

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF ROMANS – PART SEVENTEEN

It would be easy to assume that by the end of chapter 15 our study in Romans is over. Why bother with a list of 35 names? Every time a Bible chapter contains a list of names, many of whom are totally unknown to us, it would be very tempting to skip over assuming it does not matter. The first reason that would be a mistake is because every one of those names represents someone important to God, as we also are. The people in this chapter were obviously important to Paul. Many of them would be the fruit of Paul's ministry in some other place who had found their way to Rome. Some were sending greetings as his fellow workers. There was clearly a deep bond between them.

Presumably Phoebe was the personal bearer of the letter before there was any mail, internet or texting. It may well be that Paul first met her and perhaps led her to Christ on his visit to Cenchrea in Acts 18:18. She could even have given him the haircut. What is certain is that she had been God's means of grace to many including Paul. He wanted her well cared for in an age when a woman travelling alone was at risk.(16:1,2)

Priscilla and Aquila had first welcomed Paul into their home in Corinth when they were refugees from persecution in Rome.(Acts 18:2) Both had come to Christ presumably because of what they saw in Paul's life. Paul and Aquila had worked together. When Paul left Corinth, they traveled with him as far as Ephesus where Paul planted them as 'secret agents' in an intensely heathen city to prepare for his return.(Acts 18:18) Their home in Ephesus had become a church.(I Cor.16:19) Later they returned to Rom.(16:3) By the time of Paul's final imprisonment in Rome they were back in Ephesus.(II Tim.4:19) They were a lovely, consistent example of the grace of God in hospitality. In the process they had 'risked their necks' for Paul's sake.(16:3-5)

Four of those Paul greeted, Epaphroditus, Ampliatus, Stachys, and Persis, were described simply as 'beloved'.(16:5,8,9,12) Paul does not tell us why these four were addressed in this way. He loved all his Christian brothers and sisters. Some people just need the encouragement of knowing how much they are loved by God and so by us. Grace causes us to recognize this and let them know. Andronicus and Junias are told they are 'outstanding'.(16:7) They had known the Lord even longer than Paul had, shared his imprisonment and were related to him. Others are 'approved', Apelles, or 'choice', Rufus.(16:10,13) It would have helped them to know they were valued, particularly in tough times.

The contribution of several to the work of the gospel was recognized - Mary, Urbanus, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis.(16:6,9,12) Notice how they were Paul's 'fellow workers' not his servants. Paul never regarded himself as the boss, only as a fellow worker with them for Jesus his boss. Grace does not control or compete. Again and again these friends are described as 'in Christ', those who had entered into the same grace at the cross and in the resurrection.

Apart from Priscilla and Aquila's 'church in their house' there were several families – Aristobulus' and,(16:10) Narcissus' households,(16:11) and two larger fellowship groups

led by Asyncritus,(16:14) and Philologus,(16:15). Whether and how they might all have met as one large group is unknown. What is clear is that the Christians of Rome were spread through many home churches who were the substance of the church of Jesus Christ in that city. In the home they worshipped, prayed, studied, and grew together as brothers and sisters in Christ who cared for each other practically. Their names indicate a cultural mixture; there were both men and women named and valued. Grace overcomes barriers of race and gender.

One family unit was especially intriguing, Rufus and his mother who had also been like a mother to Paul.(16:13) They might have been the remains of the family of Simon of Cyrene, described as the father of Rufus and Alexander.(Mk.15:21) Simon was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus but later became one of the leading teachers in Antioch where Paul and Barnabas worked for a year.(Acts 11:26; 13:1) Paul may have lived with this family during which time they and he saw the grace of Christ in action.

Paul longed for a loving oneness among all believers.(16:16) He gives a final warning about the greatest threat to the church of Jesus Christ anywhere, false teachers. Wrong teaching divides and distracts. In contrast to those 'weak in faith' whom they are to welcome,(14:1) false teachers are to be avoided. Their motives and methods are to be recognized because of the damage they do. But the good news is that so far the Roman Christians have remained faithful. He encourages them that Satan will be crushed by God, peacefully and graciously!(16:17-20)

Eight of those with Paul are included in his greeting to Rome. Timothy,(Acts 16:1) is another 'fellow worker'. Lucius,(Acts 13:1) Jason,(Acts 17:5) and Sosipater,(Acts 20:4) were also Paul's relatives. All had been part of Paul's journey at some stage. Tertius was the writer of the letter perhaps because of Paul's deteriorating eyesight.(Gal.6:11) Gaius had experienced drama as one of Paul's travelling companions.(Acts 19:29;20:4) Erastus had also traveled with Paul,(Acts 19:22; II Tim.4:20) but had an important government job in Corinth. Quartus was simply another brother in Christ.(16:21-23)

In case anyone had forgotten the message of this letter, Paul concludes with yet another reminder of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only way this message could work. He reminds his readers, then and ever, since of the exciting potential of preaching the gospel which is all about Jesus, Old and New Testament. Somehow for many generations the mystery of the message of 'Christ in you, the hope of glory',(Col.1:25-27) had escaped even Jewish people. This message can only be received and then obeyed by faith. The result will be strong people. But no-one deserves credit for the outcome except God Himself.(16:24-27)