

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 35, Chapter 15 continued

I want to begin today by giving you a thought-provoking tidbit of history about the Book of Romans that you need to carefully weigh. This information reveals something about the book itself but perhaps even more about the uneven history of the development of Christianity in general.

We are about halfway through our study of Romans chapter 15. However there is much scholarly controversy about the final two chapters of the Book of Romans. One of the controversies is whether or not chapters 15 and 16 were written by Paul and perhaps were added by someone at a much later date. Another is a contention that Paul indeed wrote the first 14 chapters of Romans as a general systematic theology of Christianity meant to be sent out to all the Believing congregations; only later did he revise it by adding chapters 15 and 16 before sending it to the congregation in Rome.

As one can easily imagine much of the reason for these controversies, and where a Bible scholar chooses to take his stand in his conclusions about them, centers around the particular doctrines he or she holds. The reality is that Romans chapters 15 and 16 put up to grave doubt some of the more common Church doctrines such as Paul not just converting to Christianity, but also leaving his Jewishness behind and essentially converting to a gentile. What better way to resolve that dispute than to simply declare chapters 15 and 16 as invalid or of questionable authorship, inspiration or value?

It is true that ancient Greek manuscripts of the Book of Romans are not identical; there are variations and differences, often depending on the region where they are found. Some of the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Romans do end at chapter 14. Others include chapter 15 but not 16, some slightly rearrange a few of the verses, and still others contain all 16 chapters. But what is it about chapter 15 or 16 (or both) that causes such heartburn for some Christian Bible commentators? Generally speaking it is because of the heavy concentration of Old Testament Scripture references that are used and Paul's declaration that it is these that he considers as the Holy Scriptures. Paul also strongly insists that it is the Father, the God of the Old Testament, that is to be glorified and The Son, the God of the New Testament, is subject to the Father. This line of thinking casts serious doubt upon the beliefs of that part of Christianity that insists upon a rigid Trinitarian doctrine that demands that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal "persons". That is, there is no authority structure or hierarchy among them, and there is no "person" of the three who is higher or preeminent over the other two. As I have mentioned before, while the modern Church is careful not to say out loud out that the God of the Old Testament is today therefore the old and former God and so largely irrelevant; and the old and former God has given way to Jesus, the new God of the New Testament, in fact some of the most widespread, fundamental Church doctrines operate upon that assumption. Paul's statements especially in chapter 15 blow holes in that Church tradition.

The early Church Father Origen has recorded for us the reason that the very early Greek manuscripts of the Book of Romans end at chapter 14: Marcion removed chapters 15 and 16. We've discussed Marcion before. He was a wealthy and powerful gentile shipping magnate who claimed Christianity in the mid 2nd century. He used his wealth to gain substantial influence in the Church. He was openly anti-Semitic, despised Jews, and so was greatly agitated by the heavy focus of the Old Testament on Israel and the Hebrews. It was he who first advocated that Christians should set aside the Holy Scriptures (the Old Testament) and create a Christian Bible to replace it. His suggestion for what would be contained in the new Christian Bible was the Gospel accounts, several of Paul's letters (some of which he personally edited), and a couple more documents. The Church Bishops were appalled at such a suggestion and branded him a heretic. However as the years passed and Christianity quickly morphed into a gentiles-only faith and much of the Church separated itself more and more from its Hebraic faith heritage, Marcion's concept of a new Christian Bible was resurrected and by around 200 – 220 A.D. a number of Church Bishops from various regions more or less followed Marcion's formula and the New Testament was created. Not surprisingly these Church Bishops incorporated some of the documents that Marcion had personally edited, and one of those was the Book of Romans. Marcion had edited out of Romans what we today call chapters 15 and 16 for the obvious reason that it exposed Paul's reverence for, and reliance in, the Old Testament as well confirming his staunch Jewishness. It would be many years later before other Church Bishops from other regions of the world who had older copies of Paul's letter to the Romans at their disposal began lobbying to restore the final two chapters. And so over the next many years various Churches added some elements of those 2 chapters, others added them fully but in edited form, and others accepted them in total as-is.

It shouldn't shock us for these various forms of the Book of Romans to exist. It is, after all, human beings with different agendas who were making the decisions about the final form of this document and others of the New Testament documents as well. I've mentioned before that the Book of Hebrews, for instance, has been included, then removed, re-included, and removed again from the New Testament over the centuries, and in the Western version of the New Testament Hebrews was only added back in again 200 years ago. Some like Marcion and others of his anti-Jewish ilk did all they could to wring any favorable Jewish flavor out of the New Testament and wanted it to be a gentile oriented work. But others had reasonable and pragmatic reasons for leaving certain sections of Romans out; for instance, chapter 16, which as we'll see next week was either an addendum or simply a non-theological ending to the letter that was mostly about certain people who were with Paul that knew many of the folks in the congregation of Rome and simply wanted to say "hello". So as Paul's long letter went into circulation after the Romans received it and released it for general consumption, and as paper was scarce and expensive, then it makes sense that what we call chapter 16 would be left out for all the other congregations to see because it was mostly personal and had no relevance to other congregations (to their way of thinking).

One more historical note that is especially pertinent to our study of Romans 15: Paul was probably in the Province of Achaia when he wrote this letter. He felt he had mostly completed his mission of evangelizing the east as a pioneer of the Gospel of Christ as he explained in verse 19 of Romans 15 that he had ventured all the way to Illyricum. As a result he was ready, now, to move his mission field towards the west to Italy and then from there to Spain. In fact a

case could be made that Paul was more or less preparing for his trip to Rome by sending the Roman congregation this letter in advance and informing them of his plans. I'll remind you that a few years later (4 years perhaps) he indeed did wind up in Rome but not in the manner in which he had hoped; he arrived as a prisoner who was going to plead his case before Caesar. The Book of Acts indicates that he met with several prominent Jews in the Roman Jewish community but there's nothing explicit that says that he had interaction with the congregation that he had sent his letter to. And as far as anyone knows, Rome is as far to the west as he ever journeyed; he never made it to Spain.

Let's re-read part of Romans chapter 15.

RE-READ ROMANS CHAPTER 15:17 – end

In verse 20 Paul makes it clear that he wanted to pioneer new areas for the Gospel and not attach himself to the work of others who came before him. This is further proof that Paul was not the only Believing Jewish evangelist of the Good News and more it shows that Paul was not the boss, so to speak, of any Believers or organization of Believers who undertook an evangelistic mission. What set Paul apart from the others was that he was an Apostle appointed directly by Christ and that gentiles were to be his primary mission field. It was simply pragmatism that led to Paul usually winding up at synagogues everywhere he went because there he would find some number of gentiles who had interest in the Jewish faith. It was much less of a leap for a gentile to trust in Messiah Yeshua from already having some knowledge of the Bible and to some degree identifying with the Jewish faith than it was for a pagan gentile who had no familiarity with the Scriptures. Paul had to begin by instructing them in the basic concept of sin and thus the need for a Savior. These were uniquely Jewish concepts for which pagans had no basis for understanding. This is what makes the rapid spread of Christianity among gentiles all the more astounding and downright miraculous.

So then in verse 22 Paul explains that the reason he has never been to Rome is because he was prevented from it by all the missionary work he was doing in pioneering new areas. Apparently even before Paul began his evangelistic efforts the congregation of Rome was already established. Just who established it we don't know. It is interesting that Paul sees himself as a sort of Johnny Appleseed of planting Believing congregations. He has no illusions that his purpose is to start a congregation, stay and grow it, and behave as we think of a Pastor. Paul's purpose was not to be a long-term shepherd or caretaker over a particular group of Believers. In fact, I don't think Paul had the demeanor of a Pastor. Paul was all business; he was a scholar, a teacher and authoritarian. His goal was to spread the Gospel of Christ as far as possible to as many as possible as quickly as possible. So Paul devised a strategy; he went around establishing Believing congregations by wandering into a town where there was a Jewish community where he would usually be welcome. Next he would convince some number of Jews and gentiles that Yeshua was the Jewish Messiah, he would select a leader, help the leader to set up an organization, establish someplace for the Believers to meet, and all during this time instruct the leadership in proper doctrine. Once accomplished, he moved on. He kept track of the various groups he created through letters; and through these letters he reproved them, commended them, and taught them.

In verse 24 Paul announces that he intends to go to Spain. Does this mean that as far as Paul knows the Gospel has not yet been preached there? I don't know; but I rather think so considering what he just said. However Paul will take a route to Spain that necessarily has him going through Italy. In Italy he'll go to Rome and spend time with the Roman congregation. Whether by road or by sea Rome isn't really a natural stop on the way to Spain; he would have to make a significant detour. By explaining to the Roman congregation that his ultimate destination was Spain, they would immediately understand that his coming to Rome required some extra time and effort on his part. But we must also understand that in Paul's day Spain was seen as one of the furthest places on earth that a person could travel (at least it seemed that way from a Middle Easterners perspective); it could take as much as a full year to get there.

In the first chapter of the Book of Acts we read this:

Acts 1:8 CJB ⁸ *But you will receive power when the Ruach HaKodesh comes upon you; you will be my witnesses both in Yerushalayim and in all Y'hudah and Shomron, indeed to the ends of the earth!"*

So in a sense, by going to Spain Paul would have been following Yeshua's instructions by evangelizing the west as representative of the "ends of the earth".

What was Paul's motive for stopping in Rome? After all, this was not a congregation that he had established and he didn't seem to personally know the leadership. No doubt it had something to do with the City of Rome being the hub of the known world and therefore also the religious power center of the known world. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint Rome was all important and since the city was so heavily populated likely it had a pretty large congregation of Believers (perhaps even more than one congregation). But Paul also made it clear that he hoped for help from the Believers in Rome to get him to Spain. Likely this help meant monetary help, perhaps even some of the members coming with him to Spain to help. No matter how he might get to Spain it was going to be a long, tiring and risky journey. So staying in Rome to rest for several weeks to recuperate would have been desirable even though it required a substantial detour.

He next explains that before he undertakes his trip to Spain, first he must go to Jerusalem; itself a long and challenging trip. He says he is going to be taking aid for God's people there. In other passages in others of his books he says that it is also to go to Jerusalem to fulfill the Torah commandment to make pilgrimage to the Temple for the occasion of the Biblical Festival of Shavuot.

When he mentions bring aid he is speaking of the collection of money he had been taking from the various congregations he was visiting on his missionary trips around the Mediterranean. To show you just how interconnected Paul's letters are and why we must always look to his other letters to other congregations to give us the fullest context for what he means by many of his challenging comments, we will read about this same collection of charity and Paul's trip to bring it to Jerusalem in a few different places in the New Testament. Just as a small sampling:

Acts 24:17-18 CJB

¹⁷ "After an absence of several years, I came to Yerushalayim to bring a charitable gift to my nation and to offer sacrifices. ¹⁸ It was in connection with the latter that they found me in the Temple. I had been ceremonially purified, I was not with a crowd, and I was not causing a disturbance.

Notice that Paul intended on making sacrifices at the Temple. Doesn't much sound like a man who has turned his back on the Torah or his Jewishness does it? It seems that Paul certainly doesn't think that Yeshua abolished the sacrificial system, even though most Christian commentators claim Paul teaches against it. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul also speaks of this same trip to Jerusalem from a little different perspective.

1Corinthians 16:1-8 CJB

CJB 1 Corinthians 16:1 Now, in regard to the collection being made for God's people: you are to do the same as I directed the congregations in Galatia to do. ² Every week, on Motza'ei-Shabbat, each of you should set some money aside, according to his resources, and save it up; so that when I come I won't have to do fundraising. ³ And when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the people you have approved, and I will send them to carry your gift to Yerushalayim.

⁴ If it seems appropriate that I go too, they will go along with me. ⁵ I will visit you after I have gone through Macedonia, for I am intending to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and I may stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me continue my travels wherever I may go. ⁷ For I don't want to see you now, when I am only passing through; because I am hoping to spend some time with you, if the Lord allows it. ⁸ But I will remain in Ephesus until Shavu'ot.....

Moving on to Romans 15:27, Paul tells the Roman Believers that while it was generous and kind of the various Believing congregations in the far-flung Diaspora to donate these funds for the poor Jewish Believers in Jerusalem, in fact what they did was closer to paying a debt than to giving charity. Apparently a great many gentiles had donated; so Paul notes that since the gentiles shared in the Jews' spiritual heritage, then it behooved the gentiles to pay back by helping the Jews in material matters. While the principle of sharing what we have with a brother in Christ is self-evident in this issue of taking aid to the Believers in Jerusalem, it also follows along with Paul highlighting the Biblical principle of "love your neighbor" that he has been preaching since Romans chapter 12. But in this same passage I also want to highlight that Paul makes the point that gentiles don't have our own separate spiritual heritage; by grace gentiles are allowed to share in what God gave to the Jews. It is the Jews' God-given spiritual heritage that gentiles can also enjoy through their trust in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ. This is another of those passages that drives a number of Christian scholars to want to find sufficient fault with Romans chapter 15 to disregard much, if not all, of the entire chapter as not having been written by Paul. This is because it clearly refutes the rather standard Christian doctrine of gentiles possessing a different and superior spiritual heritage than the Jews.

In verse 28 Paul says that once he has completed this task of collecting donations and bringing the aid to the brothers in Jerusalem he will then begin to focus on his intention of going to Spain and stopping in Rome on the way. But then Paul says something rather cryptic; he says that he knows when he comes to the brothers in Rome that it will be "with the full measure of the Messiah's blessings". Nice words; but what do they mean? What is the "full measure of the Messiah's blessings"? Let me tell you in advance that this is another of those statements in Romans 15 that many Bible commentators wish wasn't there because it has a direct connection to the Hebrew heritage of salvation. "The Messiah's blessings" that Paul speaks of are contained in the Father's promise to Abraham (the Abrahamic Covenant) that in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. In other words, Paul is saying that his coming to Rome, the pagan capital of the world, and his coming to be with Christ Believers in Rome consisting of both Jews and gentiles, is nothing less than the prophetic fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham 1800 years before Yeshua was born. Paul fleshes out what he means by "the full measure of the Messiah's blessings" in the Book of Galatians.

Galatians 3:13-16 CJB

¹³ The Messiah redeemed us from the curse pronounced in the Torah by becoming cursed on our behalf; for the Tanakh says, "Everyone who hangs from a stake comes under a curse." ¹⁴ Yeshua the Messiah did this so that in union with him the Gentiles might receive the blessing announced to Avraham, so that through trusting and being faithful, we might receive what was promised, namely, the Spirit. ¹⁵ Brothers, let me make an analogy from everyday life: when someone swears an oath, no one else can set it aside or add to it. ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Avraham and to his seed. It doesn't say, "and to seeds," as if to many; on the contrary, it speaks of one- "and to your seed"- and this "one" is the Messiah.

Paul then asks the Believers in Rome to join together in prayer for Paul about his upcoming trip to Jerusalem; he is expecting opposition the moment he enters Judea. Clearly Paul sees danger in his going to the Roman province of Judea because among the majority of Jews who don't believe in Yeshua are many (mainly the Zealots) who would harm Paul. This is a good time to remind you that while it is the common mantra among Christians that the danger that Paul was always in was because he believed in Jesus Christ that isn't really the case. Some new Messiah figure or another was always coming along that various groups of Jews believed in; it was hardly a new or rare phenomenon. Certainly that Paul thought Yeshua was divine offended the most pious, especially the Pharisees. But the reason that Paul was always facing the prospect of physical violence had to do with his befriending of gentiles.

Zealots were radical militant Jews who were itching for an armed rebellion against Rome; they wanted to fight for their freedom from Rome. And just as it always is for human beings, we tend to stereotype entire groups of people simply because someone who looks like them or bears the same affiliations might be seen as our enemy. The Zealots hated **all** gentiles because to their minds they represented Rome.....the oppressors of the Jews. Clearly all gentiles didn't oppress Jews. Besides that, the oppression was a political oppression and not a religious oppression. It is well documented that generally speaking the Roman government bent over backwards to stay clear of Jewish religious matters and accommodated Jewish beliefs

wherever possible. The Romans were known for being tolerant of all gods and religious systems provided they weren't advocating rebellion.

Therefore in the eyes of the Jewish Zealots Paul was seen as a political traitor to his people. It isn't that the treason was that he might have renounced his Jewishness and taken on a gentile identity (even though thousands upon thousands of Jews, especially in the Diaspora, had done that). Rather it is that he kept on staunchly identifying himself as a Jew at the same time he cavorted with the enemy: the gentiles. That, of course, was a purely political viewpoint. But from the religious perspective Paul was also offering unclean gentiles the opportunity to partake of sacred Jewish religious ideals....while remaining as gentiles. He would not have been in near as much danger, if any, had he agreed with the circumcision faction that in order to worship the Jewish Messiah a gentile had to convert and become a Jew by means of circumcision. Then Paul's association with gentiles would have been looked at more as a Jew evangelizing for Judaism and Jewishness; that is, Paul would have been seen as one who was working to convert gentiles to Jews.

Thus when Paul says in verse 31 that he wants the Believers in Rome to pray that the unbelievers in Jerusalem will find his "service" acceptable to them, he is speaking of Temple service; he is referring to the fact that one of the reasons he desires to go to Jerusalem is to sacrifice at the Temple. Paul is hoping that the unbelievers and the Zealots will see that he remains a good, loyal, Torah observant Jew. Sacrificing is something that James, the brother of Yeshua, had advised Paul to do some years earlier when he had come to Jerusalem for different reasons. He felt that doing so would go a long way to proving that Paul remained loyal to the Law of Moses, which was at the heart of being Jewish.

So, says Paul in verse 32, after he goes to Jerusalem and faces all that he fears he might, then he'll be ready to go to Rome and stay awhile to rest. Paul ends this long letter to the Believers in Rome rather typically with a blessing. This blessing is both a wish and a prayer. In calling God the God of peace (or better, in Hebrew, **shalom**), Paul is acknowledging that all well being, all blessing, comes from God.

Next week we will take up the final chapter of Romans and conclude our study of this perhaps the most influential of all of Paul's writings.