

## God Prepares You For His Coming 4) With His Gospel

Romans 16:25-27 • 2020-12-20 • Advent Series: God Prepares You for His Coming



I've been reading a book series with my children. It has a rabbit princess who has a special tonic which she shares with injured soldiers. Her tonic has the almost magical power to heal and strengthen them. It reminds me of another book series we read in which there is a special bread called lembas which the travelers received from some elves. A few morsels gave them strength for a whole day's journey. People are always interested in finding the perfect health and strength food. Energy bars and drinks seem to be growing in popularity each year. Trail hikers like to talk about what special products they eat in order to hike through day after day. Wouldn't it be nice to have some special tonic or some lembas to give us needed strength for tough times?

We do have a source of amazing strength available. And it's not from a story princess, from fantasy novel elves, or from some fancy shelf product. It is from our God. What does he offer to give us the strength that we need for life and for upholding our faith? The apostle Paul opens and closes his letter to the Roman Christians by mentioning our source of power and strength. It is what our God uses to create and strengthen our faith and to enable us to boldly live as followers of Christ until he returns. Today we'll look at the source of our strength in the closing words of the letter to the Romans. And we'll finish our series, "God prepares us for his coming" as we look at one more way in which he prepares us. With his gospel he strengthens.

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome closes with the longest listing of names in all of the New Testament letters. There are people Paul wants to greet and people he wants the church in Rome to support and welcome. There are people like Phoebe who served the church and helped Paul. She likely carried his letter for him. People like Aquia and Pricilla who risked their lives to help Paul. There were women like Mary and many other women who worked hard for the Christians in Rome. There were men like Rufus and his mother who had been like a mother to Paul. And then there were men who held Christian gatherings in their homes. Many of the names include Jews, but many include Gentile (non-Jew) names. Some of Paul's relatives are mentioned and even a high official in the city of Rome is mentioned. The Christians in Rome were a diverse group of people, men and women from all walks of life and all backgrounds. The point is clear for us: the gospel has reached a lot of people and the church is diverse.

But the teachings of the church are not supposed to be diverse! So, after mentioning the many names to greet and welcome Paul urges them to also, "*watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teachings you have learned.*" (Ro 16:17) There is a struggle for those who have faith in Jesus. Paul reminded them, "*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*" (Ro 16:20) But until Christ returned they needed to continue to remain strong in faith. "*I want you to continue to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.*" (Ro 16:19)

Still today the Church is remarkably diverse. There are Christians not just in Rome but in every part of the world. Men and women from all different cultures meet together in homes and larger buildings. Day after day, billions of Christian greetings happen around the world. You don't just find Christmas songs here. They will be sung all around the world by countless believers this Christmas. We rejoice in such a diverse church!

But like the Christians in ancient Rome, we know that the diversity of people in the Church should not bring diversity in teachings. Not every song sung at Christmas time is good. Not every sermon preached at Christmas time is going to build up people in faith in Jesus. Persecution, immorality, and false teachings were a problem in every early church and they still are today. We know that the God of peace will come and forever crush Satan. But so often it gets hard to remain wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil. It is hard for every Christian to continue to avoid every teacher who teaches what is contrary to what we have learned. The diversity of cultures and people in the church is celebrated. And that is good. But when the diversity in teaching is celebrated it weakens the church. House churches are good. But when every house begins to teach something different that is always bad.

How can believers around the world be prepared for Christ's coming when so many are wandering down so many different paths of teaching? The church becomes splintered and weak. Satan knows he can crush the faith of any Christian who is weak. All he has to do is get them to separate from Christ a little bit by a little bit of false teachings. He knows he can weaken the bond of faith as there are less and less greetings because of false teachings. He knows that the faith of believers can become watered down and weak. What he offers believers isn't strengthening food, it is quick and easy junk food that tastes good at first but brings sickness and weakness to all to try to live on it.

Paul's letter was written to the various house churches and believes in Rome in order to bring them strength. He wanted them to be united in truth and to work together to support the truth. Paul wanted to visit them and strengthen them and be strengthened by them. Don't you want that from fellow believers today? How does God strengthen us? It's not with a special rabbit-princess tonic or elven bread. It's not with a product that promises a day's worth of energy. He strengthens us with something far more powerful. It is something which creates and strengthens believers and empowers them to carry on until Christ's return. He strengthens us with the gospel.

Paul's letter closes with a reminder of the source of our strength: "*Now to him who is able to strengthen you— according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.*" God strengthens us with the gospel. Paul started out this letter by saying "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation." (Ro 1:16)

The gospel is centered on the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Do you want to find strength for faith and for bold Christian living? You can't find it in merely fancy decorated trees and impressive or trendy church architecture. You won't be strengthened by merely hearing an old familiar style of music or a moving modern arrangement of a tune. Strengthening in faith can't come by merely having yourself surrounded by smiling faces or feeling the preacher is witty and worldly-wise. Strengthening in faith can only come by the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The power of the gospel is the message of God's Son, Jesus.

If the church architecture points to Jesus and helps you to see him as the center it has power. The message of Christ empowers the believer to remain strong in faith and witness boldly. If the music made for worship points to Jesus as the Savior of the world and not mere human love, it is powerful music. It allows the singer to endure the hardest times, like when Paul and Silas sang in prison at midnight. We are strengthened when we sing the gospel at any hour. You can sing, "I love you God" all day but it won't increase your love for God. But if you sing, "He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all," the love of God found in the gospel will strengthen you. You can cry out "Here I am to worship," but it will not make you strong for worship. But if you sing with the angels, "Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled," you will be strengthened. With the gospel in song, you have good news centered on Jesus that is powerful to create faith and sustain a believer through all things. You can be surrounded by Christian smiles and a preacher with a great smile. But that congregation and that preacher must join with John the Baptist in saying, "Jesus must be greater, I lesser. I am not worthy to even be at his feet." You won't find power from God until his Son is the focus of your preaching.

Paul says that the proclamation of Jesus Christ was *veiled in silence for long ages past*. The world long sat in darkness and without the light of God. The many nations and cultures around the world had tossed aside the truth and the only source of true strength. They discarded God's heavenly food for strength for the strength of this world. They chased after the power of this world and the tonic and bread of this world and lost the light given first at creation.

But all of that changed when God revealed his gospel in the prophecy of Scripture. Light came to a dark world as the gift of a Savior was proclaimed throughout the ages. The people of Israel bore the promise that a king would be born who would bring us true peace and lasting joy. The prophecies in Scripture spoke of the coming of the Messiah, that is the Christ. This good news was revealed to Israel. The gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes -first for the Jews, then for the non-Jews. God didn't choose a rabbit princess with a magic tonic or some elves with special bread. He chose for us to turn to the prophets in Israel for the strength from his gospel.

All those promises hinged on that night when the gospel was shared by angels to some shepherds in their fields. The angels came to strengthen some shepherds who had been longing for a Savior from sin. Imagine how much strength of boldness and joy they had after they heard the gospel, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today a Savior was born for you. He is Christ, the Lord!" After those heavenly beings shared the message, they hurried off to find him and ran off to spread the news.

Can you see the strength given to Philip, Andrew, Peter, and John when they first heard the news about the man, Jesus? They learned that he is the Son of God long prophesied to come and rule on David's throne and bring everlasting peace to all the earth. And he fed them with the gospel. Along with the saints before them who walked through fire and water, they had strength and boldness to walk on water and face the fires of persecution.

God's people need strength as we wait for him to complete his plan for us. On that dark night that Jesus died it might have seemed like Satan crushed the promised Savior. He had been crucified and was placed in the tomb. But this was all part of the good news. The long-prophesied Savior had died for the sins of the world. He fulfilled Scripture by taking our place. The curse of sin was taken off of us and placed on him while he suffered on the cross.

Then when he came alive again, Jesus commanded that the good news be preached to every nation. This resulted in the good news creating faith in the hearts of people all around the world. Paul's plan was to come to Rome and then strengthen them. From there he planned to head out to the ends of the continent to Spain. God gave them all strength by the power of the gospel. God strengthens you with his gospel. And his gospel comes to feed and strengthen believers all around the world. He gives us his heavenly tonic and heavenly bread as he says, "Take. Eat... and drink. This is my body given for you. This is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." We receive his gospel in word and sacrament, and we are strengthened.

In his wisdom and wonderful workings, God has prepared you for his coming. He now sends you and me with this gospel to prepare more hearts and strengthen the fearful with the good news of peace in Jesus. The world is weak and lost. And Satan foolishly seeks to spread and divide believers. But God has a wise plan. His plan is to strengthen you through his gospel. And with it you will offer strength to many more. It is the power of God this Christmas and into eternity. ---to God, who alone is wise, be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen.