

ROMANS – Study 11: Closing Words (15:14-16:27)

Introduction – the last word

The last words of people are often remembered, especially if they are profound or enigmatic. Sadly, when it comes to the end of Bible books we often skim through, especially the personal greetings to individuals. We can miss out on some important clues as to the meaning of the letter and some important applications to our lives if we do this. Romans was far from Paul's last letter, so we can't call these the apostle's last words, but they are his closing words to this church in Rome and they complete the message of the gospel. This final portion of the book can be divided into three sections:

- Paul's Mission (15:14-33)
- Greetings and Warnings (16:1-23)
- Closing Doxology (16:25-27)

QUESTIONS

- How can we engage in God's mission of taking the gospel to the world?
- What role does the local church have in mission?

Paul's Mission (15:14-23)

These verses give us important insights into Paul's view of his mission that we can apply to our own attitude to mission. The gospel message is not intended to be kept to ourselves. We have already seen in chapter 10 that the message must be proclaimed, and here we have an insight into how Paul thought of his responsibility as a missionary. The section divides naturally into three – the first dealing with Paul's past mission activities, the second with his future plans, and the third containing his appeal for their support in prayer:

Looking back (verses 14-22)

The fact that Paul is now entering the closing section of his letter is clear from these verses, where he speaks well of the believers in Rome and explains the reason for the boldness of his words. He can be bold because he has been given a clear mission from God. God has given him the gift of a mission to the Gentiles. Paul will be a servant of the gospel and, like a priest, he will teach the truth of the gospel to the Gentiles. His ultimate goal is that they might become acceptable to God as an offering made pure by the Holy Spirit. Paul's unusual use of Old Testament terms here (priest and offering) is another reminder that a key theme of this letter has been the bringing together of the Jews and Gentiles in the church. In this section Paul gives us insights into his **motivation, resources and strategy** in spreading the message around the Eastern Mediterranean ("*from Jerusalem to Illyricum*", verse 19).

- *Paul's motivation in mission* (verses 16-17)
We have an insight here into what it meant personally for Paul to offer himself as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2) in response to the mercies of God to him in Christ:
 - He pictures himself as a priest, with both the privilege and responsibility of serving God (motivated by God's mercy).
 - His service is to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, a specific task which was God's special gift to him (motivated by obedience to God's gift and call).
 - He presents the results of his work (both those who respond to the message in faith and the glory for his service) as an acceptable sacrifice to God (motivated by the desire to please God).
- *Paul's resources* (verses 18-19a)
Paul's aim was to teach the gentiles to **obey** God (see also 1:5). Faith involves obedience. God commands people to repent and to believe. Obedience demonstrates our trust in God and is an essential part of discipleship. How is Paul's mission achieved? Paul sees himself as an agent through whom Christ works. He glories in Christ. All of his confidence is in Christ and His power at work through him. This work was accompanied by the "*power of signs and wonders*" (verse 19):
 - "*Signs*" point to the significance of the events, the arrival of the kingdom of God – they authenticated Paul's apostleship and his ministry to the Gentiles.
 - "*Power*" focuses on the character of the events – they demonstrate divine intervention.
 - "*Wonders*" looks to the effect of the events on others – they cause amazement.

God can still do miracles today, but authentic miracles will meet the same criteria as Paul's miracles. We should remember that the chief purpose of these First Century miracles was to authenticate the unique ministry of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. The power was not Paul's; it was the power of the Holy Spirit (verse 19)
- *Paul's strategy* (verses 19b-21)
Paul's call and gifting led him to pioneer the evangelisation of the Gentile world. He was particularly keen to boldly go where no one had gone before! His strategy was:
 - *Evangelise key cities* – usually as part of a team (including helpers including Barnabas, Timothy, Silas and Luke). They often began, where possible, with people who already had some knowledge of the Bible (e.g. Jewish synagogues, prayer groups). Then they targeted the market places and centres of learning.
 - *Plant churches there* – Paul was always interested in establishing local fellowships in which new believers could be nourished and which would become centres from which the gospel could continue to spread.
 - *Give the churches all the help he had time for, especially through teaching the Word* – he stayed longer in certain places than others. He was three weeks in Thessalonica but three years in Ephesus. Sometimes it was physically impossible to remain long; sometimes God made it clear (as at Corinth) that despite the opposition he was to stay.
 - *Leave to the local churches the task of radiating the message to surrounding districts.*

Looking forward (verses 22-29)

Paul had completed his mission to the Eastern Mediterranean by establishing local churches that could continue to spread the gospel throughout their regions (verse 23). He was now looking eastward. Three places feature in Paul's future plans.

- **Rome (verses 22-24)**

At last Paul expects to visit Rome as he has longed to do (verse 23b; also 1:11). He has had an ardent desire for Rome for many years. This is different from his usual approach to mission, as the church is already established there whereas Paul was usually a pioneer into new regions. Paul's intention was not to settle long-term in Rome, but to spend some time with them and then to use the Roman church as the launch-pad for a mission to Spain (as a pioneer missionary). Antioch had been his base for the mission to the East, but Rome would be his new base as he headed eastward.

- **Jerusalem (verses 25-27)**

The churches in Greece had raised funds to support the suffering Christians in Judea, and Paul planned to deliver this gift to Jerusalem. This was a hugely significant act and Paul took his responsibility very seriously indeed. The gift was highly significant because it crossed numerous barriers:

- Geographically, from Greece to Judea – not an easy task when money could not be sent by electronic transfer!
- Socially, from rich to poor, although many of those who contributed were themselves very poor (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-5).
- Ethnically, from Gentiles to Jews – huge evidence of the reality of conversion and our new unity in Christ.
- Ideologically, from those who were more progressive to those who were more conservative.
- Theologically, from beneficiaries to benefactors (the Gentiles are hugely indebted to the Jews).

We cannot over-emphasise the importance of giving for mission. It is interesting, however, that in this case the giving was to a local church. The believers in Greece were resourcing the local church in Jerusalem so that its members could be more effective in their on-going witness where they were. We should always seek to direct our giving to mission towards local churches or missionary organisations and teams who work with local churches or seek to establish new churches. Mission is not meant to be a 'lone ranger' activity. God's means of mission is through the local church.

- **Spain (verse 28)**

We cannot be certain if Paul was ever able to complete this intended mission to Spain. Many scholars suggest that at the close of Acts Paul was in jail at Rome, but that he was later released and was able to travel to Spain (and other places) before his re-arrest and execution in Rome under Nero.

Missions and Prayer (verses 30-33)

Paul believed that partnership in prayer would make a difference in his mission. Prayer is another wonderful way of getting involved in missions and all can (and should) be involved. Paul invites them to struggle alongside him through prayer. Prayer is a struggle, but it is a fight worth fighting! Paul's appeal for prayer support is founded on two principles (verse 30):

- Jesus Christ is our common Lord, so we serve together.
- Our bond is the love of the Spirit, so we support each other.

Here Paul presents specific prayer needs. We need this kind of information so that our praying is not always general (e.g. "God bless the missionaries"!). He asks for personal safety from unbelievers (he will be carrying a lot of money) and that the believers would accept his service. The issue was Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the Body of Christ. Just as the Gentile believers had expressed this solidarity in giving the gift, so the Jewish believers must express it by receiving the gift.

In verse 32 Paul connects prayer with the will of God. The purpose of prayer is to realign our wills with God's. Paul's trip to Rome depends on his success at Jerusalem. What we are to pray for is sometimes plain because the will of God is plain, but sometimes it is not clear and so it is appropriate to pray 'DV' (*Deo volente*, meaning 'God willing'). Were Paul's requests granted? According to Acts 21-28 it seems that the gift was accepted at Jerusalem. Paul was protected, but not as he expected – he was put in protective custody under a Roman guard. Paul finally reached Rome over two years later, but in chains. He was allowed to proclaim the gospel and to teach there unhindered. God's will was worked out, and this involved the fulfillment of Paul's requests but not in the way he had anticipated. God's ways are not our ways, but His eternal purpose is certain.

Greetings and Warnings (16:1-23)

At the beginning of chapter 16 Paul moves on to personal greetings to people in Rome who were known to him. Although he mentions a large number of names it is important to remember that he is writing into the context of a local church. These are not just individual believers, but members of the church in Rome. Paul's words are also intended for the whole church, not merely for the individuals he addresses. This section divides naturally into three:

a) Greetings to the Roman Church (verses 1-16)

Paul is sometimes seen as an austere, academic – hard and impersonal, with no sense of humour and no expression of emotion. This is not the picture of Paul that comes across in chapter 16 (or anywhere else, for that matter!) He does three things here:

- *Commends Phoebe* – a servant (deaconess) of the church in Cenchrea who is coming to Rome.
- *Greets several believers in Rome* personally and (in the case of Aquila and Priscilla) on behalf of the Gentile churches.
- *Highlights the faithful service of some individuals* – there is an emphasis here on Paul's fellow-workers, those who joined with him in his mission, and especially those who worked hard (verses 6, 12).

The names present an interesting picture of **unity in diversity**. The majority are Gentile names, although some are Jews. The majority are slaves or freedmen, although some are aristocrats. It seems there were at least three household churches within the church at Rome (verses 5, 14, 15). Another two may possibly be found at verses 10 and 11. The capacity of a very wealthy house was 70 to 80 people, so we can estimate the numbers in the whole church. The pattern for early churches was to meet in the

homes of believers. In a large city, or where there were a large number of believers, they would meet in smaller gatherings in a number of households throughout the city. At times they may meet together in a central location and they were generally under the leadership of one team of elders.

b) Warnings about opposition (verses 17-20)

In other places Paul talks a great deal about persecution, but he doesn't focus on that here. What concerns him more is that the fledgling churches are vulnerable to false teaching and division. Paul has been encouraged by positive reports about the Romans and their obedience, but he needs to warn them about the danger of false teachers. We do not know much about these false teachers in Rome, and especially what falsehood they were teaching, but Paul does speak about:

- *Their character* – they were divisive (verse 17), hostile to sound teaching (verse 17), serving their “own appetites” not Christ (verse 18).
- *Their method* – they operated through smooth talk, flattery and deception (verse 18).

Our response must be to watch out and to keep away from them. We need to develop discernment so that we can be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil (verse 19). We can identify four tests that will help us to identify false teaching:

- *Bible* does it agree with it ?
- *Christ* does it glorify Him?
- *Moral* does it promote goodness?
- *Unity* does it promote unity or division?

Paul reminds us that ultimately our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of wickedness (verse 20a). God will throw Satan under our feet so that we may trample upon him (but not just yet!) Although defeated, Satan does not yet concede his defeat. In the meantime we need the grace of our Lord Jesus as we face the challenges of maintaining unity in our local churches (verse 20b).

c) Greetings from Paul's team (verses 21-24)

These verses give us an insight into the people who were with Paul at the time when he wrote the letter. It is a reminder that Paul was not a 'lone ranger' but a 'team player'. We should seek to be so as well. Each of us has our unique contribution to make to the ministry of our local church and to the mission God has entrusted to us.

Closing Doxology (16:25-27)

In Paul's closing words he summarises the central themes of the whole epistle:

- 1) **God's character** – he mentions God's power (verse 25), eternal nature (verse 26), and wisdom (verse 27). All he has written and his entire ministry are to God's glory (verse 27).
- 2) **The gospel of Christ** – the gospel is centred on Christ and revealed by Him (verse 25).
- 3) **The evangelisation of all nations** – this is the mystery that was previously hidden (verse 25), that was made known through the Old Testament by God's commands, and that has now been revealed. All nations may believe and obey God (verse 26).

There are numerous echoes here of the opening section of the letter:

- “who is able” (1:4,16)
- “to strengthen you” (1:11)
- “(my) gospel” (1:1,9; 16; 2:16)
- “revelation” / “manifested” (1:17; 3:21)
- “obedience of faith” (1:5)
- “all the nations” (1:5)

In addition there is a parallel with Paul's closing doxology at the end of the first section of the letter (11:33-36) as both focus on God's wisdom revealed in His dealings through history and through the Church.

So, then, **Paul's gospel comes from God, centres on Christ and is for all nations!** What an amazing message it is, and no wonder Paul was not ashamed of it (1:16)! We must never lose sight of our commission (God's command, verse 26) which is to take the good news of Jesus to the nations. If we are not supporting one another in the mission of evangelism and discipleship we are not functioning as God calls us to. This is the purpose of the church – to be the light of the world! Let us shine for Christ in this dark age, for the day is almost here (13:12)!

QUESTIONS

- What part does God want you to play in His mission – prayerfully, financially and in actions?
- How can you apply what you have learned from this final section of the letter to your own local church?