

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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Chapter 24 -

THE HEART OF AN APOSTLE

Romans 15:14-21

We come now to the close of a long journey through Paul's epistle to the Christians at Rome. I realize that it would be possible to spend more than one chapter on these last verses, but explanations seem almost superfluous especially to the 16th chapter. It is as blessed to us in reading as in hearing, and so I want to urge you at your leisure to reflect on the 16th chapter of Romans to which we will point in some aspects.

As Paul closes his letter to Rome, he reveals the heart of a great Christian and apostle. We see into the life of this servant of JESUS CHRIST and we may discover some explanations for his greatness. He begins almost as if he were apologizing to the Christians at Rome for writing them at all. You remember he defends his own ministry later on by saying that the LORD led him to preach the Gospel where it had not been preached; that the LORD had led him to go where no one else had gone lest he build upon another man's foundation. But he is breaking this rule in writing to Rome. So he says to them in the 14th verse, **"And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another,"** or instruct one another. Let's spend a moment in this beautiful picture of apostolic Christianity. Here is a congregation so filled with goodness and the knowledge of GOD that they are qualified to instruct each other, to admonish each other.

We have come a long way since that day in Rome. It is now a one-way proposition. The congregation gathers in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, or Sunday evening, or Wednesday night, for an hour or so, expecting to be taught. Almost imperceptibly we have introduced into the church the idea that there is somebody who has unique authority to interpret the Scriptures; almost without realizing it we have established a spiritual hierarchy in fact, if not in theory. A pastor is very often aware of this.

I have given my own self since 1947 to a ministry of meeting in small groups, encouraging inductive Bible study; and one, of the biggest hurdles that I had to surmount was my presence as a "professional." Several things would happen. One, most of the people in the group were unwilling to express what they felt about a passage of Scripture or to ask a question because they felt they would be embarrassed by their ignorance; they would wait for the "authority" to speak. Another reaction, though men would participate in these small groups, their attitude was

tentative or apologetic and they would expect the pastor to have the final word as though to set the matter straight. Often a pastor feels that people will not allow him to come, sit quietly and be taught through others.

*****BBB NOTE: As the centuries have worn on and the world in general have fallen further and further away from absolute biblical authority - it IS necessary to be cautious about these so-called "inductive Bible studies" led by all. There was a time when the cults were not as nefarious as today, to the extent that they are quite easily able to blend in with the people of GOD and teach heresies. Oh, pastor, be very, very cautious about these home Bible studies and Ladies' Bible Fellowships. They could end up becoming a charismatic takeover of your church. It won't happen, however, as you maintain your authority over the quasi-ministries in your church*****

But here is the great apostle, author of more than half the New Testament, again and again in these closing remarks of Romans intimating this kind of a relationship with Christians; and I can say to you that there are pastors in the world today who languish for this kind of relationship with people. They do not want to be a professional class; they do not want to be insulated from the congregation.

We are going to hear more and more about church union, and one of the things that we are going to hear often in defense of church union, especially from those who believe in bishops, is this: "Who is to be pastor to the pastor?" The implication being that bishops have this role. Have you ever thought about that? Who is the pastor's pastor? Someone, with sentimental piety, suggests the pastor's pastor is the LORD. As you read the 16th chapter of Romans, you become aware of the fact that people ministered to Paul constantly. They were able to instruct one another.

In the past fifteen years when exposing myself to small groups for Bible study, I have received infinitely more than I have given; but there are pastors who are desperately lonely for just such a relationship. It may be partially their fault, but, you see, we have made it this kind of situation: the church member comes on Sunday morning to occupy a pew; he places his "subsidy" in the collection plate; and when it is all over, he goes home. He waits to be taught; week by week he returns to be taught.

In apostolic times every Christian was a teacher, not in a professional sense but in the sense of witness. It was not a one-way proposition, as though interpretation belonged exclusively to a special class. Pastors desperately need this reciprocation even more than they need criticism. How many homes have "left-over pastor" at dinner, following church? I wonder in how many homes the little children, whose minds are like delicate recording instruments, whose eyes and ears are taking in everything they hear around the dinner table, are getting a negative attitude toward pastors from the conversation of the adults around that table. I wonder how many children grow up feeling that going to church is a liability because they had to listen to the pastor criticized around the table? When they decide not to go to church, are they not often reflecting an attitude that was communicated by critical parents?

There is nothing in the Word of GOD, you see, that indicates that the pastor is superhuman or abnormal or somehow in unusual ways qualified to resist temptation and to be less human in his attitudes to life than the man in the pew. As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul indicates that he

was chosen because he was of all men least qualified along certain lines. He called himself the "**chief**" of sinners. He said he was "**less than the least of all saints.**"

One of the reasons there are not more men going into the pastorate, one of the reasons that men are leaving the pastorate for other professions is this terrible double-standard pressure placed upon pastors to be superhuman men; and the failure of the congregation to recognize that the work of the ministry has never been given by GOD to the pastor but belongs to the congregation and cannot be delegated. Good men have been broken by congregations who thought the pastor's job was to do the work of the ministry while they subsidized him by coming to church and putting money in the offering plate! We have come a long way from apostolic Christianity.

Now Paul says, "**And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another,**" but he says, "**I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind.**" There is a picture of the real teacher. Not one who keeps introducing new truth but one who is faithful in reminding the people of the truth they already know, to which they have already been exposed, and by which they are not yet living.

One youth official said that, so far as he knows, there is rarely a Jewish young person in the delinquent courts of California, and he attributes it to the patriarchal system. What was this system? The father was the head of the house, for one thing, and he was also the teacher. Not professionally, he only shared what he received, but what was the teaching method? The fathers burned into the minds and hearts of Jewish children the history of Israel.

They were never to forget the fact that GOD had brought them with a strong hand out of Egypt; they would never forget the Passover Lamb; they could never forget the opening of the Red Sea; they could never forget being kept in the wilderness for forty years; they would never forget crossing the Jordan River; they would never forget the battle of Jericho. These things were engraved on their memories.

Read the Psalms of the Old Testament and count the number of times the word "remember" or its equivalent is there! It is no longer considered progressive in our Sunday Schools to encourage children to memorize the Word of GOD. This is modern education. It is one of the explanations for Sunday School failure. The Word of GOD taught Israel to memorize; this is the way they learned. The Jews were not prolific writers. They read the Scriptures, memorized the Scriptures, and taught them to their children when they were sitting down and when they were rising up, when they were going and when they were coming. Thank GOD for Sunday Schools which have not become infected with modernism that no longer encourage the memorization of the Word of GOD. There is a very practical application of this in the passage under consideration.

It was Paul's familiarity with the Word of GOD that gave him direction for his life's ministry. He says that he was called to preach the Gospel where it had never before been preached, that he should not build upon another man's foundation. What is the basis of this peculiar ministry of the apostle's? He quotes from Isaiah 52:15. Before Paul was converted on the Road to Damascus he had probably memorized Isaiah 52:15. If he had not memorized it, he was very familiar with it, so that every time he approached this passage, as he was reading the Old Testament, he would be reminded of this verse.

Now I am sure that this is the way it happened: one day the Apostle Paul was out in the wilderness being taught firsthand from the LORD JESUS CHRIST; he was reflecting on Isaiah, chapter 52, and suddenly this verse held new meaning for him. Paul knew that he was being called by the LORD to go where others had not gone, to preach to those who had not heard.

This is the way GOD directs. If you are unfamiliar with the Word of GOD, how is He supposed to direct your life? If you have not hidden the Word of GOD away in your heart, how does the SPIRIT of GOD speak to you? You are never too old to hide GOD's Word in your heart. You won't have the facility of a younger person, but you ought to be doing it all the time. The reason that some of us are not being led by GOD, or feel we are not led, is simply because we are not exposing ourselves to one of the tools He uses to direct our lives. One of these tools is His written Word.

Beginning at the 22nd verse through the 23rd Paul discusses his future plans. He says now because he was called to this kind of ministry, he has been hindered in coming to Rome, much as he wanted to come to the capital. But he said, **"For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you. But now having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you."** Illyricum was on the Adriatic Sea not very far from Rome. Think of this! In three missionary journeys the Apostle Paul had accomplished this tremendous task: planting the Church, raising up leadership and leaving the Church in capable hands; and Paul never stayed more than two years in one place.

Where did we ever get the idea that pastors were supposed to stay put so long? Paul stayed two year's in one place, less time in most others and then moved on. If we make the pastor indispensable to the life of the church, he must stay, you see; but when the congregation is able to instruct itself, they can get along without a pastor. Not that a pastor is not needed; GOD ordained pastors and Paul makes it very clear in Ephesians 4 that they have a place, a function. But why should a particular pastor become indispensable to any local fellowship? Paul by this method had covered all of Asia Minor and gone into Europe through Philippi clear over to the Adriatic Sea. So complete was his ministry (He had probably been laboring now for about sixteen years.) that he says he is now no longer needed in these places; he is free now to go to Spain and will stop at Rome on his way.

Paul says, **"Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey."** Why is he going to come to Rome? There are two reasons, and one is very interesting and human: in the 32nd verse he says he wants to come just to rest. He anticipated a vacation in Rome. But there was another reason. Paul wanted to have the encouragement of the Roman Christians as he made his way to Spain to preach the Gospel. Not only did he want their encouragement, but I think it is clear that Paul hoped there would be a little group in Rome that would accompany him to Spain. This too was the apostolic pattern; he wanted some in Rome to accompany him, to be part of his team.

And there was another reason. Paul had another job to do before he went to Rome, he had an offering from Macedonia and Achaia to take to the poor Christians in Jerusalem, and he had some apprehension about this because he had been warned by Agabus the prophet in Miletus that the Jews, the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, were going to trap him and deliver him over to the

Gentiles. So Paul says to the Christians in Rome, **"Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord JESUS Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints."**

Much can be said about that. Paul did not want these Christians in Jerusalem, the poor Christians who needed help, to resent the gifts that were coming from the Gentiles in other places. You know, this is one of the reasons the Gospel is unpopular because it is free. You cannot pay for it. You must acknowledge your poverty spiritually speaking and receive the gift, and our pride does not like us to do this. So there are people who reject the Gospel for no other reason than pride. You tell them to do something to be saved, and they will do it; but if they just have to receive the gift, their pride will not allow them. There is this kind of false pride that sometimes gets into Christians so that even in a time of desperate need they will resent and reject an offering given in love from Christian brothers and sisters. They say, "I don't accept charity." Well, this is not charity.

There is something very significant here. Will you notice the way the Apostle Paul speaks about prayer in the 30th verse? **"Strive together"** in prayer! One of the reasons we do not pray is because prayer is labor. Prayer is striving. Prayer is work. Prayer is sweat, and there are so many other things easier to do in the Church of JESUS CHRIST than to pray. But the measure of the power of the Church is the measure of our laboring in prayer, our striving in prayer. How long has it been since you worked in prayer? How long has it been since you labored in prayer, since you have striven in prayer? Here is Paul's estimate of prayer, *it is the work*, and we will not be powerful as a church except GOD raises up men and women who labor in prayer.

Chapter 16 concludes with closing greetings. In the first 16 verses he speaks of individuals, and for this reason I urge you to read and reflect on it at your leisure. It is wonderful to think of the personal friends that Paul had. See how he refers to them. This couple who "stuck out their necks" for him, those who risked their lives. His first converts in Asia. See how he lists them and feel that the team that Paul had laboring with him wherever he went. He was not teaching them; they were together in their labor for JESUS CHRIST. How I covet this for every pastor, this rediscovery of apostolic Christianity, so the pastor does not stand alone as a professional peculiarly committed to do something nobody else will do. Maybe the pastor is weaker than many in the congregation (Paul was less than the least), more desperately in need of prayer and the encouragement and the instruction of people than anyone to whom he speaks. Well, Paul lists his team members who labored with him. It is a beautiful picture.

But there is something else here; as we read these names, we are reading Paul's prayer list. Every day as he prayed he would go through this list of friends; these weren't all, but he would remember his friends. Do you have a prayer list? People for whom you pray regularly? Uphold them at the Throne of Grace? Twenty-nine persons Paul names in 16 verses, and then implies there are many others as he speaks concerning a household, concerning their friends.

In verses 17 through 20 he warns against divisiveness. He says, **"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."** Avoid him. That is pretty clear language. How easy it is in our modern 20th century Christianity to walk after the divisive man, heed every word, and whether

he documents it or not, whether he speaks the truth or not, we listen, and we believe. Paul is very clear in this instruction, stay away from the divisive person. He closes with greetings from others, and his own kinsmen, Timothy and others and with a beautiful benediction. Thus ends Paul's letter to Rome - his prologue to prison.

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