

“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” (v20)

This is a stunning statement –
but Paul just says it and moves on.

“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”
Wait, Paul, don’t you mean that God *has crushed* Satan under Jesus’ feet?
Or at the very least, God *will crush* Satan under Jesus’ feet, when he returns?

No.

Paul says,
“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under *your* feet.”

To understand what Paul is saying here, we need to work through Romans 16 with some care.

Introduction (16:1-2)

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae,
that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints,
and help her in whatever she may need from you,
for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. (v2)*

There has been no small controversy over this passage
because Phoebe is plainly a woman,
and yet she is called a diaconos --
which is the masculine form of the word.
If she was a deaconess then Paul would have used the feminine ending.
But she is not a deaconess.
She is a deacon.

What does that mean?
Some have argued that the early church was radically egalitarian,
and that Phoebe was the pastor of the church in Cenchreae.
But the rest of the introduction to Phoebe helps us understand who she is.

In short, she is the bearer of Paul’s letter.
And since carrying an important letter was an important service
(they didn’t have post offices!),
she has been commissioned by the church for this.

In Greek, a “diaconos” is an agent or emissary –
one who acts on behalf of another.
Phoebe is the “deacon” – the agent – of the church in Cenchreae,
(a port city near Corinth)
who has been sent to Rome to carry Paul’s letter.

Romans 16, then, is something of an addendum to the epistle.
At the end of chapter 15 Paul said, “May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”
In one sense, that is the end of the body of Romans.
But then Paul adds a letter of reference for Phoebe
to introduce her to the church in Rome,
and to send greetings.

Why does he do this?

Paul asks them to *help her in whatever she may need from you* –
suggesting that Phoebe did not carry this letter to Rome
simply out of the goodness of her heart.
Phoebe apparently has business in Rome (possibly imperial business)
which could benefit from the assistance of the church in Rome.

After all, Phoebe is a *very* wealthy woman.

Paul calls her “a patron of many and of myself as well.”
In the Roman world, a patron is (by definition) a very wealthy and powerful person
who is able to protect those under his (or her) care.
Phoebe is a patron – the Christians in Cenchreae (and elsewhere)
look to her for protection.

Now she needs help as she is outside of her circle of influence
(she may be big stuff in Corinth, but she’s small fry in Rome).
She has used her influence on behalf of the church –
now please help her.

In other words, the church is a community where we take care of one another –
we look out for one another.

1. Greet One Another with a Holy Kiss (16:3-16)

In verses 3-16, then Paul says to “greet” someone sixteen times.

It would be easy to skim over this as just another list of names.

When John Chrysostom came to the end of the book of Romans, he said:

“I think that many even of those who have the appearance of being extremely good men,
hasten over this part of the Epistle as superfluous,
and having no great weight in it...”

For because it is a catalogue of names, they think they cannot get any great good from it.
Yet the gold founders' people are careful even about the little fragments;
while these pass over even such great cakes of gold...
For it is possible even from bare names to find a great treasure."

What do we learn from this list of names?

Well, Phoebe was the name of a Roman goddess.

She was reared as a Gentile idolater –

but now Paul calls her his "sister" and his "patron."

Prisca and Aquila are known from Acts 18 as a Jewish Christian husband and wife
who catechized Apollos and trained him in the way of Christ.

And Paul refers to his "kinsmen" Andronicus and Junia, as well as Herodion –
at least identifying them as Jewish Christians,
if not close relatives.

Stachys in verse 9 means "ear of corn" –

perhaps suggesting that he came from a farming family.

Ampliatius, Urbanus, Hermas, Philologus and Julia
all were common slave names.

But Herodian, on the other hand,

was a name only given to members of Herod's household.

In verse 11, we hear of "those of Narcissus" – who was an influential freedman
well-known among the elite of Rome.

What do you see in this list of names?

In Christ there is not Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free,
but Christ is all and in all.

Jesus Christ has established a new community that brings together a new humanity,
as Paul offers up the Gentiles as a sacrifice, pleasing to God,
because sanctified by the Spirit.

Indeed, that priestly language of chapter 15 continues here as well.

I realize that verse 5 read,

"Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia."

But that is an unfortunate translation.

Paul says that he was the *firstfruits to Christ* in Asia.

In Paul's priestly work of the gospel ministry, Epaenetus was the firstfruits –
he was the first offering that Paul offered to God.

It is interesting to note that Paul refers to two couples in this list:

Prisca and Aquila, and Andronicus and Junia.

No doubt others in the list were married,

but these couples worked as a team.

To give you a contemporary parallel –
my friends David and Sharon Covington must be named together.
The wives of many others of my friends are good and faithful women –
but one would not name them together in the same way.

There are several women named in the list:

Phoebe is commended in verses 1-2.

Prisca and Junia are greeted with their husbands.

(Indeed, you might say that Aquila is greeted with his wife!)

But there is also Mary (v6), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v12) and Persida (v12).

Rufus' mother – has been a mother to me, Paul says.

There is Julia and Nereus's sister (you can almost imagine Paul saying to Tertius,

“Oh, come on! What is Nereus's sister's name?! Fine, just say ‘and his sister!’”

But Paul says that several of these women – Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persida
have “worked hard for you,” or “have worked hard in the Lord.”

Unfortunately, “worked hard” does not really capture the idea here.

It would be better to say:

“Who grew weary in the Lord” for Tryphaena and Tryphosa

And the adjective “much” is added for Mary (v6) and Persida (v12).

The idea is not just that they “worked” – but that they grew fatigued –

they poured themselves out in the service of Christ and his church.

What is interesting is that all four of those who are said to have “grown weary” are women.

The church in Rome was not a huge church yet.

There appear to have been a handful of congregations –

at least one met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (v5).

But the total number of Christians in Rome at this time is probably in the hundreds.

And these four women Tryphaena and Tryphosa,

and especially Mary and Persida,

have labored faithfully – wearing themselves out in Christ's service.

Today we would call it “burnout” and we would tell them that they need a “break.”

A year and a half ago I was “wearing out.”

I wondered if I was reaching burn-out.

And then the folks in Hillsdale asked me to help them with planting a church in Hillsdale.

And then Mid-America asked me to teach Patristic and Medieval Church History.

It may seem odd that taking on additional burdens would be rejuvenating –
but that is because the reason for “burnout” is not that we are overworked,
but rather that we have lost our focus.

Paul certainly believed in times of refreshment and renewal
(that’s one reason why he wants to come to Rome).
But if the power within us is the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13),
then it is nothing less than the resurrection power of our Lord Jesus Christ
that gives us strength to wear ourselves out in his service –
knowing that his strength is a never-ending source of power!

And so as we talk about my taking a sabbatical next year,
I don’t want you to think of it as the pastor “taking a break.”
Rather, it is an opportunity for me to continue to labor in another setting.

John the Little would sit in front of the church at Scetis on weekends
so that the monks could talk with him about their thoughts, temptations, etc.
from the week.

One young monk was worried that he spoke to him too often.

He replied,

Go, light a lamp.

He did so.

Bring in some more lamps, and light them from the first one.

Then he asked if the first lamp had dimmed.

No.

So it is with John.

Even if all of Scetis came to see me,

they would not separate me from the love of Christ.

When I start to feel “burned out” it is because I have lost my focus –
not because I have too much work to do!

[And by the way, it is that focus on Christ and his kingdom
that gives us wisdom to know what I should do and what I should get rid of!]

In the modern world we don't like to work hard.

I recognize that I am lazy.

I just barely get by with the work that I need to do,

and then focus my energies on pleasing myself.

Why is this?

Well, it all goes back to worship.

What matters most to me?

I would rather indulge myself than love and serve God –
or love and serve others.

Do I worship the living God, or is my God my stomach? (v18)
(a word Paul uses to refer to all sorts of human appetites)

I sometimes hear people express concern about how we are not well-connected –
how we do not have a well-organized pattern of working together.
Perhaps that is (in part) because we do not have a well-organized pattern of praying together.
And since prayer is rooted in the Word of God as our response to what God has said,
we can also see that the solution is rooted in our worship of God.
But our problem is that we gather once a week and then go our separate ways.
How do we express our unity in Christ during the week?
How do we "work hard in the Lord"
How do we "wear ourselves out" for one another during the week?

I do not believe that everyone needs to come to everything.
But if you are currently spending considerable time watching TV,
playing computer games,
or doing other things that are not especially "working hard in the Lord,"
then perhaps you should remember that Christ calls you to love and serve him –
and to love and serve one another –
and to stop pleasing yourself!

Do you want to be better connected?
Do you want to improve our life of service to one another and to those around us?
Do you want to see our congregation grow in love for God and one another?
Then work hard in the Lord – wear yourself out for one another!
How?

- 1) Come Sunday evening (we are going through the Lord's Prayer) – after all, worship is at the *heart* of everything else we do!
- 2) Come to Sunday School (the adults are finishing the Judges study and will be moving on to the Paul and Ted Tripp series on parenting; the youth class on church history is also open to adults)
- 3) Come to Shepherding Groups (Wednesday night and Sunday night) -- we are engaged in a discipleship study focused on how the basic teaching of the scriptures sets forth the pattern for life, utilizing the structure of the Westminster Shorter Catechism
- 4) Come to the Ladies' Bible Study (alternate Tuesday nights) -- they are currently in a study on Paul Tripp's Quest for More
- 5) Come to the Men's Breakfast (4th Saturday morning) -- followed by a reading group on Calvin's Institutes
- 6) Come to Pastor in the Pub (Thursdays, 2-6) -- open office hours at Fiddlers' Hearth

If your schedule does not permit any of these,
then talk to people about finding a time that is good for you.

We have a handful of things that we do regularly
to provide opportunities for promoting “life together.”
But there is no reason to feel limited by “official church programs”!

If you feel like you do not know people well enough, then invite them over to your house –
either for a meal, or for a home-improvement project, or a canning party,
or to spend a few hours reading and discussing the scriptures together.
Or for that matter, ask the deacons how you can help with a service project in the community!

But make sure that all of these activities are centered around the Word of God.
If there is a topic that you are thinking about –
say to some people, “I’m wondering about how to live out my faith better,
would you be interested in having dinner Tuesday night
and discussing Romans 12 in more detail?”

Paul concludes his greetings by commanding the church to greet one another with a holy kiss.
In Paul’s day this would mean men kissing men and women kissing women.
I think the “holy handshake” loses something in translation.
There is a distance, a reserve, found in a handshake
that perhaps is connected to the distance and reserve
that we so often experience in our relationships with each other.

(Just so you are warned, I will greet all of the men with a holy kiss after the service.
If you do not wish to get so close, then do not exit by the center aisle!)

And then he says that all the churches of Christ greet you.
This is an important point and should not be overlooked.
There is a bond between all churches of Christ.
And that bond should be expressed in how we speak to one another.

All of this is why Paul says in verse 20,
“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”

What do I mean?

2. Watch Out for Those Who Cause Divisions (16:17-23)

Paul says in verse 17:

*I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles
contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.*

*For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites,
and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. (v17-18)*

Be careful – beware of false teachers who make plausible claims,
but who teach contrary to the apostolic teaching.
Mormons sound good, they live exemplary lives, and they are devoted to their faith.
But they do not serve our Lord Christ.

Paul says that they do this by smooth talk and flattery.
The latter word is actually the word “blessing” (eulogia).
They speak blessings – they speak “plausible words” (chrestologia),
but they do not teach the apostolic doctrine.
False teachers can appear as angels of light.
But Paul says that if they teach contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught
(by which he means, the apostolic teaching),
then they are not serving Christ.

In verse 19 he adds:

*For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you,
but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.*

And because you are faithful to the apostolic teaching –
because you live as the body of Christ, the people of God,
laying down your lives for one another, wearing yourselves out in the Lord,
therefore, Paul says:

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. (v20)

The roots of this go all the way back to Genesis 3,
when God promised that the seed of the woman
would crush the head of the serpent.

In Psalm 91, the Psalmist speaks of the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
that God would deliver him from the snare of the fowler.

This is the Psalm that Satan had quoted to Jesus.

Satan, that serpent whose head was to be crushed,
quoted verse 11:

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

But that is not the end:

*On their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. (12-13)*

I wonder if Jesus smiled at the insolence of Satan –

quoting the very Psalm that spoke of what Christ would do!

Jesus is the singer of Psalm 91.

He is the one who crushed the head of the serpent in his resurrection from the dead.

So why then does Paul say that God is going to crush the Satan under our feet?

In Luke 10:19 Jesus says to the 72,

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

*Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions,
and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.*

You see, the reason why we had to spend so much time on the greetings –
the reason why we had to spend so much time on the life of the body –
is because you need to see that the power of the resurrection –
(the Holy Spirit – the power of the Age to Come) –
is at work to accomplish in the church what God has already done in Jesus.

It is not as though we can *add* to what Jesus has done.

Rather, what Jesus has done is now being accomplished in us.

The resurrection life of Jesus, the power of the age to come,
is now at work in you.

Think about it:

Jesus suffered on the cross –
we are called to take up our cross and follow him.

Jesus died to sin –
we are called to put to death the deeds of the body.

Jesus was raised from the dead –
and the same Spirit that raised him from the dead,
will give life to our mortal bodies!

Jesus crushed the head of the serpent –
and God will crush Satan under your feet as well.

I know that some of you get a little frustrated with me
because I don't spend a whole lot of time on "how do I live the Christian life?"

Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles
didn't seem to think that the details of living the Christian life were all that important.

They thought that understanding who God is,
what he has done in history,
how all of this points us to Christ
and the power of the age to come that has been poured out in the Holy Spirit –

this is what you need to understand!

Because when you grasp this –
or perhaps better, when this *grabs you* –
and the stunning glory of our Lord Jesus overwhelms you –
then you will wear yourself out in his service,
and yet never be exhausted!
You will burn brightly as stars in the sky –
that illumine the darkness, and yet do not burn out!

Because when you see Jesus, everything else falls into place!
If you are struggling with how to live the Christian life,
then start by seeking Christ!

Paul concludes with words of greeting from his colleagues:
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. (v21-23)

There is clear archeological evidence that Erastus was the city treasurer of Ephesus –
which helps us determine where Paul was writing from.
Paul is writing from Ephesus
(or perhaps from Miletus after meeting with the Ephesian elders – in Acts 20).

3. And Remember the Point (16:25-27)

Paul's concluding benediction summarizes the whole point of the epistle to the Romans:
To God be the glory *through Jesus*.
And particularly the God *who is able to strengthen you* –
the God who alone is wise.
Wisdom and strength come from him.
If you try this on your own, well, you are weak and foolish!
But he is strong and wise –
and because he is wise, he is able to strengthen you.

How?

According to my gospel
(what is the gospel? The good news of the resurrection of Jesus)
and *the preaching of Jesus Christ* (who *he* is, what *he* has done)
according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages...
(what is this mystery?)
it is the mystery of how the Gentiles are included in the people of God)
...but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings

has been made known to all nations.

And all of this *according to the command of the eternal God,*
what command?

To bring about the obedience of faith.

This is where we started.

This is where we end.

Paul's purpose –
the purpose of his ministry –
is to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles –
to make disciples of the nations.

It is to take this odd mish-mash of misfits,
these cast-offs of both Jew and Gentile,
and bring them to the obedience of faith,
so that they might believe God's promises
and act accordingly.

Because in the gospel – in the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus –
the power of God, the power of the age to come, has come to you in the Holy Spirit.

To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!
Amen.