

“Praise God”
Romans 16:25-27
January 21, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to the end of the road in our series of sermons on Paul’s letter to the Romans. This is a series that began on September 11, 2022 and included 46 total sermons including today’s. It is fitting that the sermon series should end with praise to God. This letter began with Paul’s lengthy discourse on what’s wrong with the human race, which he summarizes in terms of worship. The problem is that men and women don’t “honor [God] as God or give thanks to him” (1:21). Now, he closes his letter with things having been set straight as we learn to give praise and honor to God. Paul’s conclusion to his letter shows that human beings can be changed into those who praise God and honor him.

The human race can’t help but give praise and honor to those things we find praiseworthy. We praise athletes, successful business leaders, celebrities, skilled musicians, and famous actors. What’s more, we find joy in doing so. To praise anything or anyone requires some content. That is, we must know something about those we praise. Let me offer an example in an area where I have some familiarity—cycling. If a non-cyclist were to watch a famous bicycle race like the Tour de France, they might easily just see a large group of cyclists all bunched up on the road and pedaling their bikes. It wouldn’t evoke much praise in their hearts for the really astounding thing they are seeing. But if you know something about cycling, you will experience a bit of awe in observing what you’re seeing. You will know, for example, that a rider with my ability can sustain a power output of about two hundred watts for ten to fifteen minutes before having to back off. Then they will also know that these elite cyclists typically double that power output to 400 watts for an hour at the end of the race, and they do so after already racing for three to four hours prior to that. It is truly awe-inspiring when you know something about what you’re seeing. And when you experience some of this awe, what do you want to do? You want to talk about it with others. You want to praise the impressive thing you’ve just witnessed.

What I have just described is the heart of worship. It is seeing who God really is, being filled with awe at this God, and then wanting to sweeten the whole experience by sharing it with others. That is what we aim to do here every Sunday morning. It is essential, though, that we have some content. We must know something about the God we are here to worship each week. To that end, Paul concludes his ascription of praise with statements about God that should fill our hearts with awe and worship. I note three reasons given for the praise of God.

I. God's Power

Paul offers praise to God first because God **“is able to strengthen you according to my gospel.”** Some translations say “establish,” with the idea that God is able to nurture his people so that they might be strong and mature. In mentioning God’s power, Paul is returning once more to a theme that appeared at the beginning of his letter where he said that he wasn’t ashamed of the gospel because **“it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”** (1:16). If you want to see the power of God at work, don’t look to show-stopping miracles, even though God may at times choose to do miracles that are truly astounding. Don’t expect pastors and Christian leaders to be able to walk on water or raise the dead. Look instead to the power of the gospel to transform a self-worshiper into a God-worshiper. By the power of the gospel, self-centered people can learn to love. This is the evidence of the power of God at work today.

Do you sometimes find yourself in need of God’s strength? The source of such strength is not to be found within you, but outside of you. It is found in the earth-shaking good news of the gospel. Let’s think about some common situations where we find ourselves in need of strength, and then remind ourselves of how the gospel addresses such situations. Have you ever felt yourself to be stuck in life? You don’t like where you are, but you can’t muster the strength to make any changes. Can the gospel give strength to help someone have the courage to decide on a step forward and then to take that step? Like so many problems in life, this one too is rooted in poor theology. In this case, poor theology produces in us a fear of the future. But what does the gospel say? **“Since God is for us, who can be against us?”** (8:31). As a result of God’s favor toward you, nothing **“in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (8:39). The gospel teaches us that we now have the Holy Spirit, and **“all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God”** (8:14). The Holy Spirit leads God’s children, and that promise doesn’t come with the condition that you must make sure you never make a mistake. We want to make wise decisions, but the reality is that there is no human alive who has a perfect record of doing so. The gospel assures us that God will lead us even through less than perfect decisions we might make. The gospel also teaches that God works all things for good for those who are called according to his purpose (8:28). If you’re one of those feeling stuck right now, remember the gospel truth that God is for you. Then seek his wisdom and the wisdom of others to decide on a step forward and take that step. You can’t lose.

Perhaps the area where you need strength from God is in your emotional life. Are you overwhelmed with a sense of sadness? Let me say first that sadness can be a healthy emotional response to sad things happening. The Bible teaches that God himself grieves when sad things happen. Didn’t Jesus

weep at the funeral of his friend Lazarus? But sadness can become overwhelming and sap all our strength. Can the gospel help with this too? It strengthens us by filling us with joy and hope in the face of the sad things that are inevitable in this fallen world. What is biblical joy? It is the pervasive feeling that all things will be well in spite of life's setbacks. Paul makes a jaw-dropping claim in chapter 5. **"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame"** (5:3-5). Because God is for us, even our sufferings can't defeat us, because God puts them to the good purpose of forming the character of Christ within us.

Some need strength to face the challenges of poor health. The gospel provides such strength with these words. **"We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies"** (8:23). Health setbacks will not be allowed to have the last word but will turn out to be a tiny moment in the grand sweep of God's plan for his children. New bodies are in that plan, bodies like that of the resurrected body of Jesus, fully material but also immortal and no longer the limiting factor in life. Let these words, and all the other words of the gospel, strengthen you today.

II. God's Gospel

God is worthy of praise because he strengthens us, and he strengthens us by the gospel. Paul tells us several things about this gospel. He refers to it as *"my gospel,"* not because he claimed any authorship but simply to refer to what he had written about it in this letter.

He says next that this gospel consists in **"the preaching of Jesus Christ."** Does he mean the preaching that Jesus did or the preaching that is about Jesus? While both are true, I think he is referring more to the latter, the preaching about Jesus. The gospel is about what God has done for us in Christ. What has he done? Paul first stated it back in chapter 3. Jesus is the one **"God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith"** (3:25). He did this **"so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"** (3:26). There's the heart of the gospel. Propitiation means to satisfy divine justice, and it was the sacrifice of Jesus that satisfied divine justice. The result of that is that our salvation is now anchored in two qualities of God that are more solid than anything in all creation. Our salvation is anchored in the love of God and in the justice of God. God is love, and it was love that led the Father and the Son to put forth Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins. But it was also the justice of God that figured prominently in our salvation. When sin was laid on Jesus, just as it was laid figuratively on all those sacrificial animals of the Old Testament, God the Father could not violate his justice, and Jesus had to die even though he was

the spotless lamb of God. And since Jesus has died this sacrificial death for our sins, the justice of God becomes a second solid anchor for our forgiveness because it would be unjust for God to punish our sin a second time. It's been punished once at the cross, and it is impossible for our holy God to be unjust and punish us a second time.

This means that the forgiveness of all who trust in Jesus is the most certain thing in the world. So when Satan tempts you to doubt your forgiveness, answer him with this gospel truth. Your forgiveness is sealed by the propitiatory death of Jesus, and if Satan wants to question that he should take it up with the God whose idea it was to do so.

There was an element of mystery about this gospel which Paul mentions next. It was **“kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations.”** The particular aspect of the gospel Paul has in mind here is the inclusion of the Gentiles as part of the people of God. Though the Old Testament prophets spoke in general terms about the gospel going to the nations, the specifics of it were not revealed until New Testament times. Now, through the gospel, Jews and Gentiles are united in Christ. Gentiles don't have to become Jews first, and Jews don't have to stop being Jews to come to Christ. The gospel has been made known to all nations, not just one nation.

This is of such importance in our day and in our own country. If the gospel can unite Jew and Gentile, can it also unite Republican and Democrat and conservative and liberal? The divide has grown so sharp that we now have a legislative branch that can't even accomplish the most basic duties of governance. They were supposed to have agreed to a federal budget back in September of last year, and we still do not have one and won't until March at the earliest. Sadly, the church has become part of the problem instead of the solution as church after church has been ripped apart not by theological differences, which sometimes warrant division, but by political differences.

The gospel, if we believe it, has the power to bring unity where there was division, and it needs to start in the church. It brings unity in several ways. First, it relocates out boasting from everything about us, including our political views, to Christ. We unite in boasting of all that we have in Christ. Second, it gives us the humility to make the simple statement, “Perhaps I'm wrong.”

The last thing Paul says about the gospel here is that it has the power to **“bring about the obedience of faith.”** Paul had mentioned this back in chapter 1, and he concludes with it here. Ever since the fall of humanity with Adam's sin, God has not given up on his rescue plan. The disobedience that brought such damage to our world is still our problem. But God is all about changing lives from the self-destructive habits to the flourishing lives of obedience. And how does he do that? He does it through the gospel.

III. God's Wisdom

The final verse of Romans gives praise to God for his wisdom. God's wisdom refers to his ability to accomplish his good purposes through tragedy and setbacks. So the tragedy of the crucifixion becomes the foundation for God's rescue plan all along. The tragedy of Jewish unbelief becomes the necessary step to the proclamation of the gospel to all nations. The tragedy of the death of every believer becomes the seed planted that springs up to a new resurrection body. The tragedy of suffering in our lives becomes the dawning of hope.

Remember that Paul began this letter with a long discourse on what has gone wrong with the human race. The first two and a half chapters of Romans describe a self-destructive world spinning out of control. Many see the same troubles Paul sees and catalogues in the early chapters of his letter. But instead of praising God as Paul does, they get angry at God and reject him. They even assume often times that they could do a better job of running the world than God has done. Paul goes in the opposite direction. A letter that began so darkly concludes in joyful praise of God for his wisdom. He knows how to finish the story, and when the story is finished we will all look back and see the marvelous wisdom of God. But now, even before we see it in its fullness, we are to worship God in faith for his wisdom. The practical application of this is well-stated by Dallas Willard. "The person who is heartily abandoned to God knows that all shall be well because God is in charge of his or her life. My peace is the greatness of God."

CONCLUSION:

The very last verse of the letter is a statement of glory to God "**forevermore through Jesus Christ.**" Even in this we see the good news of God's love for his people. Many wrongly assume that God is like them and that if he wants glory for himself that it must be because he's vain and self-centered. That is what Satan would have us believe. But Satan is the father of lies, and his deception is most commonly aimed at the character of God. The truth is that God wants us to give him glory not because it's in his best interests, but because it's in our best interests. Just as the members of the trinity all focus on glorifying the other two members, God invites us into this joyful dance by learning to seek his glory above our own. It is the good news of Jesus that such transformation comes through believing this gospel. May God continue to transform us all as we believe, whether for the first time today or for the ten-thousandth time!

Small Group Discussion Questions
Romans 16:25-27

1. As we come to the end of Romans today, what have been one or two of your favorite or most meaningful passages?
2. Paul ends where he began this letter, with praise of God. But there was a big difference. He began by saying that the thing wrong with the world is that men and women don't give honor to God or thank him (1:21), but now he gives such praise to God. The movement in Romans is in this area of worship. What is the significance of that?
3. Someone has said that men and women can't help but praise. If they don't praise God, they will find something to praise. Do you agree with that? What are some common objects of praise other than God?
4. Paul starts his praise with God's ability to strengthen us through the gospel. Where do you find yourself in need of God's strength?
5. The gospel is described in various ways, including as a mystery that was previously hidden but now revealed. This is often the way Paul speaks of the gospel coming to the Gentiles. The gospel is able to unite Jew and Gentile. How could the church be more effective in helping to bring unity to our nation?
6. What do you think Paul meant by "the obedience of faith"? Do you see any significance in the fact that he began his letter with the same phrase (1:5).
7. Paul praises God for his wisdom. What is an example of the wisdom of God in Romans? Do you see any evidence of God's wisdom in your life?