

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS - PART SIXTEEN

From chapter 14 on Paul's great concern was that we should help those who are weak in their faith so that they become strong. In chapter 14 he showed us two ways which do not work - criticising their legalism by which they seek to protect themselves from the consequences of their weakness, and showing off our liberty from the law by living as we please, indifferent to the effect of our example on the weak, who may easily be led into a lifestyle which they are not strong enough to handle. Love for the weak is much more important than liberty. Love may lead us to abstain from certain behaviour for the sake of someone weaker in faith.

In chapter 15 Paul examines how we can help the weak. There are only two things which will help, bearing and building. Accepting someone who is weak does not mean we approve of their behaviour. It means that the person matters so much more than the behaviour. Jesus is the ultimate example of acceptance. On the cross He accepted us and the blame for our behaviour; He certainly did not approve. He bore us on the cross as we are. Surely we can do the same in His strength. We can have His mind that sees and loves the sinner not the sin.(15:1-6)

Paul draws on many Old Testament scriptures,(Ps.18:49; Deut.32:43; Ps.117:1; Isa.11:10) to make the same point; God always wanted Gentiles to hear of Him and come to trust Him. The Jews were meant to be His way of the Gentiles seeing and hearing of the love of God. The Gentiles were the weak as far as the Jews were concerned. The Jews wrote them off because of their weakness. God wanted to use the Jews to draw them in.(15:7-12)

The Lord wants to equip us now as Christians to draw in those who are weak because of their ignorance of God's grace. The picture Paul draws in the next few verses is not one of people who are mean-spirited and critical but who are overflowing with God's resources of hope, joy, peace, power, goodness and knowledge. Therefore we have so much to offer each other. Notice that admonishing, which means to 'put into the mind', is a two way process in which all of us have something to offer to one another. This would be the means by which they would build each other up from weakness to strength.(15:13,14)

He illustrates as so often before from his own experience. He was given the task of ministering to the weak, the Gentiles. There was only one way he could do that, by preaching the whole message of the gospel of Christ so that they had opportunity to believe. He preached the good news of grace, not rules. He was prepared to go anywhere, preferably where no-one else had been before because they would be the weakest. He realised that as he did, his life would speak as loudly as his words so he was careful not to be a stumbling block to the weak.(15:15-21)

Now he began again to look ahead to see what further opportunities there might be to help the weak. He shared his plans and his dreams. He wanted to come to Rome and was beginning to sense at long last that the opportunity was close at hand. First however he had a duty to perform. He wanted to deliver a gift from the Christians of Macedonia and Greece to those who were facing financial hardship in Jerusalem. Theirs was another kind of weakness which was also important. Beyond Rome he had dreams of somehow making it to Spain, a place the gospel had not yet reached. What he did not yet know was that in Jerusalem he would be arrested and that he would arrive in Rome, not as a visitor but as a prisoner. Whether Paul ever realised his dream of Spain we do not know. By whatever means, he knew he would reach Rome and that they would each be a means of blessing one another, of strengthening the weak.(15:22-29)

Paul wanted the Roman Christians to pray for him so that the whole plan would come about which would culminate in his visit to Rome. He knew that praying for him would mean that their hearts would be open both to receive his message and to encourage him personally. In prayer we recognise our weakness as well as someone else's need.(15:30-33)

The final chapter seems at first sight like just a list of names with which we need not bother. In fact it gives us a fascinating insight into the lives of 35 people who knew and lived Paul's message. It is therefore a series of very human illustrations of all that we have studied together translated into real life.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER SIXTEEN

16:1,2 Q.1 Phoebe was presumably the bearer of this letter to the Roman Christians. She was Paul's 'postie'. What was her ministry? How does her role illustrate chapter 15:1-6? When and how may Paul first have met her?(Acts 18:18)

16:3-5 Q.2 How had Prisca, also known as Priscilla, and Aquila become Christians? What had happened to them since?(Acts 18:18, 26; I Cor.16:19) How did their lives illustrate 15:1-6? What was the 'church in their house'?

16:6-12 Q.3 What are the key words that Paul uses here to describe the relationship of these Christians to Christ? Once again how do these descriptions illustrate 15:1-6?

16:13 Q.4 What else do we know about Rufus and his family?(Mark 15:21; Acts 13:1) How do they as a family illustrate 15:1-6?

16:5-15 Q.5 What can we assume from verses 5,10,11,14 and 15 about the structure of the church in Rome? How can we profit from their example?

16:3-16 Q.6 What can we learn from the list of names of the Roman Christians about the racial and cultural mixture of the church in Rome? What aspect of Paul's teaching would have helped to make this such a workable combination?

16:17-20 Q.7 What was the greatest threat to the continuing health and vitality of the church in Rome? How could they handle such threats?

16:21-24 Q.8 What do we know about the background and training of Paul's fellow workers? Why did Tertius write the letter? How could Gaius be 'host to the whole church'? How do Paul's friends illustrate chapter 15:1-6 in action?

16:25-27 Q.9 How does Paul's farewell sum up his conviction about how weak Christians become strong and the effect of this on the world in which we live?