



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Whatever Was Written in Former Days

### Romans 15:3-7

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Have you ever noticed the slight high spot in the floor of the parish hall? Every once in a while someone will ask, “What’s going on there?” The answer is that there’s a huge boulder under that part of the floor. It was so big that when they built the church they decided to leave it in place. At the time there was some clearance between the top of the boulder and the bottom of the floor planks. The problem is that pioneers who built our building had limited resources. Instead of building on a stone or concrete foundation, they built the church on log sleepers. That worked for a time, but by the 1970s, a century later, those sleepers had begun to rot and the building sank. The boulder started pushing the floor up from underneath. Part of the restoration project in the 70s involved pouring concrete piers to support the floor joists so that the building wouldn’t sink any further. If your building is going to last, you have to build on a solid foundation—and not just temporarily solid, but one that’s going to remain solid long-term. The same goes for our faith.

In our Epistle this morning, from Romans 15, Paul shows us the foundation on which our faith and hope are built as Christians. You would think this would be the sort of thing that’s hard to forget, but it’s often forgotten nevertheless. We try our best to follow Jesus, but the ideas and values of the world around us shout at us constantly. Sometimes it’s hard to distinguish the world’s voice from God’s. Even in the Church there are competing ideas and explanations

and opinions. Who do we listen to? Just yesterday I ran across an article titled “Eight Gnostic Myths you May have Imbibed”. It lists eight ideas that are commonplace in Christian teaching, especially in modern Evangelical thinking and in popular Christians literature, but all eight are taken not from the Bible, but from ancient pagan philosophy and religion.

I was thinking about this in particular over the last few days. I’ve been asked to lead the discussion this coming week in the ecumenical men’s group I’m part of. We’re working our way through a book by a Christian writer whom I find troubling. As I read the book this week it was clear he was off course, I could see where he went wrong despite all his explanations drawn from Scripture. As I read through the chapter a second time I realised what the problem is: he’s displaced Jesus from the centre of the Gospel and put man there instead. In a sense he says all the right things, he’s got all the right Scriptures, but he’s got them all out of order. He’s taken the right parts, but he’s arranged them to tell the wrong story. And I see this over and over again. Paul knew we’d struggle with this and that’s, at least in part, why he writes what he does in Romans 15. Leading up to this he’s been talking about the marks of the true Christians, he’s been talking about loving one another, he’s been talking about not judging and not causing others to stumble. He’s been talking about the Christian life and our life *together* as Christians. This is just what the lectionary has been showing us all through Trinitytide as it points to passage after passage in Scripture showing us what it means to live as Christians.

Brothers and Sisters, it’s easy, as we read about the ins and outs of the Christians life to get off course and to think it’s all about lists of dos and don’ts. It’s easy to think Christianity is about moralism. It’s easy to start thinking of the Good News as a “What’s in it for me?” sort of message. It’s easy to start thinking of

God as a cosmic Santa Claus, there to grant our every wish. It’s easy to put ourselves at the centre of the story. And so on the last Sunday in Advent there’s good reason why we had that Epistle from Colossians 1 that reminded us: *Jesus is at the centre of everything*. He’s the beginning, he’s the end, he’s the reason for it all. Not us. *Him*. This is the foundation on which our faith and hope—our whole lives—are built. And again, this morning, Paul brings us back to the foundation. We often call the Second Sunday in Advent “Bible Sunday” because the lessons and the collect emphasise the essential place of holy Scripture as the foundation of our faith. Romans 15 begins with Paul writing, “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up” (15:2) and now he tells us *why*. He gives us a look under the floor of our faith, he digs away the earth from building of faith and he shows us the foundation underneath. And that foundation is Jesus, the Messiah, and it’s the Scriptures, the Bible that explain to us who Jesus is, what he’s done, and why it’s important.

In Romans 15:3 Paul explains:

**For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”**

So, Paul first writes that we should be building up our neighbours—that we should be loving others—that’s the point he’s been building towards in the previous chapters. Now, here, he explains why. It’s because of Jesus. Jesus didn’t set out to please himself. “No, to the contrary”, Paul, writes, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” It might seem like a convoluted way to make his point, but I think we all get the idea: Instead of seeking his own pleasure or gratifying his own desires, Jesus let the reproach of his enemies fall on himself. In other words, he gave his life for the sake of the very people who hated him and killed him. Paul makes this point in a lot of other

places. Think of Philippians 2. Though Jesus was God, he chose not to exploit his divinity, but emptied himself, was born a man, and humbly died on the Cross.

Paul could have just come out and said that, but instead he quotes this passage saying, “as it is written”, which seems like a convoluted way to make his point. What we might miss is the reason for this. He’s quoting Psalm 69:9. And he’s not just quoting from the Psalm as a proof-text, just grabbing at a passage and manipulating it to back up his point. No. This is why Scripture is so important as a foundation for our faith and hope. Psalm 69 is a psalm about the suffering of Israel, but as much as it’s about the suffering of the people and nation, it’s also specifically about the suffering of the righteous one within Israel. Paul also drew on Psalm 69 a few chapters earlier. In Chapter 11 he sets the things that were happening in his own day in the context of the psalm. Now here, he looks to Psalm 69 as a statement or a commentary on the suffering of God’s people, but now brought to a head in the suffering of Israel’s representative and anointed king. We don’t have time to work through all thirty-six verses of the psalm this morning, but it goes like this in outline: The writer of the psalm describes his present suffering as he cries out for God to judge the evil around him and it ends with an outpouring of praise for God’s deliverance. Paul recognised this as an outline of Jesus’ own life. This was the path the Messiah walked as he became Israel’s representative and was faithful to the calling and mission to which she had been unfaithful. Psalm 69 tells the story that makes sense of Jesus.

This is what Paul gets at in verse 4. He writes:

**For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and**

**through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**

“Whatever was written in former days”. Paul’s talking about the Bible. The New Testament hadn’t been written yet—what Paul’s writing here makes up some of the earliest part of what would become the New Testament. The Gospels and other Epistles would follow later. Paul specifically has in mind the Hebrew Scriptures that we know as the Old Testament. A lot of Christians don’t pay much attention to the Old Testament. There are lots of exciting stories there, but we’re not always sure what to do with them. There’s a lot of other stuff there, like the law and the prophets and the psalms that we often we really struggle to know what to do with—how they fit into place. But Paul is very clear here. The Old Testament was written to teach us. We read it, we memorise it, we meditate on it, we learn its story, he says, so that we can have the courage to live in faith and hope. The Bible tells us where we’ve come from, what’s happened already, and where we’re going. Think of it this way: As Christians we’ve been swept up into a great story. The Bible tells us the first part of the story we ourselves our living in today. Jesus talked about us being dead wood that has been grafted into the living vine and given life. The Bible is the story that tells us about the vine and shows us the roots way down below the ground. It’s the foundation on which we’re building today and without it nothing we build will stand.

It’s troubling to see how confused many Christians are on this point—and it’s nothing new. Marcion was one of the earliest heretics in Church history. His heresy was to reject the entire Old Testament. There are a lot of modern Christians who do the same thing, thinking that with the coming of Jesus the Old Testament somehow became irrelevant. Sometimes they even quote Paul to justify this idea.

He wrote earlier in Romans that “Christ is the end of the law”. But Paul didn’t mean by that that we should throw out most of the Bible. Right here in our Epistle he says that those Scriptures were written so that we can live in hope.

On the other hand there are Christians who want to take the Bible seriously, but they go to the opposite extreme. There are people who go so far as to teach that Christians have to observe all the tenets of the law that was given through Moses. No bacon, no shrimp...no bacon-wrapped shrimp. It seems trivial, but it’s a very serious error. There are Theonomists who think the law of Moses must be the law of the nation. Just this week a friend sent me an article about Christians who are working with Israelis to try to see the temple rebuilt so that sacrifices can be offered again in obedience to the law.

Most Christians know better than to go to either of these extremes. Hebrews, for example, goes to great length to explain exactly why the Old Testament sacrificial system has been done away with once and for all in Jesus. And so we’ve tried to come up with principles for figuring out which parts of the Old Testament are still in force or still valid and which aren’t. We talk about the civil laws, the ceremonial or purity laws, and the moral laws. And it’s not that we’re wrong in doing this, but the more I study Paul in particular, I think that if he heard us approaching the Old Testament this way he’d sort of scratch his head and look a little confused by it. Paul was a Jew and he had worked through what that meant in light of his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. I think Paul would look at our attempts to explain how this part of the Old Testament is still in force and that part isn’t as being a step in the right direction, but not for the right reason or in the right way. He’d say that we’ve come up with the right answer to the wrong question. You

see, it's not so much that certain parts of the Old Testament are still in force and other aren't. It's that the whole Old Testament is the God-given story of how God's people were called into covenant with himself in order to bring God's salvation to fallen Creation. Paul knew that this was Israel's story and reason for being. He knew that it would eventually come to its crescendo in Israel's ultimate representative, the Messiah, and in the Messiah's suffering. The law was given not with the expectation that Israel would somehow keep it perfectly, but in the divine knowledge that she neither could nor would keep it. The law concentrated humanity's rebellion against our Creator in one place and in one people so that the Messiah could then take the full brunt of it himself and pay the full price for it. This is what Paul argues, particularly in Galatians.

Because Jesus the Messiah had come as the fulfilment of the Old Testament, the Bible was for Paul not a weird or perplexing story in search of an ending. No, for Paul, in light of Jesus, the Old Testament was the foundation of the story of the redemption of all things. The Bible is the foundation of faith. In it we see the faithfulness of God to fulfil the promises he had made so long before. We see them fulfilled in Jesus and knowing that God has fulfilled them we can live in faith and hope, knowing that he will complete what he started. In Jesus he has inaugurated the new age, he has inaugurated his kingdom and we can live expectantly for its fulfilment. This doesn't mean it's always an easy story to follow. The basic outline is simple enough, although even that is often obscured by sometimes long-standing mistakes. I think of the book mentioned earlier that takes the story off course and ends up putting our faith and hope in not quite the right place, all because it's pushed Jesus out of the centre of the story and put humanity—us—at the centre instead. But the basic story is simple. It's what

we covered in our Confirmation class this Fall. And once we get the basic, simple plot of the story right, knowing where we've come from and where we're going and have Jesus at the centre, the other parts fall into place much more easily. Once we've got the basic plot down, it's much easier to see when someone's telling it wrong. And it's not just an academic exercise. Paul stresses that it's this story that serves as the foundation of the whole Christian life and that undergirds and gives shape to our faith. It points us to that for which we ultimately hope.

So let's get back to Psalm 69. Again, this is the psalm Paul quotes from here in our Epistle. For him it was foundational to the Christians life. He's applying this principle of looking to the Old Testament as the story in which we're living today. The psalm illustrates an essential principle. The Messiah could not "please himself". Just the opposite, in fact. He had to take on himself the reproach of the people towards Israel's God. He had to bear himself the rejection and the insults heaped on the Lord. Again, think of passages like Philippians 2. The glory of God, by all rights, belonged to Jesus, but he instead humbled himself. He was God, but he chose not to exploit his divinity for himself. Instead he was obedient to God's plan for redemption and restoration. And then Paul connects Jesus' renunciation of his rights, he connects Jesus' humbling of himself for the sake of others, he connects this path that Jesus followed as part of his work as the Messiah, he connects it to the Christian life. If we are going to follow Jesus, this is where we, this is where you and I must follow. This is the same point Paul makes in Philippians when he says, "have this mind amongst yourselves". This is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 9, where he talks about all the things that are his by right, but then says that rather than assert or claim his rights, he's chosen instead to endure anything lest he put

something in the way of the Gospel. And that's just it. Is our priority in life ourselves or is it Jesus? Do we look to Jesus for what we think we can get from him or do we look to Jesus as our loving Creator to whom we owe everything? Are we ready to give up everything for the sake of knowing him and making him known? You see, this is why we have to get the story right. This is why it's essential, for example, that we know that Jesus is the centre, not us. This is why it's important to know that the Gospel is not primarily about us, but about Jesus.

And so Paul wraps up this part of Romans 15 in verses 5-7:

**May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.**

This God who has proved that he finishes what he starts and that he makes good on all of his promises, this God who has brought us this far in the story is the God of endurance and encouragement. And Paul prays that he will grant the Roman Christians harmony so that they can live with each other in one accord—so that they can live the life we are called to live in Jesus, so that they can live the life made possible by the Holy Spirit. Paul talks about living in harmony with each other because it follows from the other discussions he's had up to this point in Romans, but it applies to every other aspect of the Christians life. We live the life Jesus has given us, renouncing the world, the flesh, and the devil, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, being the kind of kingdom people Jesus describes in the Beatitudes, for example, even though it's often a struggle, even though it often may seem pointless or as if

we're fighting a losing battle—we press on in faith and hope because we have been redeemed by the God of encouragement and endurance—because we know the story told by Holy Scripture, because we know where we've come from and God's faithfulness in the past, and because we are certain that he will continue to be faithful in the future.

And yet we don't just live the Christians life for its own sake. We don't just live in harmony for the sake of living in harmony—if we do that we're, again, putting ourselves at the centre of the story instead of Jesus. We live this way in order to give glory to God. We live this way so that the nations, so that the people lost in darkness around us will see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. Think of Israel's mission. She was to be a light to the nations. She failed, but through her failure Jesus brought redemption and created a new Israel. Our mission is the same as it has always been: to be the light of the world. The difference is that we now stand on this side of Jesus' redemptive work, we now live in the life of the Spirit. And so we live the Christian life in order to manifest, in order to give the world a glimpse of the kingdom and of the age to come. The Church proclaims that Jesus is Lord, but we also show the world what it looks like to live in faith that Jesus is Lord and to live in hope today of the fulfilment of his kingdom's full coming at some future time. By our life we pull that future into the present for the sake of the life of the world.

Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*