

Romans 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 16 August 2020

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- [0 : 00] Romans chapter 15 Romans chapter 15 And again it is said,
Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him. And again Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope.
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. I myself am satisfied about you, brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.
But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.
In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God, for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, to bring the Gentiles to obedience, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.
- [2 : 15] And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation. But as it is written, those who never have been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.
This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.
At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.
For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.
I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy, and be refreshed in your company.
- [3 : 41] May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Romans chapter 15 is the conclusion of the body of the letter, when Paul's argument reaches its final climax.

Here we find the larger themes of the letter connected with their very practical outworkings. It picks up various of the themes that have been at play to this point, and ties them up. The most immediate theme of the relationship between the strong and the weak is taken up, alongside themes of the new worshipping community that arises out of God's great act of grace in Christ, which might remind us of chapter 12.

Themes that take us back to the earlier parts of the letter are also present. The union of Jews and Gentiles, the spread of the gospel throughout the world, the nations being brought to the obedience of faith, and the nature of Paul's apostolic mission, take us back through to the very beginning of the letter, returning us to the point where we first started.

Paul begins by charging those who are strong, among whom he seems to include himself, to bear the weaknesses of the weak. The task here is not merely one of patience with the weak, but the more positive duty of supporting and bearing them up.

The strength of the strong is best expressed, not in judgment of the weak, but in gracious support of them. Indeed, as Christians, we are obliged to such support of our brothers and sisters.

[5 : 00] The point is not to pursue our own interests, or to please ourselves, but to build up others. This principle is established by Christ himself, who we must imitate in this as in other matters.

And Paul here alludes to Psalm 69 verse 9, For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. In his willingness to go to the cross out of his zeal for the house of his father, in the face of every human instinct that recoils at it, Christ is the ultimate example of not pleasing himself.

Just as Christ acted for the sake of others, so we must act for the sake of our neighbours. Having quoted the scriptures, Paul makes a brief aside explaining his understanding of the place of scripture in the life of the new covenant people of God.

The scriptures are not just written for people in the past, but for us too. The word of God looks us directly in the eyes and speaks into our world. We might recall here verses like 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 11.

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Addressing the Roman Christians here, Paul wants to assure them that, as they patiently endure and as they look to the words of the scriptures, they will find that their hope and their confidence grow.

[6 : 21] The scripture is a source of encouragement. As we meditate upon its promises, heed its warnings, and are animated by its exhortations, and answer to its summons, we will be strengthened, encouraged, emboldened, and revived.

Paul has just said that the scriptures were given, so that, through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope. Now he describes God as the God of endurance and encouragement, presumably the endurance and encouragement that he ministers to us through the scriptures.

His prayer is that we would be granted harmony with each other, in accordance with Christ Jesus. The harmony and unity of the church, with one voice, is found in being accord with Christ Jesus, and in the act of glorifying God the Father.

As he did in chapter 14 verse 1, Paul charges the Roman Christians to welcome each other. The model for such welcome is Christ's welcome of us, and the outcome of such welcome is the glory of God.

Christ's grace was seen in the way that he welcomed us, apart from any worth that rendered us worthy of welcome. We glorify God as we participate in his welcome to others. Much of the book of Romans has been about God's welcome expressed in Christ, and one of the implications of this is the duty that we all have to live in terms of it.

[7 : 41] For instance, Jews need to welcome Gentiles, the strong need to welcome the weak, the rich need to welcome the poor. The theme of God's glory is an important one here. Much as the unity of the church in its voice of worship glorifies God, so our welcoming of each other in Christ glorifies him.

The welcoming of one another needs to be understood in terms of the great act of God in Christ that Paul summarises in verses 8 and 9. This action in Christ achieves both the fulfilment of God's ancient promises to Israel, and, as a result, allows for the Gentiles to enter into the enjoyment of the blessing and the mercy of God.

The promises that God made to Israel were promises through which the entire world would be blessed. Both Jews and Gentiles, having been welcomed by God through the great act of his faithfulness and mercy in Christ, should express welcome to each other in the one people of God that has been formed through this act.

The act of God by which we are welcomed, and the division between us and God removed, is also an act of God by which people are reconciled and the divisions between them are removed.

With three citations from Scripture, Psalm 18 verse 49, Deuteronomy 32 verse 43, and Psalm 117 verse 1, all in the Septuagint, Paul brings forth testimony to the one voice with which a Jew and Gentile people should glorify God.

[9 : 07] The underlying image evoked by these verses is that of Christ the sufferer, who has triumphed, and is now surrounded by Jews and Gentiles in a single rejoicing company of worshippers.

This is the great outcome of it all. Capping off his argument, Paul quotes Isaiah chapter 11 verse 10, The root of Jesse arises to rule the Gentiles.

In Christ's resurrection, he is the one who has risen as the root of Jesse. We might here wonder why Christ is the root of Jesse, rather than the root of David. In the Old Testament, it is as if the tree of David has been completely uprooted and destroyed.

When the Messiah finally arrives, he arises from the buried remnants of David's line as a root out of dry ground. The resurrection isn't just about Jesus as an individual, or even Jesus as the Messiah.

It is also about the raising up of the dynasty of David, which might have seemed lost and utterly destroyed. When Christ, the son of David and the root of Jesse arises, declared to be the son of God with power by the raising from the dead, he arises to rule the nations, and the nations come to place their hope in him.

[10 : 14] Paul's prayer at this point is that God, as the source of hope, might give the Roman Christians joy and peace in their faith, as the Holy Spirit's power at work among them causes their confidence in God's future to grow and to be strengthened.

Moving towards the end of the body of the letter, Paul begins his turn to some more practical matters. However, as is invariably the case with Paul, even the most practical and concrete matters are shot through with theological concerns and considerations and insights.

Paul doesn't seem to be writing to them to set them right on serious matters that they have gotten wrong, but in order to minister to them as the apostle to the Gentiles, and so that they will participate in and support his ministry in that regard, recognising the importance of his mission.

The main teaching he offers serves more as a reminder than as a correction or a novel instruction. Paul has, however, been given a very particular and special calling by God as a minister of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles.

Paul has been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, as we see in Galatians chapter 2 verse 8, paralleling him with Peter who has the gospel to the circumcised. He has an especial calling and as such, he has an appropriate interest in the Romans and gift to minister to them.

[11 : 33] He describes what he is performing as a priestly service. He is preparing an offering to be presented in the Holy Spirit, who will set the Gentiles apart as acceptable to God.

As in the beginning of chapter 12, Paul here presents the service of God in terms and concepts borrowed from temple worship. Such patterns of worship are fulfilled in the humaniform worship of the church.

Paul expresses a boast in what Christ is accomplishing through him. He is well aware of the fact that this all comes from the gracious act of God and his Son, not in some peculiar skill of Paul's own.

It is being achieved by the Spirit of God. The extent of Paul's ministry has stretched from Jerusalem in the south to Illyricum in the northwest, the present-day region of the Balkans.

The movement of the gospel described in Acts begins in Jerusalem, includes all Judea, extends to Samaria, and from there to the end of the earth. Paul also describes his ministry in a way that goes out from Jerusalem and moves to the wider parts of the world.

[12 : 37] Paul's mission is to break new ground, rather than merely to develop work that has been started by others. He sees himself as one introducing the message of the gospel to those who had not formally heard.

While there is nothing wrong with building on another person's foundation, Paul speaks of such building in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, that is not the mission that Paul himself is undertaking.

This ambition that drives Paul's mission is now directing his work towards the land of Spain. He has hitherto been occupied in the eastern Mediterranean region, but now claims that he no longer has room for work there as a pioneer and church planter.

Clearly the message of the gospel has spread widely in those areas, and there are now communities of Christians in all of the major regions. This might give us a sense of how rapidly the gospel was taking root during this early period.

At this juncture, the logical next move for Paul is towards the western Mediterranean by way of Rome. The mission to Spain is one that he hopes that the Roman Christians will help to support, and as he makes his way there, he hopes to spend some time with them.

[13 : 43] Before he makes his way towards Spain, however, Paul has to bring aid from Macedonia and Achaia to the poor saints in Jerusalem. This, as we see in so many of Paul's letters, is a task that Paul regards as an integral dimension of his mission.

In letter after letter he speaks of, or encourages the Christians to whom he is writing to participate in, this gift. For Paul, this gift is a lot more than just a needed financial boost to some needy Christians.

It's an expression of the unity between Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ, and the coming in of the riches of the Gentiles to Zion is prophesied in the Old Testament. Paul sees himself as fulfilling this.

Paul's mission is not merely to the Gentiles, but also to encourage the mutual welcome in the gospel between Jews and Gentiles. In this gift, a reciprocity of grace between Jews and Gentiles is not merely expressed, but realised, strengthening the church as a single undivided body of Jews and Gentiles.

Paul's ministry, then, is not merely about forming individual churches in particular cities and regions, but about forging an international church across regions, with strong bonds of fellowship, mutual service, and reciprocal recognition.

[14 : 58] This task of remembering the poor saints in Jerusalem was a task that the pillars of the church in Jerusalem especially charged Paul with in Galatians chapter 2. Paul's concern to accompany this gift may be motivated by his desire to ensure and to demonstrate that he has faithfully discharged that commission.

After that has been done, he can move to Spain by way of Rome. Travel within the ancient world was often dangerous, as we see from Paul's own hardship lists in books such as 2 Corinthians.

Although travel was safer on account of the Roman Empire, many unknown dangers still threaten those engaged in long journeys such as Paul's. In addition to the typical dangers of travel, Paul also has the concern of Judeans who are, as he once did, seeking to destroy the church.

Paul is a marked man, and they would be eager to do away with him. He calls the Roman Christians to wrestle in prayer that he will be preserved in his mission, and that it will serve the purpose of bringing joy and stronger unity to the church, as the gift of the Gentiles is pleasing to the Judean Christians.

His desire is that, by their prayers, he would finally safely be brought to them in Rome, having the joy of his completed commission and of fellowship with them. A question to consider.

[16 : 19] Much of Paul's ministry described in this chapter and elsewhere is not at the level of the local church, but in forging a stronger, more united, more harmonious, and more mutually welcoming international church, a church that spreads across many regions and cities.

What are some of the ways in which Paul pursues this mission? How might we serve the same sort of mission in our own day?