explaining the nature of the gospel and describing how it is that guilty sinners receive a right-standing before God based on the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel and received through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to describe how these same justified sinners also begin the life-long process of sanctification in which the remnant of our sinful nature (the flesh) is progressively put to death, while the new man is continually strengthened through word and sacrament. Paul then describes the role that Jew and Gentile will play in redemptive history, before giving a series of imperatives regarding our daily behavior as Christians. As Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul is concerned to shepherd this flock of Jesus Christ and so he leaves the Romans with a final pastoral warning as well as a wish and a prayer for God’s continued blessing upon the Roman church.

In his concluding remarks to the church in Rome, Paul explains his current situation—he desires to come and visit the church in Rome but thus far has been prevented from doing so. Before Paul can come to Rome for a visit on a hoped-for journey to Spain, Paul must first deliver an offering to the suffering Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This offering for the poor had been collected from Gentile churches throughout Macedonia. The Jewish Christians in Rome were undergoing a very difficult trial. Having come to believe that Jesus is the Christ—Israel’s Messiah—Jewish Christians faced horrible persecution from those Jews who regarded the preaching of Christ crucified as a great threat to the religion of Israel. But Jewish Christians also had a hard time accepting the Gentile mission to which Paul had so wholeheartedly devoted himself because Christ had called him to do this very thing. Gentiles were not familiar with the Old Testament. They had never heard of Moses, nor did they know the commandments of God. They ate things which Jews found offensive and they tended to engage in sexual immorality. So not only would the offering Paul be bringing to Jerusalem provide relief from their very real suffering, it would have encouraged the Jewish Christians to be more accepting of the Gentile Church.

Paul has just told the Romans that his calling is primarily to preach the gospel in those areas where it had not yet been preached. It has long been Paul’s desire to labor in mission fields to the west (Spain) since the gospel had not yet been preached in this area. Rome would make a good base of operations for Paul, which is probably why he informs the Romans of his long-standing desire to come and visit so that there might be mutual encouragement both for the shepherd and for the sheep. Paul asks for their prayers for the success of his trip to Jerusalem, but he also prays for the church that they will be refreshed and encouraged by Paul when he finally comes to this visit congregation he has heard so much about.

These prayers were answered but certainly not in the way in which Paul envisioned. The offering from the Gentiles was accepted by James on behalf of the Jewish church, but Paul was subsequently arrested for preaching the gospel, and eventually arrived in the city of Rome in chains. As a Roman citizen, Paul appealed his arrest up the governmental ladder and the final chapters of the Book of Acts describe Paul’s appearance before a number of Roman officials before ending with Paul under house arrest in Rome. There is reliable Christian tradition which holds that Paul got his hearing before Caesar, was released and did indeed make his way to Spain. But he was arrested by Nero when he returned to Rome, and was beheaded by this arch-persecutor of Christ’s church who is later identified as a type of the long line of

evil men who will arise bent upon the destruction of Christ's church and the gospel.

If you know the letters of Paul, you know that his concluding remarks to the Christians in Rome are quite typical of what we find in a number of Paul's other letters. And yet, when we come to these closing sections of Paul's letters we are apt to read through them very quickly and skip right over the gems that are buried within. Paul's concluding remarks to the church in Rome are no exception. Paul's warning to the church in Rome should ring in our ears today, and his prayer for the church in Rome should serve as the model for how we should relate to our brothers and sisters whom we have never met and who labor in places far distant from Anaheim, and with whom we share a bond that transcends all racial, cultural and socio-economic distinctions.

As we turn to our text (verses 17-20), Paul issues a warning, reminds his readers of God's promise to deliver them from Satan, before offering a prayer on behalf of the Roman church for God's grace to continue to sustain the church.

In verses 17-19, Paul issues a very strong warning about false teachers, who will seek to destroy the unity of the congregation. Some critical scholars have argued that since Paul has made no mention of false teachers earlier in the letter, these verses must be an addition to the letter which was attached at a later time. But given all that Paul has witnessed in the churches he has founded, it is certainly reasonable to assume that Paul is warning the church in Rome about what might happen to them, just as it happened in other churches Paul had founded. Not only was Rome a city with a multitude of pagan religions and proto-gnostic cults, there was also every likelihood that Judaizers or libertine antinomians would assault this congregation just as they had done in churches throughout the region. Thus Paul is, in effect, putting the church in Rome on notice that these issues may surface at any time and that the leaders of the church must be willing to protect the congregation from any wolves who attempt to enter the fold.¹

Paul makes one final impassioned appeal to his readers (hearers).² What follows is a warning. Says Paul, "*I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.*" Paul warns the Romans to watch out—the verb is a strong one—for those who will come who are bent upon causing divisions in the church. Not only is it their intention to divide the church (which is the one body of Christ although it has many members), but their method of operation is to put obstacles in the way of God's people so as to deceive them. The image here is that of the bait and box trap, in which a stick held up the box so that when an animal came to take the bait, the stick could be pulled out from under the box, the box would fall, catching the animal. The obstacles which are placed so as to trap God's people have to do with things that are contrary to what Paul (and others) have already taught about the gospel.

Since Paul offers no details here it about what, specifically, the false teachers were teaching, this may mean that the content of their false teaching was common knowledge among the people. The Judaizers set obstacles to trap people by telling people that we are not justified by faith alone, but by faith in Jesus Christ plus some additional meritorious human activity or good work. It was their insistence upon ritual circumcision as necessary for justification which divided so many churches. In the case of antinomian

¹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 929.

² This is to be understood as an appeal or an entreaty, not an imperative. Cf., Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 539.

libertines, it was the notion that justified sinners need not obey the commandments of God now that they have been justified. Thus Paul is probably warning the Romans of well-known enemies of the gospel, people who will deny justification *sola fide* or who will separate justification from sanctification. Paul has just commended the Romans for their maturity and their great faith. The Romans know the gospel and how justification relates to sanctification. When the false teachers appear, the Romans know what they must do. Now, it falls to the Romans to be willing to do it. Paul's advice is once again very simple and very common-sensical. Don't have anything to do with such people. "*Keep away from them.*"

In verse 18, Paul now speaks to the motives of these false teachers who will come with their box and bait traps, looking for the unsuspecting. "*For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.*" False teachers do not serve Jesus Christ no matter how much they may claim to be doing his will. Their focus is not upon the well-being of Christ's church, but is instead upon satisfying their own desires (literally their "belly"). In other words, they go about their deception because of sinful and selfish motives. Perhaps they derive a perverse sense of pleasure from causing division and disruption of the churches because they may resent Paul, or they have racial issues with either Jews or Gentiles.³

Notice too that such people do not come and say, "Hi, we're false teachers and we are here to divide the church and to trap unsuspecting believers. Where can we set up our traps?" False teachers are characterized by Paul as deceptive schemers who secretly enter the church by pretending to be something that they are not. Recall that Satan is the father of lies, hence he is the author of all heresy, which is ultimately a lie about what God reveals in his word. Paul says these false teachers use smooth talk and flattery—in other words, they tell people what they want to hear so as to gain a hearing and create a point of entry into the church. Their victims are those whom Paul calls "naive," literally, those who are "innocent" or without guile. Paul does not mean by this that such people are without sin, but that they don't know any better and are overly trusting.⁴ The false teachers aim for the mind, Paul says. They introduce ideas contrary to the gospel so as to lead people astray. This is why we must always be on our guard for those who will try and enter our midst to gain converts, cause division and lead the people of God astray. This is why in the pastoral letters, written some time later, Paul places such stress on officer-bearers being men who have long track-records of faithful service and who have been repeatedly tested. Such men are far less apt to be the kind of people Paul describes here.

As news of the growth and success of the Roman church spreads, this too will attract false teachers like a moth is drawn to a flame. And so in verse 19, Paul warns the Romans, "*Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.*" It is a great and wonderful thing that the Roman church has obeyed the gospel by accepting God's gift of a justifying righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and not through works. But this also makes the Roman church a target for those who want to fill their bellies with the perverse delight of setting traps for God's people by leading the unsuspecting astray. Paul wants this congregation to be fully aware of position they are in. While he is filled with joy, he wants the Romans to be very wary of what might happen if they be caught unawares.

With this in mind, Paul extends in verse 20 a promise of deliverance as well as offering a prayer for the

³ Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 931.

⁴ Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 931.

church in Rome. Writes Paul, “*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*” No doubt, Paul has in mind the so-called *proto-evangelium* of Genesis 3:15 (our Old Testament lesson), the promise that the serpent’s head will be crushed by the redeemer. While Paul clearly affirms elsewhere—most notably in Colossians 2:15 that Christ has already “*disarmed the powers and authorities, [making] a spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross*”—here, Paul is probably speaking of the final judgment when Satan and his works will be completely and totally destroyed when he is thrown into the lake of fire.⁵ This means that Jesus does not return to a saved earth, but to save the earth—a point which is highly problematic for postmillennarians.

But the point of Paul’s assertion should not be lost on the Romans. Satan is a defeated foe. Christ has triumphed over him upon the cross. Therefore Satan’s final and total defeat is guaranteed on the day of the Lord. This means that all of the attempts made by false teachers in the meantime to lead the people of God astray will be thwarted if only the people of God remain faithful, defend the faith against heresy and false teaching, and trust in the power of the gospel to bring light upon the darkness of error. It is only when the church fails to use the powerful weapons given to it (Paul speaks of this as “armor” in Ephesians 6:10 ff.), that Satan’s minions can make any significant inroads into the church. This is why Satan rarely makes a direct attack and most often tries much more subtle means. Satan prefers to take ground in inches and millimeters, not yards and meters. That way, we are far less apt to notice when he seeks to work havoc in Christ’s church.

Then, as we move to verses 21-24, a number of those with Paul, get the chance to extend their greetings to their friends in Rome.

The first of those to extend greetings in verse 21 is someone quite familiar to us. “*Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you.*” Timothy was probably Paul’s closest associate as Paul addressed two of his epistles to this young minister who was born in the city of Lystra in South Galatia. Timothy was with Paul on the second missionary journey (cf. Acts 16:2-3). He was also with Paul in Macedonia, where Paul stayed on his third missionary journey, since Timothy is listed as the co-sender of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. He is also with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome and is co-sender of five other letters from Paul (1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon). Timothy is not listed as a co-sender of the letter to the church in Rome, however, probably because Timothy was not well known in the church there. But nevertheless, he extends his greetings to his brothers and sisters.⁶

Others with Paul in Macedonia (Corinth) send their greetings as well, include “*Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.*” The identity of Lucius is a matter of some speculation. He may, in fact, be Luke (the author of Luke-Acts), since the name Lucius is a common variant of Luke. It is also possible that Lucius is the individual referenced in Acts 13:1, who was a prophet/teacher living in the city of Syrian Antioch. Jason is probably the same man mentioned in Acts 17:5-9, who helped Paul during his difficult days in Thessalonica. Sosipater is probably the man from Berea mentioned in Acts 20:4, who followed Paul when he left Greece. The fact that Paul speaks of all of these men as his relatives,

⁵ Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 931. Cranfield understands this affirmation as a general promise and does not see a direct connection to Paul’s discussion of false teachers. See Cranfield, [Commentary on Romans](#), II.803.

⁶ Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 934.

indicates that all three of these men were Jews, and they may have been delegates sent from the Gentile churches who collected the offering for the church in Jerusalem, and like Timothy, they take the opportunity to extend their greetings to their brothers and sisters in Rome.

In verse 22, we come to one of the most useful items of biblical trivia. Paul is not the author of Romans! “*I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.*” Tertius was probably a professional scribe/secretary who wrote down the letter as Paul dictated it. The employment of professionals to write down and edit such letters was a common practice in Paul’s day, and in exchange for all of his hard work, Tertius is given the opportunity to extend greetings of his own. Which he does!

In verse 23, several others extend greetings as well. The first man mentioned is Gaius, “*whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.*” Although at least three men are mentioned in the New Testament are named Gaius (a very common name), very likely, this is the man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:14, who was baptized by Paul. Also sending greetings are “*Erastus, who is the city’s director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.*” Erastus was likely the man Paul sent from Ephesus to Macedonia during the third missionary journey. He was some sort of civic official, perhaps a treasurer or the person assigned to maintain streets and public buildings.⁷ Quartus is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament.

Finally, then, Paul’s letter to the Romans ends with the doxology found in verses 25-27.

F But before we work our way through the doxology, some of you may be wondering, “what happened to verse 24?” which reads, “*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. Amen.*” This is one of the very few places in the New Testament where the original text is not certain. This verse is entirely omitted from a number of early manuscripts and is inserted in other manuscripts after Romans 15:33 or Romans 14:23. It is possibly a scribal addition and was copied into the text by a later copyist. This is why the NIV simply omits it, although it is placed in the marginal notes.⁸

In verses 25-27, Paul offers a glorious doxology which praises the God who has given us the free gift of righteousness in the person of his son. Paul writes, “*Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*” In these three verses we find a rather remarkable, albeit brief, summary of some of the major themes that Paul has so wonderfully expressed earlier in this letter, especially in the opening chapter.⁹

“*Who is able*” echoes Romans 1:4, “*who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord,*” and Romans 1:16, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of*

⁷ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 935.

⁸ See the discussion in Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, (New York: United Bible Society, 1975), pp. 533-536, 540.

⁹ Set forth in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 937-38.

everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

“To establish you” echoes Romans 1:11–“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong.”

“My gospel” echoes Romans 1:1–“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,” as well as texts such as Roman 1:9, 1:16; 2:16.

“Revelation of a mystery long hidden” echoes Romans 1:17–“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith,’” and 3:21–“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.”

“Prophetical writings,” echoes Romans 1:2–“the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” and Romans 3:21, which we just read.

“Believe and obey” echoes Romans 1:5–“Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.”

“All the nations” (the Gentiles) also echoes Romans 1:5.

The “only God” echoes Romans 3:29-30: “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”

And then finally, the phrase “wise God” echoes, Romans 11:33-36–“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

Thus as Paul wraps up this epistle, he is reminding his readers of the grand doctrinal themes of the letter, although he now does so in the context of a doxology as he directs them to praise the living God who has done all of these wonderful things for them. What had been hidden has now been revealed. The one who has revealed all of these things is fully able to do the very things he has promised. And he has brought countless Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ, that one in whom all the promises of God are finally and forever accomplished.

This is why the Romans are to have hope in the midst of trial. The God of peace will crush Satan under his feet. He will do everything he has promised. And with Paul and the church in Rome and with all the saints, let us praise our God for all that he has done for us– *Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”*