

As many of you know, I have an undergraduate degree in English Literature. And throughout my life, I have always thought of myself as an above average writer. I enjoy writing. I take a certain pride in my writing (hopefully not to a sinful degree). And I understand the effort it takes to accurately communicate something in writing with good grammar and vocabulary.

Which is why St Paul can be absolutely infuriating to me. Because there are times when his grammar is just awful. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it isn't the true, inspired Word of God. It is, absolutely. But that doesn't change the fact that it is a grammatical nightmare.

If you have ever read one of Paul's letters and it has given you a headache, you are not alone. If you have ever read a paragraph from Paul's Epistles and thought, "That's not even English," you are probably correct. It wasn't proper grammar in Greek when Paul wrote it, and it's not proper grammar when it's translated into English either. It's OK to feel that way.

Our Epistle Lesson for today is one such example. 3 verses. 77 words. Mashed together into one, giant, run-on sentence. A sentence that has 8 dependent clauses, but no main verb. It is a mess.

However, there is a method to this madness (sort of). Paul may have handed us a grammatically horrendous sentence. But he's given us some decent clues as to how it should be organized and where his main thoughts lie.

Because, buried at the core of these verses is a very simple statement. One with which we are actually quite familiar: "To God be glory." That's it. 77 words and a complex maze of interconnecting clauses, but that's really the point of the whole passage. To God be glory.

But why? Why do we give God glory? What are we giving him glory for? What has God done for us that is worthy of glory? That is the meat of this passage. And that's what we need to unpack.

So, let's start by expanding our core statement a bit. And we'll find that there are two reasons why God receives glory: *"Now to him who is able to strengthen you... [and] to the only wise God be glory forevermore!"*

Why do we glorify God forevermore? Because he is able to strengthen us and because he is the only wise God. We glorify God for who he is and what he has done. He is the only God and he is infinitely wise, therefore we glorify him. And he has used that wisdom and power to strengthen us, therefore we glorify him. These things are the glory of God and we are right to recognize them.

But there's still more. Particularly regarding the strength that God gives. Because while that's a very true statement, it's also a pretty vague one. OK, so God is able to strengthen us... but how? How does he go about strengthening us? In what ways are we strengthened?

Well, that's what the middle of this passage is all about. It's divided into three points. And, helpfully, Paul has actually made it fairly easy to identify each of those points because they each start with the phrase "according to." "According to my gospel...", "according to the revelation...", and "according to the command..."

So, first, God is able to strengthen us according to Paul's gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ. Now, of course, Paul isn't trying to lay exclusive claim on the Gospel message. He's not saying that it is "my gospel" because he invented it or he owns it.

Rather, it is the gospel that he has shared with them. Which he has spent this entire letter sharing with them, in fact. These are the last verses of the Book of Romans. He has spent the last 16 chapters sharing with them his gospel. This is his "good news," as opposed to any other source of "good new" that they might turn to in this world.

And what is that Gospel? It's the preaching of Jesus Christ. There are many good things in the Bible to learn and to preach. But only the preaching of Jesus Christ is what will strengthen us.

We have proof of that strengthening in our Gospel lesson today. Here we have Mary, an ordinary young woman engaged to an ordinary man named Joseph, going about her ordinary life in Nazareth. When the angel Gabriel appears.

And Mary is troubled by what the angel tells her. She is terrified by what he is saying. She questions everything. But then the angel tells her, “The child to be born [to you] will be called holy – the Son of God.”

And with that, she is strengthened. Her faith is strengthened. Her nerves are strengthened. Her resolve is strengthened. “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord,” she responds, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Gabriel tells her that the Son of God is coming to earth and nothing is impossible with him. Gabriel preaches Jesus Christ to her. And Mary is strengthened. Just as we are.

So we are able to be strengthened according to the preaching of Jesus Christ. We are also able to be strengthened “*according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed.*”

What is that mystery? Well, it's the mystery of the incarnation. The mystery of God's plan of salvation. The mystery of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. The mystery of his second coming.

A mystery that was sitting in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament all along. And yet, no one saw it coming. The Pharisees who knew the prophetic writings better than anyone else couldn't see the fulfillment of God's plan even though it was staring them right in the face. It was only after the resurrection that Jesus' disciples realized how he had fulfilled all of scripture.

And now, in Paul's day and ours, those prophetic writings have ceased to be a mystery. They have become a revelation. A way to make Jesus known to all nations. A way to make disciples of all nations.

“*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light,*” Isaiah tells us, “*For to us a child is born. To us a Son is given.*” That passage was a mystery to those who first heard it. But it is a revelation to those who read it now.

For we have seen the light of God born in Bethlehem. We have worshipped the newborn king, born in a stable. And seeing the plan of God unfold, seeing that promise of God fulfilled, has strengthened us as disciples.

Which leads us to our last point. God is able to strengthen us “*according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.*” Now, I want to focus on that last phrase there: the obedience of faith. Because it's an expression that is easy to misunderstand. Partly because it's a phrase that just isn't easy to translate into English.

In Greek, the word for “obedience” used there isn't about what you do. It's about what you hear. This is the obedience of a soldier paying attention to his commander's orders and responding, “Yes, sir.” He's heard the instructions, understood them, and responded to them.

God has spoken to us. He has commanded faith into our hearts. Faith in His Son. Faith in His Word. Faith in His Gospel message. He commanded this faith into our hearts and we have responded, “Yes, sir! Your Son is real. Your Word is true. Your Gospel is our salvation.” Because of God's command, we have the obedience of faith. The response to God's command that only faith can have.

This is the glory of the only wise God: To strengthen us through the preaching of Jesus Christ. To strengthen us through the revelation of Jesus throughout God's Word. And to strengthen us through faith that he has commanded into our hearts, that we may respond in faith.

Respond by glorifying him. For all that he is. For all that he has done for us. For all that we anticipate during this Advent season. And for all that we celebrate on Christmas morning. Amen.