

Chapter 15

In this chapter I round off the argument I set out in chapter 14 and then go on to celebrate a key theme of the letter – the way that, through King Jesus, God has kept his ancient promises. He told the founders of Israel that the Gentiles would become part of the people of God, and he repeated that promise in the psalms and the prophets. After that I say something about my own ministry and my plans for the next stage of my mission.

Verses 1–7 **Welcome one another**

This is one of the places where the chapter divisions in your Bibles break up the flow of an argument. These verses are the conclusion to the argument about the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’. It’s an appeal to both sides that they follow the example of King Jesus and welcome one another. As you will see if you read on, the discussion about the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ blurs into a comment about Jews and non-Jews. This is a strong clue that these different divisions are related to one another.

1. Those of us who are theologically in the ‘strong’ camp have a responsibility to the ‘weak’ and should not simply please ourselves. It is an important principle of community building that everyone should consider what impact their behaviour will have on others.
2. This explains the same basic point. If we behave in ways that help other members of the community, we will build them up. This will help to strengthen the community and keep it united. In the communities of Jesus-followers we should always try to help others in their journey of faith and avoid doing things that hinder their progress.
3. The essential reason for behaving in the way I suggest is that it reflects the example given to us by King Jesus. He didn’t go round pleasing himself, did he? No, he lived and died for the sake of others. In the community, we all belong to Jesus and that’s why I can use the text from Psalm 69. The suffering one who speaks in the Psalm is clearly King Jesus. Understood this way the scripture suggests that when those who follow Jesus have a go at one another, we are really having a go at him.
4. With a 21st-century approach to history, you might think that it’s a bit of a stretch to interpret the Psalm in that way. One of my principles for understanding the scriptures is that, though it was written in the past and can still be understood as addressing the circumstances of its time, it is a living word that speaks to us in our own time. It’s worth remembering that everything in the scriptures is there to instruct us. We have to endure a great deal, and the scriptures are a gift from God to encourage us and give us hope.
5. This is my prayer for the Jesus-followers in Rome. Since God has, through King Jesus, endured so much for us in staying faithful to his own promises, and since this gives us such encouragement, they all – ‘weak’ and ‘strong’, Jew and non-Jew – ought to live together peacefully. The unity of God demands the unity of God’s people.
6. The outcome of this would be that they would give glory to God who is the Father of our Lord, King Jesus. And they would do this together, or as I put it, with one voice. That’s the vision! A community

made up of people of different kinds all united and working together because of their allegiance to the same king. This is part of Life as God intended.

7. And this is where I sum up the argument. The goal is the glory of God which is, as we have seen, one of the outcomes of people living true Life. This is the purpose for which King Jesus has welcomed each of the people and groups in Rome. Their response, in the light of this, should be to welcome one another.

When this section of the letter began at the start of what is now called chapter 12, one of the first things I did was talk about the church using the illustration of the human body. That idea is there in the background of the argument about the 'weak' and the 'strong' and the need for different groups to welcome one another. What sort of human body would it be if different parts of it refused to accept one another or cooperate with one another? God's people should be united.

Verses 8–13 Celebrating God's promise-keeping

In this section I give a brief summary of the mission of King Jesus and then quote several scriptures that are intended to celebrate the fact that God is keeping his ancient promises so that non-Jewish peoples are joining Jewish people in the renewed one people of God.

8. In some ways this verse is a link to the previous section. It offers a theological defence of the argument. I'm telling the Jesus-followers in Rome exactly why they should all do as I say. It's worth noticing that at this point I slip out my practice of speaking of the 'weak' and the 'strong' and instead talk about Jews and non-Jews.

This is the defence; King Jesus came to serve the Jewish people, that is, the circumcised, the nation that possessed the Instruction, with two related purposes. The first reason was to show that God is true to his word and was confirming the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the founders of Israel.

9. The second reason was the outcome of those promises – the non-Jewish peoples of the world are being welcomed into the people of God and are therefore giving glory to God because of the mercy he has shown to them. In other words, I am emphasising the point that I've been making throughout the letter. God's action in Jesus is for both Jews and non-Jews. It is about God keeping his promises and enabling people from every nation on earth to become a part of the one people of God and to experience Life.

At this point I introduce a string of texts that all make the same basic point and demonstrate that the scriptures anticipate that God will do what he is now doing. The texts come from the prophets and the psalms, and they all show people from all over the world can belong to God. As far as I am concerned, all these texts promise that God will be faithful to his ancient promises and anticipate their fulfilment through the ministry of King Jesus. The first text is from the psalms and insists that God will be confessed among the non-Jewish nations of the world. If God has overcome the key division between Jew and non-Jew, there can surely be no divisions within the people of God.

10. This text is from the Instruction. Some see the Instruction as the foundation of the idea of a distinction between Jews and non-Jews. But, as I've been arguing in much of this letter, it's not as simple as that. Here the Instruction itself is summoning the non-Jewish nations to rejoice alongside Israel.

11. This text is from another Psalm in which the non-Jewish nations are summoned to offer praise to God.

12. The last of the texts is about King Jesus. It's Isaiah's promise that God's true king will rule the whole world and that the non-Jewish nations will put their hope in him.

13. And I rounded off this section of the letter, with its very particular advice to the Jesus-followers in Rome, with a short prayer. Looking back, it looks a bit like a false ending to the letter but in fact it, like the doxology at the end of chapter 11, marks a change of subject.

The main argument of my letter is now at an end. The rest is mostly personal news and greetings. I have spelled out how God has, through King Jesus, stayed true to his original purposes for creation. God consistently promised that he would do this. I have made it clear what this means for the Jews, the historical people of God, and the part they play in God's purposes. I have discussed the true purpose of the Instruction and have shown the ways in which it has been bypassed and the ways in which it remains relevant. I have explained how those who follow King Jesus should live and have addressed a major issue in the Roman communities. In closing I have made it clear that everything I have said conforms to the great themes of scripture.

Verses 14-33 Offering encouragement and sharing plans

Now, I go on to offer some words of encouragement to the followers of King Jesus in Rome and to talk a little about my own circumstances and plans.

14. I've made the main points that I wanted to. I'm moving to a conclusion now and there's a slight change in tone as I move from criticising and making suggestions, to reassuring. Hence the comments in this verse. In part, I'm preparing the ground for hinting at the things I want them to do for me.

15. In the previous verse I acknowledge that the Jesus-followers in Rome are able to teach one another. I suppose some might say that in that case there's no justification for sending them a letter full of teaching. I recognise that some might think I need to offer a defence for this, especially as some of the views I have expressed have been rather, shall we say, forthright. Therefore, I hint at my apostolic calling as grounds for the implicit authority I've claimed.

16. Here, I spell out the commission I've been given by King Jesus and talk about it in terms of priestly service. Mostly, I use language borrowed from the prophets to describe my sense of calling but here I put it in priestly terms. I make it clear that I see the non-Jewish people who are being gathered to God as a kind of offering. I am anxious that others see this offering as an acceptable one. In my mind it is linked to, perhaps represented by, the financial offering the non-Jewish churches have gathered for the Jerusalem church to distribute. You could say that the acceptance of that financial offering by the Jerusalem church will symbolise their acceptance of the believers in the churches I have been hard at

work getting planted. I want to get that acceptance established before I move on to the next stage of my mission. In the back of my mind there is a nagging doubt that the offering won't be accepted. Not because James won't want to take it. He could certainly make good use of the money. But because there will be pressure from non-Christian Jews (and some of the Christian ones too, I fear) to avoid being seen to be too close to non-Jews and hence undermining the national project of getting God to keep his promises through the Instruction. You can see the irony.

17. Okay, I admit it. I'm really pleased with all that my team and I have accomplished as King Jesus has enabled us. I feel like a significant stage of my mission has been accomplished.

18. And, in truth, nothing else is worth mentioning. King Jesus has used me to get the non-Jewish nations – or representative groups from among them – to obey God, to live in the way that God originally intended.

19. God's used all kinds of things to enable this to happen; words and actions and signs and wonders, all done in the power of God's Spirit with the result that the team and I have planted churches in the whole of the north-east quadrant of the land around the Mediterranean Sea.

20. Having achieved that, it was time to move on to the next stage of the mission. At that time there were quite a few missionaries busy working in the area. It was my ambition to go somewhere to preach where nobody had yet, to the best of my knowledge, so much as heard of King Jesus. It's not my task to build on what others have started. There's nothing wrong with doing that, of course, but it's not my calling.

21. There's a text that speaks to me about this. It's from one of Isaiah's songs about King Jesus, the servant, that I refer to often. It suggests that the news about the servant will be spread among those who had never heard that they should expect such a person. I cannot get over the fact that God has commissioned me to be one of the means by which this astonishing prophecy is fulfilled.

22. I'd often wanted to go to Rome, but the demands of the mission always got in the way.

23. But the stage of work that had kept me busy up to this point was drawing to a close and so, since I'd always wanted to go to Rome, I intended to grab the opportunity.

24. I planned to come and stay a while on my way to Spain. And I hoped that the Jesus-followers in Rome would feel able to pray for me and support me on that journey.

25. However, before I headed for Rome and for Spain, I had to go to Jerusalem with the collection for the poor there.

26. The communities of Jesus-followers in other places were delighted to have an opportunity to contribute to helping the poor among the Jesus-followers in Jerusalem.

27. The non-Jewish Jesus-followers were grateful for the chance to make the contribution, and so they should have been. As I've tried to explain before, the non-Jewish believers have shared spiritual

blessings which have come to them from the Jews, and so, surely, they can respond by offering material blessings in return.

28. Once I'd returned to Jerusalem and delivered the collection, I was determined to go to Rome on my way to Spain.

29. And I was sure that, when I got to Rome, I'd be happy and be feeling blessed because all the things I was mentioning would have been dealt with and would be behind me. If you've read Luke's history of those days, you will know that I did get to Rome but not in the way I'd expected.

30. This is a plea for prayer that God would help me to get all these things done.

31. There were some influential people in Jerusalem who did not follow King Jesus and who I feared, with good reason as it turned out, would oppose me. As a result, it's possible that all the things I was offering to Jerusalem, both funds and the people those funds represent, would not be accepted.

32. Basically, I was saying 'I trust that all will go well and that I will come to see you with great joy and have a great time with you.'

33. Another blessing. This was a prayer to mark an end to this brief section of the letter.

It's been particularly strange to look back on this part of the letter. We made our plans so carefully. First Jerusalem, then Rome, then Spain. We had it all worked out. I suppose I should have known better! God had other ideas. I did get to go to Jerusalem. Things there didn't go according to plan and, as I'd been warned would happen, I ended up getting arrested. I never regretted the decision to go. Firstly, I was keeping a promise to the apostles there. And secondly, I was following in the footsteps of King Jesus. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem but went there anyway. I felt I should do the same. He died and was resurrected there. I, however, was taken to Rome as a prisoner. So, I did get to Rome as I'd hoped, but not in anything like the way I'd planned. Jesus was condemned by the emperor's representative Pilate. I was able to offer my defence, and speak about King Jesus, before the emperor himself.