

All Roads Lead Here: Bragging Rights
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 134; John 5:19-24; Romans 15:13-21

Our final Scripture reading this morning is Romans 15:13-21. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, inerrant word. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done -- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."”

The movie's not over once the villain's been defeated. The sports broadcast isn't over when time runs out or someone crosses the finish line. There's more to do: the hero gives the heroine a kiss, the trophies and medals are awarded, there's color commentary about what we just saw, all before the credits roll and we fade to black. Sometimes, the moments just after the finale are the most important, the most poignant; they put everything we've experienced into perspective. When I go to the movies, I stay through the credits, usually – I know I'm the exception, but I want to process what I've just seen. We have a word for this part of the story from the French – it's *dénouement*, which literally means “untying the knot.” The action is over, but we tie off the loose ends.

That's what Paul begins doing here in this week's passage. For fifteen chapters, he's given us a theological masterpiece about how Christ's death and resurrection saves us from the sin debt that we cannot repay to God; when we trust in Christ, we are saved. He worked out the practical application of what that trust looks like in daily life. And now that those parts are done, Paul begins to wind up matters. It might seem odd or silly to study the way Paul ends a letter since his biggest work is already done. But there's plenty here for us to learn from.

In fact, that's an important lesson for us as we consider our study of the Bible. *Every part of the Scripture we have is inspired by God.* Not every part of it is vitally important to all people at all times, but all of it is important to some people at some times. Our culture doesn't care about genealogies, and we get bored looking back at the ancient records of family lines recorded in places like the book of Numbers. But in some cultures, those genealogies mean that they see Scripture as real – in their cultures, no truthful history is told without a genealogy of those who participated. For them, the gospel isn't believable unless it's accompanied by the genealogy of Jesus. A portion of Scripture that doesn't speak to you may speak to someone else.

Paul starts this section with a blessing on the Roman church: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” This benediction is rich in itself. What does it tell us? *God is a god of hope.* God isn’t the deity of the stoics, who said you had to take life as it is and deal with it unemotionally. He isn’t the Epicurean idol that fancies pleasure above all things. He isn’t a god who satisfies our lusts or must be appeased in order to keep crops from failing. God is God of hope. Hope is optimistic confidence that, as Paul said earlier in Romans 8:28, “In all things God works for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose.”

Our hope is confidence that Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again. Our hope is confidence that His life, death, and resurrection prove that His people are saved from our sins. Our hope is assurance that Jesus will come again to claim His people. Our hope is that despite the problems of this world, God is watching over us. Our hope is the sure footing that no matter what happens to us, there is a place for those who trust in God in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Paul’s blessing is that as we hold to that hope, as we trust in those things, we will be filled with joy and peace. The more hope we have in God and His promises, the more joy and peace we will have. If you ask most people on the street what they really want out of life, they’d probably say happiness. And if you asked them how to define happiness, I think you’d eventually get to those two words – getting joy out of life and peace in terms of an end to constant worry.

These are the things we want as human beings; they’re programmed into our DNA. But the only way we really and truly get them in abundance is through God filling us with them. We can’t fill ourselves with them. We can try all sorts of things that we think will do the trick, but if God doesn’t fill us with joy and peace, they won’t last.

Why does Paul want this blessing from God on our lives? *Because he wants us to overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Have you ever met someone who had a sense of joy and peace and you thought, “I wonder how they’ve got that?” That’s what Paul’s talking about. He wants us to have so much hope, empowered by God Himself, that other people will notice and we can share it with them. If we have overflowing hope, it means hope beyond what we can carry. An overflowing cup can’t hold all the water poured into it. It either goes to waste, or you find another cup to fill up.

That’s what Paul is saying. He always has his eye on more people being ushered into the Kingdom of God. If you are overflowing with God’s hope, it is going to pour out and fill someone else’s cup. Someone else is going to say, “I want what she’s got.” And God will use your hope to bring other people to hope in Him.

It’s not through our willing ourselves to do it. I could preach up a blue streak, spend all day on a soapbox outside Meijer, and if I’m not overflowing with hope because of the Holy Spirit’s work, it’s useless. But if I’m filled with hope from God, then I can be an effective tool, and so can you. You don’t need to have a ton of words to say to someone, just hope in God that overflows from a heart full of love for Him.

After we started CrossWay and found several different locations that either didn't want to rent to us or were way too expensive, I prayed, and I didn't share this with hardly anyone, but I prayed, "God, if there's a place we're supposed to land, make it happen. Because I'm obviously pretty awful at making it happen. Set it in our laps so that we can't avoid it. We'll faithfully pursue whatever comes up to make sure whether or not that's the avenue you want us to take, but get all the roadblocks out of the way." The hope I had was that God would come through.

And while in our timing it took a while, it was perfect from God's perspective. We're meeting here now, I am convinced, because God honored that hope. It's my prayer that this story gives you hope, that you will trust in the Lord for everything you need. And it's my prayer that hope would overflow from you to your friends, neighbors, co-workers...that they would see how much you trust in God through the struggles of this life and would turn to Him too.

Moving on...Paul continues, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

Paul wrote to the Roman church for very different reasons than most of his other letters. Corinth, Galatia, Thessaloniki – the churches in these cities had serious problems, and he wrote his letters to correct them on the serious errors they'd committed. But that's not the case with Romans. Romans is far different because it's deeply theological, strongly committed to preserving the basic truths of the gospel, but not worried about the state of the Roman church.

So why did Paul write it? God gave him the grace to be a minister – literally a public servant – to all Gentiles so they might believe and become a part of the Kingdom. He teaches because this is what he does, what he's called to do. It happens naturally. In fact, Paul calls it his priestly duty.

In ancient, very early Christianity, there was no priestly class of people because the sacrifice was already made. There was nothing for a priest to do, no sacrifice he had to make. The duty of the servant of God was to proclaim the gospel, to proclaim that the sacrifice was already complete through the giving of Jesus on the cross. That's why in many Protestant churches, the communion table is called just that and not an altar, because there's no need for one. God has provided the sacrifice Himself and given it once for all.

But back to the central point – if Paul's job was the proclamation of the gospel to those who had not yet heard, and the Romans had already heard it and were complete in knowledge and competent to teach one another, why write at all? God's purposes were not thwarted at all because the letter to the Romans has become one of *our* chief means of understanding what God did in giving us Jesus. Paul didn't really know it, but he was writing to us, those who would come later, instructing us who couldn't be instructed in person.

But beyond that, a key here that's illustrated is this: *every believer needs to be refreshed regularly with the truths of the gospel*. This is so easy to forget and so important to remember. We've got to regularly worship, regularly read and study God's word, regularly fellowship with other believers, regularly draw strength from the reminder of the gospel. Because it's so easy to think, "hey, I've got this all done – what more do I need?" The basics of the gospel are so simple that a young child can understand them and believe in Jesus.

But the reminders of the gospel are necessary because we're forgetful people. We easily forget how good God has been to us. We easily attribute the work of God to luck or chance or circumstance. We easily set aside time with God for time with family and friends doing something that seems more enjoyable for the short term. Paul wrote to the Romans and said, "You might not need all of what I've written because you're firm in the faith and are capable of teaching one another. But I'm writing boldly just so that you might keep the main thing the main thing, that you might put God above everything else."

The early church was meeting together several times a week for prayer, study, and worship, and yet they still need refreshers. That's good for us to keep in mind. We may understand tons about the Bible; we may know enough to become Bible teachers or preachers some day; we can know Greek and Hebrew and have books of the Bible memorized; we may grow greatly in showing God's grace and love to others. But we never outgrow the Scriptures. We never outgrow the teachings. We never become so good in this life that we can move past the basics of grace. Do we want to grow? Absolutely. We want to be able to understand more of the deep mysteries of faith. But we should never count ourselves above the simple truths.

Karl Barth was considered one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. He was a German who rediscovered the gospel in a time when German theology was more interested in tearing the church apart. His books are really weighty and deep. I can tell you that I bought his commentary on Romans for this series, and I haven't kept up with it because he's way up here in the stratosphere, far beyond most pastors and theologians. You have to work just to understand his wording, let alone his meaning. And once, when he was asked to explain the gospel, he answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." No matter how long we've been in church or how much we know, we can always use the simple reminder that Jesus loves us and saves us.

Final part of this section: Paul describes some of the places he's gone, saying that he'd wanted to build the church in areas where no one had heard of the name Jesus before. And he states, "I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done -- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit."

Now Paul had plenty to boast about. In fact, when the Corinthians started to question why they should listen to him, he had to go into a thorough discussion of his background and all he had done for the church. There's little argument that Paul spread the church throughout the Roman Empire far more extensively than any of the other disciples. He was incredibly smart, surprisingly brave, and extremely effective in his ministry.

Yet Paul won't speak except about what God has done by His own power through himself. Paul attributes the spread of the church to signs and wonders in the Holy Spirit's power, not his own speaking abilities or powers of persuasion. People believed in God and obeyed God because of Paul's words, but those words were God's words spoken through Paul. Everything Paul did, he attributed to God's power, and he gave glory to Jesus for all that happened.

And that's our final thought for this morning: *what you can boast about in the Lord?* When we hear about signs and wonders, what we would call miracles, we typically think, "Those don't happen anymore, or if they do, it's rare." Perhaps it's the case that in a country where His name has been proclaimed a great deal, there are very few signs and wonders that occur directly at the hand of a disciple that can be attributed only to their power.

But I want to say to you – miracles still happen. The power of God is at display all over the place if we're willing to see it. If we're willing to proclaim it, then God's glory shines through us. And my guess is, one's happened to you.

Seven years ago now, we were in a car accident on black ice on Interstate 94. I broke my knee; everyone else was unhurt. The ambulance driver told my wife sitting up front that we could have all been killed from the kind of accident we had. Air bags? Luck? Coincidence? No, in a common phrase, it was a wonder things weren't so much worse. And wonders come from God. They display His authority over all things. I can speak to you today because of His power He exerted that day.

I know that many of you here have had similar experiences – maybe not with car wrecks, but situations in your family. You have a close relative who's outlived the doctor's predictions. You've been blessed with a job you love or a spouse you adore. You've had children when the specialists said there wasn't much hope. Or maybe things haven't gone as hoped, you've dealt with a devastating illness or a major tragedy, and yet by the grace of God, you're still standing. All of these things are the way they are because of God's mighty hand being on your life.

So are we willing to boast about these things? We didn't cause them; we know God made them happen. Most people who aren't believers, if you invite them to church, they might come out of respect for you, but maybe not. A lot of folks think the church is antiquated, nonsense, rituals rather than a real relationship with the living God. No church is going to impress them into believing through its great worship team or preacher or kids' ministry.

But if you approach it from the perspective of signs and wonders, if you can describe how God has touched your life, they can chalk it up to circumstances or dumb luck, but they can't dismiss how God has been on the move in your life. People don't need one more useless thing filling up their schedule. But they'll make the time if they hear and see evidence that God is real and He's at work and wants to have a relationship with them.

Friends, God is a god of hope that can overflow in us. We have His inspired Word we rely upon. We can be refreshed by the Spirit through His Word every day. We have the church where we can gather with likeminded people to bring God praise and worship. So boast about what God has done in your life, knowing He loves you, and He will give you His joy and peace.