

## THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

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*Lesson 20 - Romans 15:30-16:27*

### **Romans 15:30-33**

These next verses form the last paragraph in the doctrinal part of Paul's letter. In verse 30, he appeals to the Roman Christians to pray for him in earnest. They are united in the person of Jesus and in the indwelling presence of the Spirit. Paul draws strength in the realization that others are remembering him in prayer.

In verse 31, Paul specifies his concerns. He knows that word of his activities in the east has reached the religious leaders in Jerusalem. In each city he visits he must contend with the opposition of the "unbelievers" from Judea. Paul is familiar with the Suffering Servant poems from Isaiah. He knows that Jesus is the unique servant of God but Paul is also aware that Jesus' followers will also suffer because of their faith in him.

For some reason Paul is also concerned about how the gift from the Gentile Churches will be received in Jerusalem. He does not tell us why he is concerned. There is the possibility that pride may prevent the Christians in Jerusalem from accepting the gift. They may see the Gentile Churches as trying to impress them with their material wealth. But other than the word of concern in this verse, we have no evidence to point to the belief that the donation was not accepted in anything but humble gratitude.

At the end of verse 31, Paul refers to the Christians in Jerusalem as "the saints." He uses this term seven times in this letter. He is not using this word in the same way we do today in reference to canonized saints but there is a well-founded similarity. Paul believes that anyone who is baptized is already sharing divine life and this is what qualifies a person as one of "the saints."

The final verses, 32 and 33, reveal Paul's belief that it is God's will that he should go to Rome. He prays that the God of peace may bless the Romans and fill them with the joy that comes from being united in the Lord.

### **Romans 16:1-5**

We now begin the last chapter of Romans. In this commentary, we briefly address the question of whether chapter 16 is part of the original letter. Some commentators hold that this chapter was added much later. They say this because they doubt that Paul would know so many people in a community he has never visited.

Another reason why this question is raised is that some of the ancient manuscripts do not include this chapter. Are we able to resolve this question? If we are looking for certitude then we would have to say, "No, we cannot resolve it." But we can look at the evidence and see which side has the greater support.

Recall that Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome around the year 49 A.D. He did this because of the controversy over the one named "Chrestus." Many of the Jewish Christians went to Greece and Turkey, the same area where Paul was proclaiming the gospel. When Claudius died in 54 A.D., these same Jewish Christians returned to Rome. Paul had met many of them during his missionary journeys and now, as he is writing his letter in 58 A.D., it is very likely that he is addressing these same people. Paul is sincere in his desire to greet them but he is also aware that these personal friends can add credence to his letter. They can verify that Paul is a person of faith and the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul begins his personal greetings with a word of recommendation for a prominent woman named Phoebe. He says in verse 1 that she is "a deacon from the church at Cenchreae." Cenchreae is the eastern port for the city of Corinth, the city from which Paul is sending his letter. It is very likely that Phoebe is the one who carries his letter to Rome.

There has been much discussion over the title "deacon" which is given to Phoebe. Was she a "deacon" in sacred orders as we understand the term today? There are some commentators who say she is. Their contention is that this is evidence of ordained deaconesses in the early Church. But the major evidence does not support this view. At the time of the writing of Paul's letter, the term "deacon" was used in a more generic sense to mean anyone who helped in *the* local community. The word "deacon" means "one who serves." Although this text cannot be used to support the view that the early Church had ordained deaconesses, there is no doubt that women fulfilled a major role in the growth of the Church and the proclamation of the gospel.

In verse 2, Paul continues his testimony for Phoebe and praises her in a manner few other people receive. He encourages the Romans to welcome her, as saints should be willing to welcome anyone who comes in the name of the Lord. Paul is identifying the Roman Christians with the same title he gives to the Christians in the mother Church in Jerusalem; he calls them "saints." (15:26) He asks them to assist her in whatever she needs as she continues to work for the good of the Church. Paul does not specify how she has been a benefactor to others and to him, but the likelihood that she is the one bringing his letter to Rome is itself a sign of her prominence in the faith.

In verse 3, Paul speaks of two of his closest friends, the couple Prisca and Aquila. Prisca is sometimes called Priscilla, which is a diminutive form of her name. In Acts 18:1-4, Luke tells us that Paul first met them in Corinth.

They had been expelled from Rome by Claudius. Prisca and Aquila, who are already Christians, begin to work with Paul in proclaiming the gospel. Luke tells us that Paul stayed with them and worked with them in their common trade of making tent cloth.

From other parts of Acts and from other Pauline letters we know of some of the activities of Prisca and Aquila. They accompanied Paul when he left Corinth and traveled to Ephesus during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18). While in Ephesus, they welcomed Apollos into their home and deepened his understanding of the faith (Acts 18:24-26). When Paul returned to Ephesus during his third missionary journey, he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. He mentions that Prisca and Aquila have opened their home as a gathering place for Christians (1 Corinthians 16:19). They moved back to Rome and were living there when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. In the last scriptural reference of Prisca and Aquila, we find them back in Ephesus. Paul greets them with warmth and friendship (2 Timothy 4:19).

In verse 4, Paul says that they risked their lives for him. He does not describe the incident but it may have to do with the riot of the silversmiths in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41). He speaks of his thanks to them and he says that the churches of the Gentiles should also be thankful. The implication is that they saved Paul's life, and if he had died, the gospel would not have reached the communities Paul established.

What remarkable people they are. Again in verse 5, Paul says that they have opened their home as a gathering place for those of the faith. In these early days there were no church buildings. The Christians gathered in homes to celebrate the Eucharist and share their common faith. In the last part of verse 5, Paul sends his greetings to Epaenetus who is the "first convert in Asia for Christ." Paul is probably thinking in terms of the analogy he uses in 11:16, "If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy." This first convert is a sign that all of Asia (meaning western Turkey) is now dedicated to God and will eventually come to faith.

The individuals Paul will mention in the final verses tell us at least two things about the early Church: first, there was a great deal of movement within the empire, for Paul greets around twenty-five people in a community he has never visited; second, the Christian faith is beginning to show its effect on the structure of society. Some of the people mentioned are servants in the royal court and others are of the nobility. The Church is truly letting go of differences and becoming the body of Christ.

In these final verses, we find the following three segments: first, personal greetings to numerous individuals; second, a caution against those who disrupt the Church; and third, praise of God for all he has accomplished.

## Romans 16:6-16

There are twenty-three people mentioned by name in these verses. We have little knowledge of most of them except for their names. What we do know is that they are active members of the Roman Christian community. A few of the individuals have names which are found in other parts of the scripture and so there is room to speculate as to whether these are the same people. Paul met many people during his missionary journeys. It is quite likely that some of them found their way to Rome.

In verse 6, Paul greets a woman named Mary "who has worked very hard among you." Mary is one of five women Paul recognizes for selfless service to the Church. Some of Paul's writings do show that he is a product of his culture (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16), but for his times, Paul is advanced in his respect for women. He knows that his ministry has been assisted by the courage of numerous women of faith. Women were also the ones who remained faithful to Jesus during his passion and crucifixion. They carried the first message of the resurrection to the apostles the morning of Easter Sunday. Many women have lived and died in service of the gospel.

In verse 7, Paul greets Andronicus and Junia. Although Paul's letters are written in Greek, he often retains the Latin form of certain names. A name which ends in "us" is usually masculine and a name which ends in "a" is usually feminine. There are exceptions to this rule. But commentators are not certain whether "Junia" is a man or woman, because ancient texts differ from each other. Some of the texts have "Junias" with an "s" which would indicate a masculine name. Other texts have "Junia," a feminine name. If Junia is a woman, then Andronicus and Junia could be husband and wife. Paul says that they are "prominent among the apostles," which means that they were given the mission of proclaiming the gospel to new communities. Since they are "in Christ" before Paul, it is possible that they are eyewitnesses of Jesus.

A prominent commentator, William Barclay, tells us that in the catacombs of Domatilla in Rome, there is a tomb with the name "Ampliatus." Most slaves had only one name, while people of nobility usually had three names. We do not know if this is the same person Paul greets in verse 8, but it is interesting to think that someone considered a slave by society could be considered a brother in the Lord.

Urbanus and Stachys are mentioned in verse 9. The only information we have is that they were co-workers with Paul and that he holds them in great affection.

The name Aristobulus in verse 10 is a well-known name. Herod the Great (73-4 B.C.) had a grandson with this name who lived in Rome and was a close friend of Emperor Claudius. The custom in Rome was that the slaves of a particular family were considered to be part of the "household" of that family.

Upon the death of Aristobulus, it is possible that his slaves entered into the household of the emperor. This could be the meaning of Paul's final greeting in Philippians 4:22, "All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household."

In verse 11, Paul refers to Herodion as his relative. In the context of this letter, this does not necessarily mean a blood relative. The term "relative" is used as a sign of affection and deep respect. "Herodion" is a Semitic name, so it is possible that Paul is making reference to their common Jewish ancestry.

Tryphaena and Tryphosa are women, and because of the similarity of their names some commentators say that they were probably twin sisters. They are recognized in verse 12 as hard workers for the Lord. This is another example of Paul's respect for women and their dedication to the gospel.

We are only speculating here but the possibilities are fascinating. In verse 13, Paul greets a man named Rufus. This is a common name in Rome. When Mark wrote his gospel, he was writing for Gentile and very likely for the Gentiles in Rome. In his account of the crucifixion of Jesus, he says that a certain man was forced to help Jesus carry his cross. This man was "Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21). Now, it is unusual that a man should be identified by his sons, unless his sons are better known in the community which is being addressed. Could it be that this Rufus is the son of the man who helped Jesus carry his cross? Could Simon and his entire family have been drawn to Jesus because of that experience near Jerusalem the day Jesus died?

Verses 14 and 15 contain nine individual names and references to other members of the Roman community. Paul speaks of them as "the saints" for they all share divine life through baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul concludes his personal greetings in verse 16. He says that they should "greet one another with a holy kiss." This is the gesture which is used at liturgical celebrations. It is similar to the sign of peace at our Eucharist. Paul also speaks for all the Churches of the east as he sends their affection and respect. Paul prays that the entire Church may be united in the Lord.

#### **Romans 16:17-24**

In this final teaching section of Paul's letter, he warns the Roman Christians to watch out for those who cause dissension in the Church. He is probably referring to those Jewish Christians who still hold onto some form of the Mosaic Law. Numerous times in Paul's ministry he has to defend the foundational truth that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ not through works of the law. This same issue is at the heart of the rebuke Paul gives to Peter in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14). At the end of verse 17, Paul says that the Romans should avoid anyone who tries to contradict the teaching they have received.

In verse 18, Paul continues to describe these opponents as people who do not serve the Lord. He says that they are only interested in their own appetites. This could be a reference to the problem of eating which Paul addresses in chapters 14 and 15. Paul's attitude in these two chapters is conciliatory toward most of those who are weak in faith, but there is the possibility that some of those weak in faith may have been strong in confrontation. Paul is willing to sacrifice for others, but he is not willing to let the truth be trampled.

At the end of verse 18, Paul warns the Romans not to be taken in by the "smooth talk and flattery." This is a valid warning in every age of Christianity. When someone claims to be giving the word of God, the message must always be examined in the light of the consistent teaching of the Church found in the scriptures and tradition. There is a good example of this form of discernment in Acts 17:10-11. When Paul and Silas reach Berea, they proclaim the gospel in the Jewish synagogue. Luke says that these Jews listened to what Paul said and then "examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so." Through the guidance of the Spirit they came to believe.

In verse 19, Paul reiterates that the faith and wisdom of the Roman community is well known. This is a source of joy for Paul and an example for all people. He encourages them to be wise so that they can recognize what is good. Whatever is good has its origin in God. The gift of wisdom helps people of faith to discern what is from God. Paul prays that they be "guileless in what is evil." He uses a word which means "pure." He wants the Romans to be free from anything which would weaken their Christian faith.

Throughout his letter, Paul is encouraging the Roman community to be at peace. In verse 20, he says that the "God of peace" will soon crush Satan. Paul wants to bring his readers into this act of God's victory by saying to them that God will "crush Satan under your feet." Satan, the personification of all evil, is the cause of dissension and alienation in the world. Although the battle is still being fought, the victory is already assured by the death/resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul concludes this verse by wishing them the "grace" of Jesus Christ. Grace is God's life. To share God's life is the privilege of all God's people; to share it fully is the promise of heaven.

Verses 21, 22 and 23 contain greetings from those who are in Corinth with Paul. Timothy is an extraordinary young man in the early Church. Luke tells us that Paul met Timothy in Lystra while on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy accompanied Paul and became a trusted emissary when Paul needed to communicate with local Churches (Philippians 2:19-20). Paul also wrote two letters to Timothy while Timothy was in Ephesus. He encourages Timothy to be a strong leader and witness in the Church, and Paul encourages the people to be united with their local leader.

The names of the other three people Paul mentions in verse 21 are found in other parts of the New Testament, but whether they are the same individuals we do not know.

In Acts 13:1; Lucius of Cyrene is one of the members of the Church at Antioch who prayed over Paul and Barnabas before their first missionary journey. A man named Jason is found in Acts 17:5-9. He and a few others were mistreated in Thessalonica when the mob was searching for Paul. And Sosipater (a variation of "Sopater") is mentioned in Acts 20:4 as one who accompanied Paul as the collection is taken to Jerusalem. Paul refers to these men as "my relatives", meaning very dear friends and fellow Jewish Christians.

Verse 22 is interesting in that it contains the greeting of the one who writes the letter as Paul dictates it. Tertius sends his greeting to the Roman Christians. There is some evidence in the scripture that Paul may have had poor eyesight. In Galatians 4:15, he says that at one point they loved him so much that they "would have torn out (their) your eyes and given them to me." Is this an analogy or is Paul referring to his physical disability? We do not know for certain. But at the end of Galatians Paul writes in his own hand and says, "See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!" (6:11) This would also indicate a problem with his eyes and therefore the reason for a stenographer.

In verse 23, Paul mentions a man named Gaius. This is probably the same Gaius Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14) and the one who was Paul's travel companion during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29). Gaius is now back in Corinth with Paul and he has made his home available to the Christian community. The other two men are identified as Erastus, the city treasurer, and Quartus, the one Paul refers to as "our brother." Paul has touched the lives of many people. These are but a few with whom he shares the gift of faith in Rome.

Most translations of the bible do not have verse 24. The reason for this is that in the ancient manuscripts where this verse is included, it is a repetition of 16:20b. The opinion of most commentators is that this verse was added by a copyist sometime after the composition of the original letter.

#### **Romans 16:25-27**

The final three verses form a doxology, which is a hymn of praise to God. There are differing opinions among commentators as to whether Paul is the author of this final paragraph. Although the style of writing differs from the rest of the letter, the main themes of revelation and gospel faith are consistent with the rest of the letter.

In verse 25, Paul returns to a theme he introduces in the very beginning of his letter. He asks God to "strengthen" the Roman Christians through the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the same prayer/wish found in 1:11 as Paul expresses his desire to strengthen them through his visit and the proclamation of the gospel. This strength comes from God and from the revelation of the mystery which was foretold long ago. Paul describes this mystery in Ephesians 3:6. The mystery is that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and share in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Although the mystery was foretold, it was not understood. In verse 26, Paul says that now it is disclosed. A study of the prophetic writings shows that this has been God's plan and desire from the beginning of time. Paul says that God's plan calls for the salvation of all people. Everyone is urged to come to the recognition that Jesus is Lord through the "obedience of faith." This is the same phrase, "obedience of faith," which Paul uses in 1:5 to describe the purpose of his mission to the Gentiles.

In the final declaration of praise in verse 27, Paul proclaims the wisdom of God. The entire mystery of the plan of salvation has come to reality through Jesus who is the Wisdom of God. Through Jesus, glory is now given to God and this glory will continue forever.

Paul concludes his letter. He has written to a people whose faith is recognized by all the Christian communities. He has shared his faith with them and told them that he longs to visit them. He wants them to know of his love for Jesus Christ and the unity they share in Christ. This is also his message to us. Paul's word is alive today and is still a means of contact with Jesus. Some day we will meet Paul and together we will rejoice in the glory of God through Jesus Christ and in his Spirit.

**Final Notes:**

I hope this commentary has been a help to you. The fact that you have been willing to spend these months in study of God's word is a sign of your depth of faith and your love of Jesus Christ. The Lord will continue to reveal himself to you and he will draw you ever deeply into the abundance of his love. Always remember that the Lord loves you with infinite tenderness.

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