

# Three Great Truths

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn back together to that passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, Romans 15. We won't be able to look at this chapter in any great detail, but three great truths I think leap off the page.

I'm grateful for the devotional. A minister several years ago, Scotty Smith, from Nashville, Tennessee, came and spoke at a vision weekend for the church planting group within the church.

Scotty just has a remarkable way of capturing truth in a way that's both personal and powerful. And one of his devotionals, which I read in my class last semester, looked at Romans 15 and he highlighted these three descriptors of God.

The God of endurance and encouragement, the God of hope, and the God of peace. Because you see, how you see God is critical.

Our understanding of ourself, of course, is important. I think it was John Calvin who said, really, the two great pieces of knowledge are this, knowledge of God and knowledge of self.

[ 1 : 13 ] And we really can't have either in isolation. We can't really understand God or ourselves in isolation. But how you understand God will shape, will shape your life, will shape your worship, will shape your service.

C.S. Lewis once said, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

You see, if you believe that God is distant, then your experience will be of a God who is remote. If you believe that God is harsh, your experience will then be shaped by the God who seems to be judgmental and condemnatory.

If you believe that God is indifferent, you'll go through life thinking, doesn't know, doesn't care, maybe both. If you believe that God is near, you will see God at all points of your experience.

You'll see him in the ordinary and you'll see him in the extraordinary. If you believe that God is love, you will see testimonies of his love all the time. And if you believe that God is intimately and personally concerned about you, you will be reminded of those truths.

[ 2 : 34 ] So how you see God will shape how you live. And how you live is a testimony of your theology.

You know, that's, I was appointed now 13, can you imagine, I was 13 years here as assistant minister. I've now been 13 years at ETS. I can't believe that. Time just goes so quickly.

And I was asked to teach theology. I was asked to teach students about what God is like. And there's no greater privilege to teach or to preach these great truths.

And I just want to highlight what's already there in the passage. Because I think the Apostle Paul is drawing his magnificent letter to a close.

And he wants to build up. He doesn't want to tear down. He wants to encourage. He doesn't want to discourage. He wants to equip the audience there and now for the realities of life.

[ 3 : 34 ] I don't know about you, but life is tough. Life is unexpected. Things happen that you cannot predict. But we have a God who is dependable, reliable, steadfast.

So we learn three things. Well, we learn many things. But three things I want to highlight to you. Verse 5. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had.

Endurance. The ability to keep going. Now, the endurance that is spoken of here is not your endurance. It's not how strong your faith is.

It's not how deep your commitment is. But the endurance that's spoken of here is the endurance of God. How strong is his commitment? How deep is his power?

How able is he to keep you going? Those are two very different propositions. Because if I were to ask each one of you today, how strong?

[ 4 : 40 ] How committed? How deep? There'd be a variety of answers. But if we ask ourselves how strong, how committed, and how deep is the commitment of our God to us, that doesn't change.

That is universal. Because he is the God who sticks with his people. If there's one of many lessons that you could learn from the 66 books of the Bible, God sticks with his people.

He sticks with his people not because of who they are, but he sticks with his people because of who he is. He doesn't let them go. And we're going to be looking at that this evening. The God of all grace.

The God who looks upon us with unmerited favor. The God of endurance and the God of encouragement. Now, I think encouragement and enthusiasm are cousins.

There was a Harvard commencement address by the famous essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. And he closed his address with these words.

[ 5 : 47 ] He said, I think the author of this letter was a man who was an enthusiast.

A man who had a mission and a man who had a message. He could summarize his message quite succinctly. He said, We preach Christ crucified. That was his message.

And his mission was to tell people the message. So we have an enthusiast telling us of encouragement. Now, as you read through the scriptures, the Bible tells us that God by his spirit gives gifts.

He gives gifts to his people. And we have particular gifts and particular aptitudes that he gives each one of us. And in fact, the gift of encouragement is a spiritual gift.

However, I've searched the scriptures. I did that. I just double checked this morning. And I've yet to find the spiritual gift of discouragement. The spiritual gift of fault finding.

[ 7 : 04 ] And the spiritual gift of a critical spirit. I just haven't found that yet. Maybe if you find that in the Bible, you let me know. But what I find is that we have a God who encourages.

And we have a God who wants his people to be encouragers. Famous preacher of a previous century. A man who was not well educated. He left school at the age of 10.

He was not gifted. Well, he was gifted intellectually. But he was not. He didn't have the advantages that most people would have had. But at the age of 17, something unusual happened.

You see, he was forced to go to church. Maybe you've been forced to go to church. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. You see, his uncle owned a shoe shop. And this young man wanted a job.

And the uncle said, I'll give you a job. There's one condition. You go to church. You go to my church every Sunday. The young man agreed. And in addition to church, there was a Sunday school. And Sunday school at that time was for adults or young adults.

[ 8 : 05 ] And he went to the Sunday school class. And here was a man who really knew nothing about the Bible. The other members of the class were Harvard graduates. And this young guy from the country, the minister would say, well, now look at John's gospel.

And this young guy would just start flicking the Bible from the beginning. He didn't know where to find John's gospel. But he had the benefit of encountering a Sunday school teacher who was kind. And for those of you who have taught Sunday school, never underestimate what your impact has been.

Never underestimate how much you may have said or shown young people many years ago. And you see, that young man, remember, because of the first time he was in this class, when he couldn't find the book of the Bible, his Sunday school teacher named Edward Kimball handed him his open Bible at the right page.

And the young guy thought, this man is for me. I'm going to be for him. So when the Sunday school teacher later came by this young man's place of work, the shoe shop, you see, the Sunday school teacher was concerned that his class, they might have known a lot of stuff.

But they didn't know Jesus. You see, Paul wants to teach us a lot of stuff, yes. But above all, he wants us to know Jesus. You see, you can know a lot of stuff about Jesus, but not know Jesus.

[ 9 : 24 ] But if you know him, you know all that you need to know. So Kimball went to the shoe shop and told this young man about Jesus. And he was converted then and there. His life was changed.

He later went on to preach to 100 million people in person. Not a bad life achievement. And this young man grew into an older man. But it's interesting.

D.L. Moody was often criticized. You see, isn't that easy to criticize people? And he said, you may find hundreds of fault finders among professed Christians. But all their criticism will not lead one solitary soul to Christ.

I never preached a sermon yet that I could not pick to pieces and find fault with. I feel that Jesus Christ ought to have a far better representative than I am.

But I have lived long enough to discover that there is nothing perfect in this world. If you are to wait till you find a perfect preacher or perfect meetings, I'm afraid you'll have to wait till the millennium arrives.

[ 10 : 25 ] What we want is to be looking up to Christ. Let us be done with fault finding. So if we have a God who encourages, we should be people who are encouragers.

Our God strengthens. Our God equips. Our God builds us up. He does not want us to tear down one another. He wants us to encourage each other along the road.

I don't know about you, but whatever I'm doing, if I'm encouraged, I do it better. If I'm encouraged, I speak better. If I'm encouraged, I teach better. If I'm encouraged, I cook better.

Whatever it is, you just do it better. So we have a God who brings endurance and a God who brings encouragement. And notice that one of the characteristics of endurance and encouragement is unity.

Verse 6, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you.

[ 11 : 28 ] So this is who God is. This is what God does. And this is how the people of God respond. We are given his endurance. We are given his encouragement.

So therefore, we are to be encouragers to one another and to have a unity of heart and a unity of mind. Secondly, we see that in verse 13, we read, 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.

Encouragement, endurance, and hope. Now, sometimes in the Bible, the Bible uses a word that we are familiar with in our day-to-day conversation.

Some words are quite different. You know, the Bible uses words like justification and we don't often use that word. But when you use the word hope, the Bible speaks of hope in a very particular way.

But we often use hope as kind of a vague desire. I hope to. You know, I hope one day to go to Australia. I don't think I ever will. But maybe one day I'll go down under.

[ 12 : 45 ] But the Bible, when it speaks of hope, speaks of a firmly rooted truth. Of a guaranteed expectation. The God who guarantees certain things for the future.

And we trust in him. And we trust that he is faithful. And what he promises, he delivers. The God of hope. You see, the God of hope fills his people.

He fills his people with joy and with peace. And the Holy Spirit then overflows in their lives. Why? Because they are not living for this moment.

They are not living for this day. They are not living according to the spirit of this age. We are looking forward and we are looking upward. This world is not heaven.

It's not hell. But it's not heaven. We are looking to a better place. We are looking to a better country. We are aspiring higher. Not because of who we are.

[ 13 : 46 ] But because we have a God who is filled with hope. And fills his people with hope. C.H. Spurgeon, another great preacher of a different age.

He says, without Christ there is no hope. You see, endurance without Christ is no endurance. Encouragement without Christ is no encouragement. Hope without Christ is no hope. So even when the Apostle Paul is not specifically referencing the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We know that that's his focus. He's already told us. We preach Christ and him crucified. You know, he is determined to know nothing but Christ crucified.

That's the sum and substance of his message. So we have hope. And this hope is intended for people who are surrounded by situations that appear to be hopeless.

You see, again, a previous commentator. You know, I quoted C.S. Lewis to begin with. C.S. Lewis, again, had a great fluency of words.

[ 14 : 49 ] G.K. Chesterton was another commentator who could put words together quite well. And he says, hope means hoping when things are hopeless. Or it is no virtue at all.

As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude. It's only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength. And I think what Paul is saying to the Christians in Rome, your situation is not good.

Your prospects are not bright. Your future, humanly speaking, is insecure. He's not trying to tell them to pretend that things are different because things are tough.

But he wants them to know that there is a God who is the God of hope. The God who brings hope. The God who brings joy. The God who brings peace. Because these characteristics and qualities are not circumstantial.

They are not dependent upon a situation. So when you feel hopeless, that's when the God of hope begins to shine even brighter.

[ 15 : 56 ] Begins to bring even greater comfort, greater encouragement. And you know, again, just as endurance and encouragement foster unity, notice that hope produces something.

Because we're told that hope and the work of the Spirit are intimately connected. The God of hope and the power of the Holy Spirit work together to produce an overflow in the lives of God's people.

Now, as you read the Bible, you'll see that the chapters are separated by big numbers, 15, 16. In the NIV that I'm reading here, we have a break at verse 13 and 14.

Paul, the minister to the Gentiles. Now, these breaks are not in the original. And sometimes these breaks come at inopportune times. Because I think the break almost makes you pause after verse 13, take a new breath, and then start as if verse 14 is a new thought.

But actually, verse 13 and verse 14 are intimately connected. Because verse 14 says, I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and competent to instruct one another.

[ 17 : 18 ] At ETS, we want to do three things. We want to impart knowledge. We want to encourage skills. And we want to help develop character.

Knowledge, skill, character. But most important of all those three is character. It was Albert Einstein, you know, the famous scientist. He said this, Most people say it is the intellect that makes a great scientist.

They are wrong. It is character. Einstein was once asked, Professor Einstein, can you tell me the speed of light? Remember,  $E$  equals  $MC$  squared.

$C$  is the speed of light. He says, no, I can't. I can look it up. So he didn't know it off the top of his head. So knowledge, of course, is important. But most knowledge you can look up.

Character is key. Not what you know, but who you know. Not what you have, but who you are. And what you have in verse 14 are those three qualities.

[ 18 : 22 ] Because first of all, full of goodness. That's character. You can only be full of goodness if you are in Christ, united to Jesus. You can only be full of goodness if you are one of his people.

That's who you are, your Christian character. Second, you are filled with knowledge. You need to know something. You need to know something about Jesus. You need to know something about God. You need to know something about the Holy Spirit.

You need to know something about yourself. And third, that you are competent to instruct one another. You have some skills. And those skills are, in this case, internal.

That you can instruct or encourage or build up one another. Character, knowledge, skill. So as a follower of Jesus, who you are is the most important thing.

What you know is important and what you do is important. But your character is critical. God of endurance. God of encouragement. God of hope.

[ 19 : 23 ] And third, at the very end of the chapter we read, The God of peace be with you all. Amen. Now this word peace.

When you learn a new language. If you're building vocabulary. You often, especially with adjectives. You begin to build vocabulary with antonyms.

Tall, short. Old, young. Rich, poor. And peace is one of these words that we often associate with its opposite. Peace and war.

I think Tolstoy had a book by that time. I think he put them in different, reversed order. But sometimes you can think, well that's it. Peace is the absence of war.

Peace is the absence of conflict. And yes, that's true. But peace is much more than that. Peace is not just the absence of conflict. But peace is the presence of harmony.

[ 20 : 22 ] The presence of wholeness. Of completeness. When you hear a song sung well by a solo performer. You would say, wow. That's a wonderful singer.

But when you hear a song that is sung beautifully. By a chorus with parts. You say, wow. That's magnificent.

You hear the bass. And you hear the soprano. You hear the alto. You hear the tenor. You hear the male voices. You hear the female voices. You hear the harmony. But it all blends together in unity.

That's what peace is. In the Old Testament, the visual illustration of peace is a stone wall. And a stone wall where every stone is in its proper place.

The absence of peace is that stones are missing. I've never been to Rome. I hope one day I can get to Rome. But I'm told that the Colosseum is magnificent to view.

[ 21 : 25 ] But the Colosseum is a ruin. You get a scale of how magnificent this building was one day. It used to be. But it's just a ruin now. But imagine every stone in the Colosseum is in place.

Just as it was when it was built. How magnificent that building would be. The God of peace is the God who fits every stone in place perfectly.

Our lives often seem incomplete. Our lives often seem to be out of place. But the God who we worship is putting all the right pieces in all the right places.

And making us complete in Jesus. Because when you come to trust in Jesus, there is an immediate completeness. But as you come to know and grow in Jesus, that completeness begins to grow.

We begin to see that our lives are coming together. Not perfect by any means. But the God of peace begins to unify us individually and collectively.

[ 22 : 34 ] So, the Apostle Paul wants to leave his audience with this note of encouragement. He wants to build them up. He wants to strengthen them.

He wants to equip them. The challenges are many. The enemies are many. The difficulties are many. And yet, God is with his people.

God is with them. He's for them. And through the Holy Spirit, he's actually dwelling in them. God who brings endurance doesn't let them go. The God who encourages them along the way.

The God who fills them with hope that overflows in joy and peace. And the God who brings harmony. The God who brings unity. The God who brings completeness.

Now, what do we do with these truths? Very quickly. The Apostle Paul doesn't leave us without application. You see, the Bible is wonderful.

[ 23 : 34 ] You know, as you read this chapter, you see the way in which the Apostle Paul informs. You see the way in which the Apostle Paul encourages. But he wants his audience to take this knowledge, to apply it personally, and then to live it out.

Verses 1 to 2. We are to bear with and we are to build up. Look at the, just as the chapter started. We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Each of us should please our neighbors for their good to build them up. We bear with and we build up. Why? Because our God bears with us and our God builds us up.

So if we are his people, we do the same thing. We don't have the same power, of course. We are not perfect, of course. But our characters begin to be more and more like the God who saves and the God who rescues.

You see this in families, don't you? When you're a kid, you kind of, you know, you look at your parents and you think, I'm never going to be like them. I'm never going to say the things that they say.

[ 24 : 45 ] I'm never going to do the things that they do. But then you catch yourself years later and you see the qualities of your father or your mother. The words that they said, the phrases that they use, even the physical characteristics, the way in which they walked or talked.

And it just kind of comes through. Why? Because you were brought up within that household. You were brought up within that family. And you take on the qualities and characteristics of your parents, for good or for ill.

But when you're part of God's family, you take on his qualities and his characteristics. And unlike human parents, all of his qualities and characteristics are for good.

None are for ill. So he's the God who builds up. We build up. He is the God who bears with and we bear with. Verse 6 tells us that we are to glorify God.

We are to give God the glory. We are to give him the credit. You see, if this was about your endurance and your encouragement and your hope and your peace, what you do, you could take the credit.

[ 25 : 52 ] But it's not. It's about him. He gets all the credit. He gets all the glory. Verse 7 tells us that as we glorify God, we accept one another. Notice that the Apostle Paul very rarely, if ever, uses an either or.

He doesn't say you can glorify God or you can accept one another. He says, no, no, you do both. If you glorify God, you accept one another. That doesn't mean that you accept everything that everyone does because much of what we do is disordered.

We get it wrong. But you see, the vertical and the horizontal go together. You glorify God. You accept one another. Why? Because we are on the same journey and we will arrive at the same destination.

And finally, again, we've taken a kind of a whistle-stop tour through this chapter. I'm not suggesting we've dealt with everything by any means.

But if we are to glorify God, if we are to accept one another, the final exhortation in the chapter, quite lengthy, is prayer. We pray for one another.

[ 26 : 59 ] We pray with one another. We need God and prayer is one of the best ways that we lay hold of that God that we need. When you pray, you recognize that you do not have what you need.

When you pray, you ask God for help. When you read a chapter like this and you think, I'm not that good at building other people up. I'm not that good at bearing with one another.

I'm not that good at glorifying God or I'm not that good at accepting people. You pray. Pray for your leaders, yes. Pray for those who are preaching.

Pray for those that are teaching. Pray for those that are leading. But pray for each other. Pray for yourself. Because prayer is simply this. Help. I was speaking to one of the guys in HMP Edinburgh.

I saw him before I went away. And I said, I'm going to teach you a short prayer. When you need help, I want you to say three words. God help me. I saw him the other day and he was in the segregation unit, which means maybe he wasn't always praying that prayer.

[ 28 : 06 ] But nonetheless, and I said, you remember the prayer? And he looked at me and he said, God help me. That's what we pray. God help me.

I don't have the answers. God help me. I don't have the strength. God help me. I don't have the wisdom. God help me. I got it wrong again. But God help me. Pray.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Spirit to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. So pray for me.

And I'll pray for you. We pray for each other. Because we need God's help. And may God bless his word to each of our hearts. Let's pray.