



# TO GOD BE THE GLORY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 15:14-16:27  
31st Message  
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Two years ago we began this study of the book of Romans. We are not going to cover the last chapter and a half this morning. I will briefly summarize what the apostle Paul has to say in these closing verses, and then I want to focus on the marvelous benediction at the end of chapter 16.

The grand exposition of chapters 1-11 and the powerful exhortation from 12:1 to 15:13 are over. The benediction in 15:13 might lead us to conclude that Paul has concluded his letter, but he hasn't. He ends by answering questions about his relationship with the church at Rome, which he briefly mentions in chapter 1. He tells them why he hasn't visited them and when he plans to do so. He is concerned about how they are going to receive the letter and, as John Stott puts it, "whether he has been presumptuous in writing so strongly to a church he didn't found and hadn't even visited. Has he given them the impression that he considers...*them*... immature?"<sup>1</sup> If he has, the rest of the letter will certainly disarm and reassure them.

Paul's sentiments are very personal in these final verses. He makes frequent use of the words "I" and "you." His tone is warm and affectionate. He asks humbly for their prayers and sends many personal greetings.

In the remainder of chapter 15, Paul elaborates on the unique nature of his ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. He summarizes ten years of powerful ministry, using two images, those of a priest and a pioneer. Don't assume that my lack of exposition of these verses indicates that I consider them superfluous. I do this because of time considerations. I want to conclude our studies in this great book in my current stint in the pulpit. I urge you to read through chapter 16, which covers the greetings that Paul sends to twenty-six different individuals. There is wonderful truth in these verses about personal relationships and the unity and diversity of the church. I commend them to you.

What we will do then is focus on the last paragraph of the letter, 16:25-27. At this point it is likely that Paul took the pen and wrote these closing words in his own hand. This was his normal practice, as he says in 2 Thessalonians (3:17). He did this to protect his letters from forgery, for one thing, but also that he might send a personal greeting to those to whom he was writing.

Paul's beautiful doxology is praise to God for both his work and his wisdom.

**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 which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 16:25-27, NASB)**

These remarkable words are a summary of the whole letter to the Romans. What a beautiful finale to this great epistle! It sums up the great themes of the book and relates them to each other. I want to focus on four points in these verses: the power of the gospel, its essence, its origin, and its scope.

All of this leads Paul to praise God for his wisdom.

**Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, (16:25)**

It is no accident that the apostle begins and ends his letter with a reference to the power of God through the gospel. In chapter 1, he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." That word translated "power" is the same word translated "able" here in verse 25. We ought not be ashamed of the gospel, because it is the only thing that can change people. Education doesn't change them. It just makes them more intelligent in their evil. Bettering social conditions doesn't change them. Doing something to help meet their physical needs is a good thing, but it doesn't change their hearts. The only thing that can change the heart of a man or woman is the gospel, the good news about Jesus. Paul says that is why he preaches it. He is not embarrassed by it. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Further, Paul reminds us here that the gospel is God's power not only to save us but to establish us. That word *establish* is a term that is used in the New Testament for nurturing new believers and young churches. It implies the idea of making Christians strong, firm and stable. God is able to bring us to a place of security where we are not easily shaken by things, either doctrinally, through false teaching, or morally, through temptation. God wants to put us on solid, stable ground. Have you ever set up a picnic table and tried to have all four legs touch the ground? You tried to "establish" it so that it

would not rock or become shaky or uncertain. That is the idea that Paul has in mind with this word *establish*. God wants to take us to a place where we are no longer rocking or shaky or unstable, but solid and secure. That is what all human beings are looking for: an inner security from which they can handle the problems of life. They want to become dependable, to have a true sense of worth so that nothing gets to them, shakes them up or throws them off balance.

The gospel (the good news) is the instrument that God uses to do this. The word has been robbed of much of its meaning, however, so that many people are unfamiliar with the good news. They may have some church background, but they don't know the good news. What they know is not good news at all, but a burden, an unrealistic and obnoxious form of piety. The gospel is the good news about God, the good news that he is doing something about the mess we have made of our world and our lives.

In the opening two and a half chapters of this book, Paul describes the terrible plight of mankind. We are sinful. All of us, bar none, are sinful, self centered and separated from God. If sin were blue, we would be a shade of blue all over. All of us are tainted by sin. We are ungodly. That's the bad news. But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about our predicament. He came to earth to become the sin-bearer. Our sins were placed upon him, in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins, declared "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness. "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). There is the good news.

That is why Paul says in the next phrase, which I take to be synonymous with the first, that the gospel is essentially *the preaching of Jesus Christ*. The gospel of God is the gospel of his Son. God's good news is about Jesus. John Calvin said, "The whole gospel is contained in Christ." The heart of the gospel is the revelation of a Person, Jesus himself. All through this letter, Paul has emphasized that fact again and again: everything centers in Christ. He is the heart of it all.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). In these words, Jesus declared the uniqueness of his position. There is no one like him in the whole realm of theology. There is no one that is equal to him or that can be remotely compared to him in all the religions of the world. Therefore, any gospel that minimizes Christ, or puts him on the same level of others, is a perversion of the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ is the central figure of all history, all time and all faith. Take Mohammed out of Islam and the message of Islam remains. Take Buddha out of Buddhism and his message retains its integrity. But remove Jesus Christ from the gospel and the good news is destroyed. Jesus Christ is the gospel. Jesus Christ is absolutely cen-

tral and indispensable to Christianity. The gospel is about Jesus Christ, God's Son. This is what makes it good news. Christianity is not meant to be the intolerable burden of rules and rituals that it has become for many, and by which Luther was enslaved until he understood Romans. Christianity is a person, Jesus Christ, who came to do for man what man was incapable of doing for himself.

The third clause that Paul uses to describe this gospel declares that it is revealed truth.

**according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, (16:25b-26a)**

Paul is not referring to something mysterious. The word simply means that it is a secret, something we would not know unless it was revealed. What is that mystery? Paul doesn't explain it here, but he does elsewhere. The mystery is Jesus Christ himself in his fullness, and in particular, Christ for and in the Gentiles, so that they have an equal share with Israel in God's promises.

Listen to what Paul has to say about this in Colossians:

**Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:24-27, NIV)**

There is the mystery. Ray Stedman put it this way: "All that God is, wrapped up in a Person and given to you and to me — the only hope we have of ever discovering the glory that God intended for us as human beings: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"<sup>2</sup>

And in Ephesians, the apostle declares:

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus. (Eph 3:2-6, NIV)**

Gentile and Jewish Christians have become fellow heirs of the same blessing, fellow members of the same body and fellow partakers of the same promise. This was a new revelation. It is true that the Old Testament

reveals that God had a purpose for the Gentiles – that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham, and Israel would be given as a light to the nations. But the OT does not set out the radical nature of God’s plan, which is that the theocracy would be replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be the body of Christ, organically united to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms, without distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new, and which God revealed to Paul, overcoming his entrenched Jewish prejudice.

There is one more truth about this good news. Not only has this mystery which was hidden been revealed through the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, the fourth fact is that this good news is already, and must continue to be, made known throughout the world.

**but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; (16:26b)**

The good news is being made known, first of all, by the Scriptures of the prophets, the prophetic writings (which we refer to as the Old Testament Scriptures). That sounds a bit strange. John Stott comments: “How can God make known his mystery through the OT when it has been in existence for centuries? What Paul means is that following the saving events of Christ, God has given his people a new understanding of the OT so that they can now see that it all bears witness to Christ.”<sup>3</sup> They can now see that Jesus is the Son of Man of Daniel 7 and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In Acts, Peter quotes the OT in reference to Jesus’ resurrection, exaltation and the gift of the Spirit; and Paul reasons with people out of the OT Scriptures that the Christ (the Messiah) must suffer and die, and that the Messiah is in fact Jesus.

When Adam and Eve made that fatal choice that threw the world into sin, right then, God made the promise that One would come who would set everything right. And throughout the whole OT, as C.S. Lewis says, “The leaves rustle with hope.” A Man is coming! A Savior is coming! He will be a Semite, an Israelite. He will be of the Tribe of Judah. He will be one of David’s descendants. He will be born in Bethlehem. He will live in Nazareth. He will sojourn in Egypt. He will suffer and die. He will rise again. All of that is in the OT. Everyone was looking forward to the One who was coming. The gospel was promised in the OT.

Through the apostles, who demonstrated through the OT Scriptures that the Christ, the Messiah, is Jesus, the good news spread to all the nations. So the scope of this good news is universal; it is to be made known to every nation. Throughout this letter, Paul says that the good news is for everybody. God’s purpose is to save and

unite Jews and Gentiles in Christ. And if we are going to be committed to spreading this good news we will have to be liberated from our own prejudices and pride of race, nation, tribe, caste and class, and acknowledge that God’s gospel is for everybody, without exception and without distinction.

What a miracle! God’s salvation extends to all races. All who receive it are in Christ and he is in them. Through Christ, all Jewish and Gentile believers stand together as brothers and sisters and will be established for eternity.

**to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (16:27)**

John Stott summarizes Paul’s intent in these words:

God’s wisdom is seen in Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; above all in his cross which, though foolish to human beings, is the wisdom of God; in God’s decision to save the world, not through its own wisdom, but through the ‘foolishness’ of the gospel. His wisdom is seen in the forming of his multi-racial, multi-cultural church, and in his purpose ultimately to unite everything under Christ. No wonder Paul breaks out in praise of the riches of wisdom in chapter 11, saying, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” No wonder he does so again here at the end of his letter.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to close with a story that I believe captures the heart of this book. Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is the story of the triumph of God’s gracious love over human raggedness. John Ortberg, in his book *Love Beyond Reason*, summarizes the book:

The escaped convict Jean Valjean, imprisoned for twenty years because he stole a loaf of bread, is shown hospitality by a bishop. But the temptation is too much; he takes some of the bishop’s silver and runs off into the night. Stopped by a constable, he tries to lie his way out of trouble. He tells him the silver was a gift. The constable takes him back to the bishop, and Jean Valjean waits to hear the words that will return him to prison until he dies. Nothing in his life prepared him for what he is about to hear.

“You are mistaken,” the bishop says to Valjean. “Of course this silver was my gift. But only part. You forgot the most valuable part. You forgot to take the silver candlesticks.”

Jean Valjean was waiting for the condemnation that he knows he deserved. Instead he gets blindsided by grace. One moment he faces poverty and prison, the next, freedom and abundance. Before Valjean leaves, the bishop says to him, “You must never forget this moment. Your soul and your life have been bought back. You are not your own. From now on, you belong to God.”

And because of grace, Jean Valjean’s life becomes an act of love. He honors the promise given to a dying

prostitute: he devotes himself to raising her child, Cosette. Later he faces danger to save the man who loves Cosette, even though he knows it may mean living life alone.

Opposed to Jean Valjean is a man committed to the law, to "spirituality wrongly understood," the constable Jauvert. Jauvert is convinced of his own righteousness. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. He is a champion of morality and justice. He spends his life seeking to recapture Jean Valjean.

Now, we must say that he believes in many good things. He is committed to truth. He wants unrighteousness stamped out. He desires a society without thievery or deceit or corruption. And he makes personal sacrifices to pursue such a society. He sincerely believes himself to be an agent of good.

In his world, though, there is no room for grace. And because he is blind to his own need for grace, his capacity to love withers and dies. He cannot offer mercy. The crisis of his existence occurs when Jean Valjean risks his own life to save that of Jauvert, his relentless pursuer. But Jauvert cannot bring himself to receive grace. He despairs. He kills himself, rather than admit the truth: his own raggedness has been as great as that of the criminals he devoted his life to punishing.

In the end it is Valjean, the convict, who is able to love. He comes to see what is expressed so beautifully in the song: "To love another person is to see the face of God."<sup>5</sup>

The book of Romans was written to turn Javerts into Jean Valjeans. Our world is tired of Christians who proclaim they know the right beliefs and are committed to the right values, but in whom there is no grace.

God in his wisdom makes it possible for people who are bound by their sinful depravity to know the freedom of his love and grace, and to become his children. For all this there can only be praise, "to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen."

1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 377.
2. Ray C. Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, Vol. 2 (Waco: Word, 1978), 202.
3. Stott, *Romans*, 405.
4. Stott, *Romans*, 405.
5. John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 136-137.

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