

How God Strengthens His Church

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on October 9, 2022.

Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Romans 16:21–27).¹

As we conclude our study of Romans, let us give thanks to God for such a robust treatise of Christian doctrine and pastoral counsel. Many of the doctrines that we hold dear as Protestants come from this New Testament book. Furthermore, through our study of this book we have learned more about the apostle Paul, his calling to the Gentiles, his love for the Jewish people, and his heart for Christ’s church. But as instrumental as Paul was in advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ beyond Jerusalem, we must remember that he did not serve the Lord as an island unto himself.

We see this clearly in his commendations to those working with the church in Rome as well as the Roman Christians themselves. But we see this also in Paul’s inclusion of those serving with him at the time, such as his pastoral understudy, Timothy, as well as his fellow Jewish converts Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater. We are introduced to Paul’s *amanuensis*, Tertius, who wrote what Paul dictated, as well as Gaius, his host in Corinth. Finally, Paul introduces Erastus, “the city treasurer,” likely of Corinth, as well as Quartus. In introducing these fellow servants of Christ, the point is not who these men are but that they are serving the Lord with Paul, and the Roman church is a recipient of their service.

Paul is grateful to God for those who serve alongside him but ultimately to God, as he explained to the Corinthians about his work with Apollos in the church, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5-7). So, Paul concludes in grateful praise to God in a kind of doxological dénouement, but even as he does, he is still teaching us, teaching how God strengthens his church.

We are led in praising “the only wise God [to whom] be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ,” for he “is able to strengthen” his church, meaning he is the source of our strength, on which Paul elaborates with three prepositional phrases: “according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ”, “according to the revelation of the mystery...”, and “according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.” And for these means of

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

grace, we join Paul in praising God who indeed strengthens his church. So, let us glorify God in considering each of these more closely.

Through the Gospel

God strengthens his church through the gospel. Paul refers to it here as “my gospel,” not implying that it is his version or variety but that he has been entrusted with it as “a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1), “the gospel of his Son” (Rom. 1:9). The word translated “gospel” literally means “good news.” It is a word rich with meaning but simple to understand: It is the good news that born sinners, like you and me, evidenced through our sins of thought, word, and deed, who fall far short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23) and deserve eternal death (Rom. 6:23), receive forgiveness of our sins and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16). It is the good news that the Son of God was born of a virgin, lived as a perfectly righteous and obedient man, died a sacrificial death atoning for our sin, and resurrected from the dead conquering both sin and death. It is the good news that what our father Adam lost in Eden has been redeemed in our Lord Jesus Christ and is ours through faith in him.

This is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is not good news apart from him, nor is it beneficial unless heard and believed. So, Paul includes the all-important addition: *and* “the preaching of Jesus Christ,” meaning Jesus is the essence of the gospel we preach. Had Christ not come there would be no righteous One. Had Christ not died there would be no forgiveness of sin. Had Christ not resurrected there would be no victory over sin, no life everlasting, no hope eternal at all.

If Jesus Christ is not the center of the gospel, there is no good news; in fact, it would be bad news. If your good works define your righteous standing before God, it’s not the gospel. If your sincerity to be a good person seemingly secures your status as a child of God, it’s not the gospel. If your promise to live a better life is your attempt to score eternal life, it’s not the gospel. No, as Paul put it simply for the Corinthians, “we preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). It is good news to be heard, believed, and proclaimed, for “faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

How then does God strengthen his church through the gospel? He does so in two primary ways: our conversion and our sanctification. Neither you nor I entered Christ’s church by birthright nor merit but only by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone. When we heard the gospel, the Holy Spirit opened our ears to hear the good news and changed our hearts to believe the saving truth. Christ’s church grows through believing the gospel and as it grows, we are strengthened by God’s grace one with another.

The church is also strengthened through the gospel in our sanctification. Or, to put it another way, we are strengthened through the gospel because we are prone to forget it. Fact: Your flesh delights in condemning you for your sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. Fact: Your flesh relishes reminding you of all the sinful things you have ever done (You may not remember what you had for breakfast, but your flesh remembers a particular sin ten years ago!). Fact: Your sinful flesh

will even tempt you to believe that your sin defines you, characterizes you, even claims you as its slave. Fact: Your flesh is a lying remnant of your old self to be crucified daily by the power of the Holy Spirit within and the conquering Word of Christ given. Your adversary may hurl condemnation at you, but the gospel is the ultimate truth-teller, a veritable fact-checker: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

This is why Paul confesses, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). And it is this essential truth that we must return to daily as long as we live this side of glory. We never outgrow the gospel. We never mature beyond the good news. We never graduate from the gift of God’s saving grace, but we preach it to ourselves daily. God strengthens his church through the gospel.

Through the Word

Inclusive of the gospel, God also strengthens his church through His Word. Yet, it is easy for us to take God’s Word for granted. Today, we are the beneficiaries of a full and complete canon of Scripture, Genesis through Malachi, and Matthew through Revelation. But when Paul wrote to the church in Rome, the New Testament canon had not yet been completed and compiled. Their Bible consisted of the Old Testament canon and accompanying letters such as this one. And yet, their understanding of the Old Testament, specifically the “prophetic writings,” was significantly greater than even the prophets from ages past. Why? Because they read the Old Testament in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul refers to this as “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed.” That which was veiled before Christ is revealed in Christ. For example, consider the prophet Isaiah’s description of God’s suffering servant. Isaiah describes this man as one who “was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). He is described as one who “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” one “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted,” one “pierced for our transgressions,” “crushed for our iniquities,” yet through “his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:4-5). Who is this suffering-yet-atoning Savior of the people of God? The prophets wondered (1 Pet. 1:12).

We do not wonder. We know precisely who Isaiah’s suffering servant is because the mystery has been revealed. The New Testament provides full disclosure: Jesus is the Lord and Christ. He is the fulfillment of God’s promise made to Abraham. He is the fulfillment of God’s law given to Moses. He is the fulfillment of God’s covenant with David. “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ” (2 Cor. 1:20 NIV), which is revealed to us through God’s Word.

How then does God strengthen his church through his Word? First, we are strengthened through it because it is “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). In teaching us, we do not wonder what God would say to us; He has said it. In reproving us, we do not question what God might reveal to us; He has revealed it. In correcting us, we do not pit Scripture against itself, as if the New Testament wages war against the Old; we interpret it through it. For example, there is a reason Isaiah is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament: Christ who was once hidden in Isaiah is

there for all to see, through the lens of Christ's revelation. We then interpret Scripture with Scripture, and through God's breathed-out Word we are strengthened.

We open our Bibles and read and are strengthened through the very Word of life. We hear the Word preached, and the Holy Spirit refreshes, melts, convicts, comforts. We neglect the Word at our peril, study it to our benefit, ignore it in our stupidity, meditate upon it to our blessing. So, may we be strengthened praying as one pastor prayed,

Bless to my soul all grains of truth garnered
from thy Word;
may they take deep root,
be refreshed by heavenly dew,
be ripened by heavenly rays,
be harvested to my joy and thy praise.
Help me to gain profit by what I read,
as treasure beyond all treasure,
a fountain which can replenish my dry heart,
its waters flowing through me as a perennial river
on-drawn by thy Holy Spirit.²

So we pray, so God does: God strengthens his church through his Word.

Through the Obedience of Faith

God also strengthens his church through the obedience of faith, an expression Paul used to begin this letter and now to conclude to it. It is the obedience to believe the gospel as well as to live it. Or, as one commentator describes it, "obedience always involves faith, and faith always involves obedience."³ He who enabled and empowered us to believe so also enables and empowers us to live obedient lives. We shall not be defined by sin and the decay of death but life through the faith God gives: "May we be rich in faith, be strong in faith, live by faith, walk by faith, experience the joy of faith, do the work of faith, hope through faith."⁴ And so, God strengthens his church through the obedience of faith.

And all of this is according to "the command" or sovereign purpose of God who is calling a people unto himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation. In his perfect wisdom, God only wise is building us into the household of God (Eph. 2:19), a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:4-5), the temple of God in whom his Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3:16-17), and he strengthens us for our good and his glory through wisdom himself, Jesus Christ. May God be glorified in his church through the gospel, through the Word, and through the obedience of faith, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

² Arthur Bennett, Ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 347.

³ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 52.

⁴ Arthur Bennett, Ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 397.