

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part one

Sunday, September 16th, 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2070

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IMPORTANT BACKGROUND MATERIAL: The *author* of the letter is Paul. It was written around **57 A.D.**, probably (though this is not certain) from **Corinth**, near the end of Paul's **third missionary journey**. The *reason* for the letter is Paul is planning to reach **Spain** with the Gospel and his two former bases for operation (**Antioch** and **Ephesus**) will prove less than useful. Paul needs the cooperation of the capital of the West - **Rome**.

Romans differs from all the other letters of the New Testament and it's important we take note of it. All the other letters were written as **responses** to churches and people and situations where the gospel has already been preached. Usually the writer was the one who had already been in that church. Some problem had come up and the apostle needed to correct or encourage as the need necessitated. But no apostle had yet been to Rome with the gospel. The letter wasn't a **response** to a known congregation or situation. No one had officially preached or taught a complete gospel message. This makes Romans unique. It functions as a complete, organized summation of the work of God in the Old and New covenants.

Paul had never been to Rome and had no hand in planting the church there. It was probably started by Roman believers upon their return from **Pentecost** - see **Acts 2:8-11** - **"And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? [9] Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, [11] both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."**

People, living in the power of the Spirit, proclaimed and fleshed out the greatness of God's work in Christ. That's how the gospel reached Rome.

Before we launch into the text itself we'll take one study on the forces launching this great letter:

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES:

- 1) **THE STRANGE BIRTH OF PAUL'S DESIRE TO REACH ROME - ACTS 19:18 - 20:1** - **"Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. [19] And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. [20] So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."**

Notice, the Word increased in influence, not merely by the **words** of these Christians, but by the way they so openly renounced a fortune in silver for their faith in Christ. Then as now people long to see the preciousness of Christ **demonstrated** in radical ways.

Pick up the text at **verse 21** - **"Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.' [22] And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. [23] About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. [24] For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. [25] These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, 'Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. [26] And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. [27] And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.'"**

Again, notice the manner of the spreading of the Gospel. It always manifests itself in a turning from other forms of religious devotion. The Gospel never makes friends with false religion. There is always **confrontation** and **separation**. The power of the Gospel is made visible in the way people switch allegiances. Thus, faithfulness in the face of persecution magnifies Christ and spreads the Word.

Acts 19:28 - 20:1- **"When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, 'Great is Artemis of the**

Ephesians!' [29] So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. [30] But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. [31] And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. [32] Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. [33] Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. [34] But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' [35] And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, 'Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? [36] Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. [37] For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. [38] If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. [39] But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. [40] For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.' [41] And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.... [20:1] After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia."

I wonder how many people would have interpreted the opposition to ministry in Ephesus as a sign that they had failed or they should quit. Paul had just finished close to three years of ministry in Ephesus. He was forced to leave because of an uproar caused by the silversmith's anger as the people began to forsake their idolatry. Notice Paul's desire to move west in **19:21**. That desire was fanned into action by the difficulties in Ephesus. We're encouraged not to quit just because the road becomes rough. It was through trial God pushed Paul further west, eventually to Rome.

- 2) **ACTS 20:2-3** - "When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. [3] There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia."

From Ephesus Paul went to **Greece** for about three months. While the city of Corinth isn't specifically sited there is evidence that Paul did, in fact, stay there:

- a) Paul tells us that he stayed in the house of **Gaius** (Romans 16:23), who was a convert from Corinth - **1 Corinthians 1:14** - "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius...."
- b) There is evidence that **Phoebe** may have been the deliverer of Paul's letter. She also was a member of the church at Corinth - **Romans 16:1-2** - "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, [2] that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well."

There's another lesson here. Months are now unfolding and passing. Possibly half a year or more has elapsed since we first have record of Paul's desire to reach Rome. Genuine calls from the Lord can stand the test of time. They are germinated in patience. This allows them to unfold in wisdom and maturity. God is rarely rash.

- 3) **Romans 15:20-24** - "...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, [21] but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.' [22] This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. [23] But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, [24] I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while."

What is your life's ambition? I say **ambition** rather than **goal** because ambition is the word Paul used. Besides this, a **goal** can be a mental thing, like a dream or a plan. But your **ambition** is what you actually live for - what you give yourself to. Probably a person can only have **one** controlling ambition. You can see how this drives Paul. And it figures prominently in his desire to come to Rome. But he wasn't just interested in Rome as a **place** or **destination**. Rome tied in with his life's ambition. He hadn't come to Rome yet because there were still people where he was who hadn't heard the gospel

of Christ.

But now that had changed. That's what he means in **verse 23** - **"But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions...."** Others are carrying on the work where Paul is. And there's a hunger in his heart to find the greatest need and fill it. That's what is taking Paul eventually to Rome.

- 4) **Romans 15:25-29** - **"At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. [26] For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. [27] They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. [28] When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. [29] I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ."**

Before Paul reaches Rome he wants to deliver the **collection** from the Macedonian churches to the poor in Jerusalem. This was in keeping with the admonition Paul received from the other apostles - **Galatians 2:9-10** - **".....and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. [10] Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."** Paul wanted to convey to these Christians at Rome that sharing with brothers and sisters in need was not something **optional**, but was to be seen as an **obligation** - **"....they owe it to them...."**(15:27).

- 5) **Romans 15:30-32, Acts 20:3, Acts 20:13-23**

Romans 15:30-32 - **"I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, [31] that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, [32] so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company."**

Acts 20:3 - **"There he [Paul] spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia."**

If all Paul wanted to do was tell the church at Rome that he wanted to come there, why did he write such a long, theological letter to them? Part of the answer to that question lies in these verses. **Paul wasn't totally certain that he would ever reach Rome.** This is why he called Christians to join him in **prayer** for his safe arrival. He sensed that his life was in great danger. But **he still recognized the central importance of Rome in the growth of the church.** If for some reason he didn't make it he still wanted the Gospel to be fully understood by these Christians in the central capital of Rome.

Next week we will get right into the text itself.