Sermon 214: Romans 16:21-27: Doxology

OUTLINE

The power of God
The gospel of God
The wisdom of God

INTRODUCTION

What distracts you in worship? Is it the heat? Maybe it is the sounds of people cutting their grass. Maybe you are distracted by the sounds the kids make, misspelt words on the slides, or maybe it is something at work or at home that enters your thoughts and derails you. As we come to the end of Romans we come to the doxology. But Paul is like us he gets distracted. He begins in the traditional way, ‘Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel….’ And then Paul loses it, the gospel is so distracting Paul goes on a tangent, and then brings it back, ‘to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.’ Paul gets distracted by the gospel and into deeper worship, if only we would get distracted like him!

Today we come to the end of our exposition of the text of Romans, I will do one more summary sermon to pull it all together. We began this series in Romans in early February 2012, that is just over 7 years. We have walked with Paul through 16 chapters of gospel grace, how would you end a letter after this, what notes of worship would you hit, what are the specific things that you would want to praise God for after such a reflection on the gospel? Paul’s doxology focuses our worship on three things, the power of God, the gospel of God and the wisdom of God.

Our section begins in v21 and includes the final greetings 21-23, ‘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.’ Paul we know is writing from Corinth, where v3-16 are greetings to the Church in Rome, v21-23 are greetings from the church in Corinth. Timothy, Lucius, Jason and Sosipater are probably travelling companions of Paul who are all going together to Jerusalem to deliver the gift from the Gentile churches to the needy in Judea. Gaius would be the rich Christian who hosts the church in his home and is host to Paul. Tertius and Quartus are probably his slaves who are converted, their names literally mean third and fourth, and Tertius is the secretary who wrote what Paul dictated. Erastus we are told is the city treasurer, and incidentally archeology has found evidence of an Erastus donating a pavement to the city of Corinth and this could be the exact same person. There is much we could say about the church in Corinth through the details we can glean from this but we have made the point already of the love and unity expressed between churches.

So we want to move on then to the meat of our passage to the doxology and look at it under our three headings, the power of God, the gospel of God and the wisdom of God.

The power of God

One of the striking things about our doxology is that Paul repeats many themes that were raised in the introduction to the letter. The power of God is mentioned in 1:4 and 16; the gospel in 1:1; the prophetic writings in 1:2; the Gentiles/all nations in 1:5; the obedience of
faith, 1:5. It is obvious that Paul who introduced those topics in the introduction in order to develop them throughout the letter is now tying it all up in a neat bow pulling all the various lines of thought together to the praise of God.

Our doxology begins with the words, ‘Now to Him who is able to strengthen you.’ At the beginning of the letter Paul made a powerful statement, Rom. 1:16, ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.’ Paul is glad to lay down his life in proclaiming the gospel all over the world, why, because the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe. The gospel is how God saves people. Salvation is not a once off thing that happens to you when you believe and are born again, salvation can be spoken of as past, present and future. You were saved, you are being saved and you will be saved. The gospel is not the announcement that God merely forgives sins, nor even that you go to heaven when you die, the gospel is the exercise of God’s power against all of our enemies so that all those whom God has loved will be saved. The salvation with which we are saved is a work which will be finished once begun.

Last week we had this point made by our look at grace. We are dead in sin, we are weak in the flesh, we are not the source of our own salvation. So from beginning to end, God has to work, and because the work is according to His great power and not according to our strength our greatest confidence is that He is for us and working within us. Paul has spoken about how God provides salvation by providing a righteousness not our own, how God causes us to be united to Christ and are now enabled to be holy. Paul spoke about how God puts His Spirit within us as a guarantee of our final adoption and glorification. Paul spoke about how God’s power is at work in every situation of our lives causing good to come from evil as we live in a fallen world. Paul has shown how God will save all His elect in many ways Paul is understating it, for there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

The gospel of God

But just as Paul is getting going about the strength of God to save us he derails and distracts himself with the gospel, ‘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.’ We know that the word gospel means good news and at the mention of the gospel Paul is off, he describes it in three complimentary ways. Firstly, he calls it my gospel, then it is called the preaching of Jesus Christ, and finally it is also called the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages. Paul tells us much about this glorious gospel.

Firstly, notice that Paul calls it my gospel. Why does Paul call it my gospel? In Rom. 1:1 it is called the gospel of God, why then here is it my gospel? This is not the first time Paul does it in 2:16 as well, ‘on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.’ Paul as an apostle as opposed to Paul as a personality is what we need to keep in view. Paul had been hand-picked by Christ, Paul had been taken up into third heaven and shown things, Paul is called of God, to speak of the gospel as his gospel is to speak of it as God’s gospel. Just remember what Paul says about apostles and the foundational role they have in the church and this will explain it all. This is not license for every person to make up their own gospels. To the contrary, this word ‘my’ limits the gospel to apostolic origin not every person’s opinion.
The gospel is described as the preaching of Jesus Christ, or as Paul put it in the opening of the letter, it is the gospel of God ‘concerning His Son.’ The gospel has exclusive content, it is all about Jesus. Many have tried to tone down the gospel to make it a message of love about how we should all love each other, all a message about hope and a happily ever after. These are true but only because of Christ. Jesus Christ had to be born as a man, live under the law, submit the death we deserved and rose from the dead to reign at God’s right hand. He is the Lord of the earth and all are to turn from sin to worship Him, all are to turn from their self-righteousness and trust in Him. He is the way the truth and the life, apart from Him there can be no salvation for there is no other name given under heaven by which we can be saved but His. Jesus Christ is the provision of God for a sinful people who cannot save themselves. He is innocent and we are sinners, He takes the punishment and we gain His righteousness. We do not preach a message of be nice people and God will accept you, but we reveal the problem of sin and Christ as the solution. Paul is praising God for the provision of Christ.

Paul tells us next that gospel is a mystery now revealed. What does he mean? The gospel, the good news is something that was promised in the OT, but it was not always clear what was being promised, it was mysterious. There was the promise of a defeat of satan it is revealed in Christ’s victory that this is a victory of satan, sin and death. There is a promise of a child born to a virgin who will be called Immanuel, we now know that this was a promise of God becoming incarnate as a man and miraculously being conceived in Mary’s womb in order that He might be from Adam but not of his sinfulness. We were told of a Messiah who must both reign as king as suffer as a criminal. We see now how this unfolds as the first and second comings of Christ in His humiliation and exaltation. There were hints of a prophet a priest and a king, yet in the OT no King from Judah could serve as a Levite. There were promises of One coming who would set the captive free yet also prophecies of subduing all His enemies. There were promises of blessings both for the Jews and for all nations. Things were mysterious and difficult to see. Even John the Baptist was confused, but when it is all revealed and every promise finds its fulfillment in Christ, every type and shadow finds it meaning in Christ, all becomes clear and all the pieces of the puzzle finally fall into place. And the picture is the greatest story ever told, of the greatest love ever given, of the greatest sacrifice ever made, to affect the greatest rescue, from the greatest enemies, and all to the glory of the great God. That is why Paul talks about the OT disclosing this mystery in v26, ‘but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known....’ The OT is like a who-done-it crime novel, and now that we know it is all pointing to Christ, the OT reveals the mystery it once used to conceal. Paul is praising God for the long ages of anticipation finally being realized and the promised Saviour coming.

But there is more to this gospel which moves Paul to wonder and worship, it has been ‘made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.’ Once again Rom. 1:16 is the best help in interpreting Paul’s meaning, ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.’ Paul loves the gospel and praises God for the gospel because in it God’s power is active to save. It is a gospel not only for the Jews but for all nations. And it is a gospel that is not one of works but of faith. Paul delights in this free grace and this universal offer of the gospel and it comes back again into his worship as he ends this letter.

There are two curious phrases we should focus one, the one is the fact that the eternal God has commanded this gospel to be made known to all nations, and the second is the curious
phrase, the obedience of faith. I think that Paul is making a rhetorical point in talking in this fashion. The Jews were resistant to the gospel. They did not see it as from God. Even those Jews who had converted had great difficulty in welcoming Gentiles into the people of God. And an ongoing problem for the Jews was the matter of the law and the fact that Paul taught that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works of the law. I think Paul therefore puts the proclamation of the gospel in such a way as to highlight to his Jewish detractors that this gospel is of God. Firstly, by the mention of the fact that the command to preach to all nations and not just Jews is from God Himself, showing the divine sanction behind the great commission, and the deity of Christ in appointing Paul personally as the apostle to the Gentiles. Secondly, to talk of salvation by faith apart from works as the obedience of faith is provocative. The Jews thought themselves so holy and obedient, yet by this way of speaking Paul highlights their disobedience to the gospel and to God Himself. The Gentiles who believed are obedient but the Jews who did not are not obedient and are unrighteous. This is the point Paul makes in Rom. 10:16 when speaking of the Jews he says, ‘they have not all obeyed the gospel.’

This is important to understand as there are those who try to make obedience faith and equate the two as if we are saved not by faith alone but by obedience. It is true that we are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that stands alone, but we are saved to do good works. However, anyone who tries to twist this phrase to downplay Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith apart from works is perverting this verse and is refusing to read it in context.

The wisdom of God

If you were to choose one attribute of God to emphasize after a 16 chapter exposition of God’s glory in the gospel, which one would you choose? The choice is very hard, so many would seem appropriate. God’s grace would be an obvious contender, or His love or holiness, or sovereignty, or justice, or mercy. But Paul ends the letter with a final focus on an attribute of God that especially recommends itself, the wisdom of God, v27, ‘to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.’ Paul talks about the only wise God. In other words, among all the gods and their ways with their people, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ on account of the gospel with which He saves us proves that He alone is worthy of the title God, that all the others are nothing and the God of grace who comes down and dies and serves His people proves Himself the only true God and all others are mere idols. But in particular Paul emphasizes that God is wise, how does the gospel show that God is wise?

Let me mention 4 ways in which the wisdom of God is put on display through the view of the gospel Paul has given us in Romans.

Firstly, the problem of being holy as God is holy. We are sinners who cannot not sin, we will inevitably break God’s law. So how will we who cannot not sin be holy in the eyes of a holy God who cannot deny His own holiness? The answer is the heart of the gospel, God provides a gift of righteousness, an alien righteousness, whereby we are simil iustus et peccator. By the gift of this righteousness which we receive by faith and not by works, the wisdom of God gives us a garment of salvation that we could not spin for ourselves. It is accomplished by faith and not by works.

Secondly, let me begin with another problem, it is the problem, it is the problem of how can a sinner be justified before a holy God. There are two apparently unchangeable conditions. On the one hand we have ourselves. We are sinners, we have broken God’s laws, we have
brought the condemnation of God’s law upon ourselves. Worse we cannot stop sinning, worse than that we cannot offer anything that can make up for our past sins, nor can we find a way to pay for our sins. We are in a completely lost position. On the other side there is God. He is a perfectly holy judge, He cannot lie and pretend that we have not sinned, He cannot simply forgive sins and not satisfy His own justice, God cannot deny Himself. This is the conundrum how can a sinful people who cannot not be sinful be reconciled to a holy God who cannot overlook sin? Enter the wisdom of God and how He solves this problem.

Rom. 3:24-26, ‘and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.’ These verses tell us that we are justified by grace through faith on account of Jesus Christ. V25 tells us that God give Christ to be a propitiation, all to the end of being just and the justifier of the one who believes.

Paul wants us to see the amazing wisdom of His grace, where we see in His dealings with our sin what cannot ever be in any other human courtroom. It is impossible for a human courtroom to make it so that the simultaneously the sin is paid for and the sinner goes free. It is impossible in any human courtroom that the full requirements of justice are satisfied so that the law is perfectly kept and the judge is a good judge; and the criminal is able to be set free without any payment for his crime. It is only in the wisdom of God that the sin can be paid for and the sinner going free. It is the glory of God that justice and love are both satisfied. That God can be both just in the proper, full punishing of sin; and the justifier who saves the sinner without killing him/her. If there were a murderer who deserved the death penalty in a human court and the judge said ‘Guilty!’ but then let the criminal go free, we would not be happy for although the criminal is saved justice is not served. And likewise if the judge says, ‘Guilty!’ and then kills the criminal, justice is served but the criminal is not saved. How is it that God can make sure that He does not violate His own holiness in forgiving sin, and satisfy His love towards criminals that deserve to die? Jesus Christ is our propitiation, who dies as our substitute, fulfilling all the requirements of God’s law on our behalf. Someone else died so that I can live. Someone else paid so that I can be saved for free. Someone else took my ‘guilty’ charge so that I could receive His ‘righteous’ charge.

How can a holy God forgive sin without violating His own holiness? Jesus Christ!

Thirdly, Paul unties another know for us in Romans, and it is the knot of holiness. There are many who object to the gospel of free grace saying that if God just forgives all our sins past, present and future, and you cannot be separated from God’s love because there can be no more condemnation towards you, what will ensure that you will be holy? If you cannot lose your salvation, there is no guarantee that the Christian will not abuse grace. Paul anticipates this sort of argument from the Jews in Rom. 6:1-2, ‘What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?’ How does God guarantee that the Christian will not continue in sin? Is it by threatening them with hell fire? No, Paul tells us that God has taken care of this problem by uniting every believer to Christ, and causing them to die to the power of sin. The wisdom of God enables God to give full and free salvation with no strings attached and then guarantees the holiness that ought to follow that salvation not by taking back what He has given but by regeneration. This is the wisdom of God.
Finally, how will God save the Jews who reject Him and bring blessing to the Gentiles as well? Rom. 11:25, ‘Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.’ Appreciate the problem: how will God who keeps His promises keep His promise to Israel if they have not believed in the Messiah? God’s wisdom causes Israel to be hardened so that salvation will come to the Gentiles that through the Gentiles the Jews will be provoked to believe. In this way God not only punishes Israel for her unbelief, but fulfills His promises to Israel and the promise that He would bring the blessing of salvation to all nations. Paul ended Rom. 11 after a discussion of this with these words which he is repeating now in his doxology, ‘Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.’

His wisdom saves us by faith not works, by Christ satisfying the law on our behalf, by the work of regeneration securing our good works, and by hardening Israel salvation comes to all. God is wise may He be praised forevermore for the wisdom that He has worked on our behalf.