

Romans – Introduction and 1:1-17

Gracepoint – a Big family in a small House.

When we come to the Book of Romans – there’s certainly something central about the church being like home. (In fact – when you read Romans 16, you learn that the church in Rome was actually a collection of HOUSE churches).

And so what we’re going to do today is introduce the Book of Romans

Of all the books I have read, none has captured my mind like the book by Scot McKnight entitled, **Reading Romans Backwards**.

He suggests that to understand the book appropriately – if this book is going to practically apply to our lives – then we have to understand that it is based in history and not written in a vacuum.

So we need to understand to whom it was written.

And we see that in chapter 16 – where no less than **27** people are given in the form of a greeting. These are the friends of Paul. (Many men and women, a sizable group of women, husband and wives mentioned). And there are Jew and Gentiles names, and slave names there as well. So these are churches made up of a diverse group of people.

And so - the church in Rome would have looked a lot like our church. There would have been mature believers, new believers, people that aren’t believers yet – all kinds of colors and backgrounds and stories – it would have been a very diverse group of people.

That was the people in the house churches in Rome.

Phoebe – we’ll come back to her

(Notice the couple Priscilla and Aquilla (“Greet the church that meets in their home.”). This is where church took place – not in cathedrals and church buildings. That came a few hundred years later.

When you look at the chapter, you discern that there are no less than 5 house churches that are meeting in the city). Scholars estimate there were perhaps 100-200 Christians in the city.

One writer said, “We should not only think of households, but housefuls.”

But to understand the context, I want us to key in on Romans 16:1-2 as we read Romans backward.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me (Romans 16:1-2).

To us these few lines don’t seem like a lot – but Paul actually tells us here quite a lot about Phoebe.

First, her name – Phoebe comes from Greek mythology – which means she is likely a Gentile rather than a Jew.

He says she is “our sister,” that is she is a follower of Jesus Christ.

She’s from the church at Cenchrea – the port city of **Corinth** just a few miles distance from the city where Paul wrote the letter to the Romans.

MAP 1 – here is the city of Corinth. (Mitzi and I, along with the Johnsons, had the opportunity to visit ancient Corinth this summer, and it was amazing).

Corinth – sits in an isthmus between the mainland and an area to the west called the Peloponnese (AN isthmus is JUST A NARROW STRIP OF LAND)

Here's why that's important – sailors preferred not to go around the **Peloponnese Region - treacherous**

Instead they preferred to cut across the isthmus if they could.

And so – that's where we see the first Railroad. It was called the duolkous

Today – canal there – 4 miles long – 300 feet at the end of the Aegean Sea

Here's where the story intersects with our story:

Here again is Corinth on the Isthmus. THIS IS THE CITY FROM WHERE PAUL WROTE the Letter to the Romans

And just a few miles to the south, is a little city called Cenchrea. (Really a port city of Corinth). THIS IS PHOEBE'S HOMETOWN

We had the chance to visit both cities.

There is road between Cenchrea and Corinth – and it is that road that Phoebe would have traveled to meet Paul in Corinth, and then on to Rome.

Here's our tour guide – Aliko – telling us about the road that Phoebe would have traveled.

SO – in reading Romans backward – let's read about one of the people Paul mentions, and that is Phoebe:

16:1-2

Paul uses two important terms to speak about Phoebe – he calls her first a deacon

Deacon – a term that has generated a lot of discussion in the last 30-40 years.

Has been rendered with an array of English translations, from deaconess to minister to servant to helper.

But “servant” tends to downplay the true nature of her role. (you might imagine the reasons).

For Paul, the word is extremely significant, because he uses it for himself as a leader in 1-2 Corinthians, and he uses it of Jesus Christ in Romans 15.

So when Paul says that Phoebe is a deacon, he probably does not mean just that she helps out in the kitchen with casseroles (not that that's a problem).

He doesn't mean simply that she's a good Christian woman (which is how it's often glossed).

There's some quality of leadership at stake here.

That is reinforced and see that Paul also refers to Phoebe as a benefactor (or we might say patron) – in the sense we use it.

The Roman world was characterized by the patronage system – in which individuals who were further up the food chain made gifts to those who were further down in exchange for loyalty and honor.

And women were among the patrons (in fact, we read about a number of prominent women in scripture – those who had the ability to support early church leaders in their work).

Although we are accustomed to thinking of women in the Roman world as being excluded from politics and public life, there's a considerable body of evidence that what was the law and what we practiced didn't always coincide. (An ancient satirist by the name of Juvenal said, “The best path to social

advancement is through the favors of a wealthy old woman.” And he complains about the fact that women not only host dinner parties, but even have the audacity to talk about literature, and philosophy, and politics.

As a patron, Phoebe would have supported others in some very concrete ways.

Paul goes on to say that Phoebe has been “a benefactor of many, including me.”

His work with his own hands wasn’t enough to supply the needs of his missionary work, so she helped him – and others.

Her work as a patron would have included hosting gatherings in her home – but when we say that, we don’t mean she’s an early Christian predecessor of Martha Stewart – the “hostess with the mostess” who makes her home available with really cool potluck suppers.

The home was itself a much more public place than is typically the case in our Western world.

Householders received business associates in their homes, not in spaces set aside as offices.

So to say that women taught at home was not to segregate them (like we say Priscilla and Aquilla taught Apollos at home) – but that’s where the action was.

What’s likely is – Phoebe is a person of means (and that’s from the fact that she had the ability to travel to Rome).

Apparently she has her own money (if the money had been her husbands, Paul would have referred to him. That’s the way things were done).

At least some of the earliest Christians were people who put what they had – whether money or prestige – at the disposal

of the mission. (For example try running a stewardship campaign without a few Phoebe’s to help out).

In addition to calling Phoebe a deacon or a benefactor, Paul has instructions for the folks in Rome – “welcome her in the Lord.” Assist her!

This particular language is used of official envoys – and signals that she is to be received just as Paul himself would have been received. (Think “ambassador,” not “messenger girl.”)

We can safely say that Phoebe is Paul’s representative.

She goes to Rome in his place.

Now – many commentators believe Paul singles her out is because she is the one who bears the letter.

The only official, reliable mail service that existed in this period was used entirely for the purposes of the government. Private letter writers who were wealthy sent slaves. Others did the best they could – seeking a friend or acquaintance traveling to the destination of the letter.

(And if mail service around here continues as it is, we might soon be doing the same. I received a letter written from a church member back in May just last week).

So – Phoebe carries the letter.

Paul writes these lines by introducing her to the gathered faithful in Rome.

She has come to Rome and has brought the letter with her.

This letter, the one that stands first in Paul’s letters, changed the course of history – was delivered by a woman. (In fact, no letter has had more influence on humanity than the Book of Romans. Every Christian movement is anchored in Romans.

Augustine, Martin Luther, Calvin, John Wesley, Evangelicalism – are all rooted in Romans).

And so – consider this - if Phoebe is the carrier of the letter – then she was certainly engaged in discussing it in advance.

(I've never seen anybody say this, but to me it's the most obvious thing in the world – Paul didn't simply find somebody sitting in the third row and say, "Hey you – I heard you're making a trip to Rome – would you take my letter.")

This letter is very important to him – and given the importance he attaches to it, how likely is it that he would entrust it to someone who doesn't know, rather specifically, what he wants this letter to achieve?

There are many nominations as to why Romans was written, but the one thing we know – it was immensely important. Paul needed to secure a faithful hearing in Rome.

He wants their prayers for his upcoming mission to Jerusalem. He needs their support before he leaves for Spain. He would not have entrusted the letter to Phoebe without making sure that she understood its content and could represent it.

In fact – it's extremely likely that Paul and Phoebe discussed the letter at length before she took it.

Paul would have discussed this letter with Phoebe before she left for Rome.

AND – it is broadly agreed that Phoebe would have been the one to read the letter (that was the job of the courier – and it is her that Paul commends to the faithful). (So think of reading the letter from one house church to another, perhaps with many stops, starts, and Q&A's along the way).

That means she would have been the letter's first interpreter – because to read is to interpret, to make sense of something. (We know that from cable news). The way the Scripture is received – whether it accuses us or convicts us or offends us – has a lot to do with the way Scripture is read).

(And I say that, because one of our church members read Romans this week – Karen Guinn – and sent me a list of 80 questions that are asked in the Book of Romans. Can you imagine some discussion as she reads the letter? And would she not be armed with the ability to engage with the letter and deal with questions and answers?)

Why? Because most people didn't read, so they heard truth read.

So – that's Phoebe – the one who would have carried and shared the letter.

And so here is a key question (over which much ink has been spilled):

What is the book addressing? (And while there are many important themes in the book that are revealed – righteousness, sanctification, justification, justice, grace – I'm suggesting that the occasion of the letter was a conflict between what Paul calls "the strong and the weak.")

Here's the back story – in A.D. 49 the Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jewish Christians from Rome because of their infighting over Christ (whether Jesus was the Messiah).

And while they were gone, the Gentile believers rose to prominence in the churches – and they developed their own approach to following in the way of Christ – and they weren't into all the things the Jews were into – eating kosher foods, circumcising the children as the Mosaic law had taught.

So when the Jewish believers returned to Rome five years later once the exile was over, the Gentiles had come to dominate the churches – and it created quite a tension in the churches.

And Paul is concerned that believers are not dwelling together in unity – and he has terms for these two groups – the “weak” and the “strong.”

The weak being the Jewish Christians who insisted that Christians follow OT Law; the strong being the Gentiles who were living in their newfound freedom in Christ.

AND HERE WAS THE PROBLEM – as Christians, they couldn’t get along because each thought he was more righteous than the other. And it was a problem.

NOW – does that still happen today? **“You folks are too loose and unserious, and you guys are a bunch of judgmental prudes?”**

On our plane to Greece, our group flew economy. And between economy and first class – there was a curtain that was pulled.

And our seats were right in front of the curtain separating first class from economy.

And it was interesting, that when people had to go to the restroom, they would go forward to the curtain, and the flight attendants would say, “These restrooms are not for people of your economic class.”

And I’m just imagining what people on both sides are the curtain are thinking:

“Look at those people up there – do they think they’re need to go to the facilities are more important than mine? Look at those snobs.”

And I can imagine those in front of the curtain when someone sticks their head through the curtain saying, “Look at all that riff raff in the back. Use your own restroom!”

But here’s what I know – a judgement spirit can come from either side of the curtain.

So as we flew, Everyone stayed in their assigned area –they went to the appropriate restrooms “according to their class.”

UNTIL – a call came over the speaker – “There’s a lady in the middle of the plane who is having breathing problems – could any medical professionals come to the middle of the plane.”

And at once – the curtain was pulled back – and doctors and nurses from all over – one here, one there – went through the curtain to rescue the lady who struggled to breathe. And – they did!

What is Romans about? In Christ – the curtain has been pulled back. And that’s the message of Romans.

In Christ, there is no class – we are all sinners, we are all prone to bouts of sickness and sin – but in Christ – we are called to tear down the wall – and treat everyone with the same love and compassion Jesus had for you and for me.

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ but all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Romans 3:22-24

And so Paul is leading the early Christians to consider what it means to dwell with one another, to love each other, to respect each other in the Lord.

So that’s a little background.

Let’s look at Chapter 1:1-17

First – verses 1-7

Verse 1 - Paul says he is a “slave of God.”

Half of people in the Romans Empire was slaves (but not in the sense of American slavery).

Slavery in the Bible often occurred when a person contracted him or herself to someone for a period of time in order to pay off his debts.

Many ancient people chose to be slaves of a Roman citizen so that they might earn the right to become Roman Citizens.

Paul says, “I am a slave of Christ Jesus.” It was a choice he made. Why? Because he believed in the Gospel – the Good News of Salvation, and that every person on earth needed to hear it.

Paul understood that the Gospel was Good News for all people – whether Jew or Gentile.

And so Romans is very much about who will be Lord of your life.

Listen – there is no power – not the power of the Emperor, no system of government, no man made religion has the power to change your life like the power of the Gospel.

SO – as Christians, we can never forget where the power lies:

Someone shared this with me –



And so I got to know a Christians brother at one of our recovery centers this week. And as we studied the Bible Thursday night, he was just taking notes like crazy. He was so

interested, didn't want to miss a thing, said he's catching up on the Word of God that he had missed much of his life.

And he shared that while he served in prison, he spent much of his life as a Muslim man. I said, “tell me more of your story.” He said, “My religion was Islam, but I converted to Christianity and my life truly changed.”

I asked him, “What's the difference for you in the two religions? He said – IN ONE WORD – “JESUS!”

I said “Yes! The Good news of Christ is Joy and Hope and Peace.”

He said, “Man, in Islam, it ain't like that!”

Here's a man who now says, “I've become a slave to Christ!” Praise God!

Notice – Paul wraps up his greeting with these words – verse 7

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Next section – Paul's Longing to Visit Rome

8-13

Our staff was working through this section Tuesday, and Daniel said, “What I see in this is – Paul was a total giver!”

Notice what he says:

- I remember you in my prayer. When? At all times.
- I pray for an opening to come see you.
- I long to see you. Why? To impart a spiritual gift to you.

- I want to encourage you – I want us to be mutually encouraged.
- I want to see you and encourage you so that there will be a spiritual harvest among you.

If you want to know what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit, it's that.

Paul is just always concerned about others.

I was with my dad in the hospital two weeks ago, and dad was waiting on test results – and I was getting a little impatient – didn't say anything – but I was feeling it. And maybe the nurse sensed it, I don't know. And she said to my dad, "I want to thank you for being so patient."

She said, "everyone wants their procedures, their test results immediately, but it's hard to get people to see that there's 1000 people in this hospital, and only so many doctors and staff, AND FOR THE MOST PART, NOBODY THINKS ABOUT THE OTHER 999."

For Paul – life wasn't just about him. He was always focused on blessing someone else.

So we read

14-15

He uses the word "obligated." Some people are offended by that word – you should never feel "obligated."

He's obligated to Jews and Greeks, to smart people and not smart people, rich to poor – he says I feel obligated to everyone I meet to share the Gospel with them.

So – the Olympics are about to come to a close. But when the Opening Ceremonies kicked off, I struggled (did you)? Like most of you, I found part of the opening ceremonies to be

offensive and troubling. And my first reaction was, I was so bothered by that I just wouldn't watch the Olympics at all. And so I had to come to terms with that.

And in my Spirit I knew that reaction was wrong. Because here's the thing – we can stay offended at everything – but the world is the world.

SO when the world does what the world does best – that which is inappropriate and offensive – why are we surprised?

But here's what I know – continually being outraged at the world will never win the world.

The only way to change the world is by the power of the Gospel that we are OBLIGATED to share.

And so one athlete in particular confirmed that to me. Her name is Sydney Levrone.

(Maybe you watched her Thursday night, break her own world record in women's 400m hurdles). She just smoked everyone. And broke her own record for the 6th straight time.

But the most incredible thing about Sydney is not her athletic ability, it's her humility, her faith, her marriage. (And there was no in your face with her).

And some of you have sent me posts about Sydney this week – and she has a book out. And here's one of the things she says:

QUOTE

Sydney had nothing to do with the opening ceremonies – she's been training four years for this - but she had a lot to do with giving God praise.

And so here's the thing that occurred to me:

Instead of spending all our time protesting the ways of the world, we need to spend more of our time proclaiming Jesus to a broken world. Right?

Last part:

Verse 16-17 – KEY VERSE

I am not ashamed. What would that look like?

It might look like this – acting one way around one group of people (i.e. the folks at church), and a totally different way around another group of friends. (Listen, it's easy to not be ashamed of Jesus in worship or at a church fellowship – but what about at work when someone is throwing God's name around in vain?

Or when someone is being gossiped about? That's a test, isn't it?

So here's the challenge – will you stand in fear – will you gratify your flesh – or will you stand with the Gospel? In Christ, we are called to live holy lives. **YOU'RE NOT EXPERIENCING VICTORY BECAUSE YOU'RE LIVING LIKE YOU'RE ASHAMED OF HIM.**

Close with an example:

The Fiji Olympic team – each morning in the Olympic Village, gathers together to sing hymns to Jesus – right there in open spaces. And those reporting on it talk about how athletes come out of their rooms on their balconies just to listen.

My favorite part – this man – seems like a coach, one of their managers.

Don't you love that?

Say with me: Romans 1:16-17

Call to faith this week – stop playing games – get into the Word.

The church is here – you have to connect with it! Nobody can make you do that.

As we study – take a step forward. Read this week