

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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- 1954 -

Cowman Publishing Company, Inc. California

Chapter One -

Prologue to Prison (Romans 1:1-15)

In a very basic sense Western civilization is a by-product of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Therefore, at a time when civilization's disintegration and incineration is a possibility, a study of its spiritual and theological roots is certainly in order.

Indisputably Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most influential pieces of literature ever composed. Nothing written by man has had a greater impact upon modern history than this Epistle written approximately 60 A.D. Augustine, who lived in the fourth century after CHRIST, was a profligate son of a godly mother until he was thirty years of age, at which time he was converted to JESUS CHRIST and became one of the most well-known theologians of all times in the Christian church. Paul's letter to the Romans had a most profound effect upon the life of Augustine.

It was Paul's letter to Rome which liberated the soul of Martin Luther and triggered the Reformation. In his preface to Romans, Martin Luther writes, "This epistle represents the fundamental teachings of the New Testament and is the very purest Gospel, well worth not only to be memorized verbatim but also to be used daily by every Christian as the daily bread of his soul. For no one could ever exhaust this Epistle by study and meditation. The better one becomes acquainted with it, the higher one will treasure it and all the more delight in it."

One has but to contrast those nations which were influenced only by the Renaissance with those nations of Europe which were influenced also by the Reformation to appreciate the incalculable impact of Paul's letter to the Romans upon our modern world.

John Wesley, an Anglican priest and founder of worldwide Methodism, in his Journal for May 24, 1738, recorded these words:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change which GOD works in the heart through faith in CHRIST, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in CHRIST - CHRIST alone for salvation, and assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted

me. I then testified openly to all there what I now felt for the first time in my heart.

Wesley's preaching not only gave birth to worldwide Methodism, but it broke the back of corruption in England and transformed the empire.

Here is a little episode, sixteen chapters long, which has profoundly affected the culture and civilization which you and I now enjoy, and unfortunately which we are inclined to take for granted. *One reason for the rapid decline of the Western world, in spite of all that man is able to do to "shore up" its ethical and moral standards, is that we have forgotten that the benefits of our culture are the fruit of which the Hebrew Christian tradition, and more specifically what Paul teaches in Romans, are the root. Obviously, if you forsake the root, the loss of the fruit is inevitable. Flowers are lovely for decorations; but having been cut from their roots, life span is fleeting. We can preserve the beauty, the fragrance for a little while, but soon they will begin to stink and be consigned to the trash heap because they have no roots. Our Western civilization has its roots in the Word of GOD, in that which Paul teaches in Romans; and if we ignore the root, we cannot hope to preserve the fruit.*

The letter is typical of ancient Rome. Had you been living in Paul's time and written a letter to personal friends, you would have used this style. However, this Epistle is more nearly a theological treatise than any other the great apostle wrote. When Paul wrote to Corinth or Philippi or Thessalonica or Colosse, or to Ephesus, he was addressing himself to some specific need at that time in that place; and therefore the content of his letter in general was limited to that particular subject. Hence, his other Epistles contain only fragments of the Christian message whereas *Romans contains what might be termed more accurately the Christian philosophy, the Christian world view.* Beginning with the human predicament in history, Paul gives the divine diagnosis, GOD's cure, its application to life here and now, and the ultimate prognosis. No portion of the Bible is more perennially relevant.

The first fifteen verses divide nicely into three parts suggested by three words - the man, the message, and the motive. Who is this man who is writing? "**Paul = a servant** (slave, bondsman) **of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle.**" His was one of the greatest minds, one of the sharpest intellects the human race has ever produced. Nineteen hundred years after Paul wrote Romans, the Book is still accepted as one of the masterpieces of logic in human literature.

In this man converged the three great cultures of his time. He was a Hebrew, a fact which he strongly emphasizes in his letter to the Philippians with the phrase, "**an Hebrew of the Hebrews.**" In all probability Paul was able to trace his genealogy back to Abraham on both sides of his family and was rightly proud of his heritage. He was born and reared in the City of Tarsus, a great university center, the heart of Greek culture, and was, in addition, a freeborn Roman citizen. Only about one in five persons was a citizen of Rome in Paul's day, and many of those purchased this citizenship at great price.

Now this Hebrew, who was a Roman and in a sense a Greek, delighted in calling himself a slave of JESUS CHRIST. Think of it, the most influential man who ever lived since JESUS CHRIST voluntarily submitted to the total mastery of CHRIST. In his Colossian Epistle Paul declares, "**All things were created by Him (Christ), and for Him.**"

You and I were made for CHRIST, and life is empty and futile until we are CHRIST's. We remain a caricature of the person we can be until we are slaves of JESUS CHRIST. We remain subhuman, subnormal. Life is an empty shell, no matter what is put into it until one belongs to JESUS CHRIST. "Made for CHRIST." Paul knew that a man could be really free only when he was CHRIST's slave.

William Penn declared that either we shall be governed by GOD or ruled by tyrants. This is true individually as well as collectively. If JESUS CHRIST is not our LORD and MASTER, inevitably we shall be mastered by some tyrant, perhaps the tyrant of self, which is the worst of all. *No man is free except the one who is the slave of JESUS CHRIST.*

The story of Paul's conversion to CHRIST is recorded in the ninth chapter of Acts. Incidentally, at the moment CHRIST claimed Paul, he would hardly have been considered a candidate for conversion. As a matter of fact, his opposition to the Gospel, his hostility to CHRIST and the Church had reached its explosive zenith.

Sometimes in your love for a friend or a relative, you are burdened for his salvation and inclined mistakenly to measure how near or far he is from CHRIST in terms of his reaction to the truth. Imagine, for example, being concerned for Saul's conversion; this would have seemed the least propitious time to speak to him about trusting CHRIST. "**Breathing out threatenings,**" Doctor Luke records, he was on his way to Damascus to imprison Christians, and at that unexpected moment he was apprehended by the Son of GOD!"

Hostility may be an encouraging sign. Recall JESUS' word to Saul as he lay on the road blinded? "**It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.**" Inexorably the SPIRIT of GOD was dealing inwardly with this man, wooing him; and the more he felt the *inward working of the HOLY SPIRIT*, the more he rebelled outwardly. This is often the way people react to the working of the SPIRIT of GOD through our witness and our love. *Therefore, despair of another's salvation is never justified, we must always reckon on the faithfulness of GOD.*

In the 22nd and 26th chapters of Acts is recorded Paul's testimony when he was making his own defense. It is found also in Galatians chapter 1 and Philippians chapter 3. What does Paul say about himself? First he reminds his hearers of his blind allegiance to his race and religion. A "**Hebrew of the Hebrews,**" he was a Pharisee, the strictest sect of the Jews. They were the separatists. In fact, the *word Pharisee stands for separation.* Then, he declares that he was more zealous for his religion than any of his contemporaries. He makes the amazing claim, as "**touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless,**" and, incredibly, dares to say "**If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more**" (Philippians 3:4). Think of it! Here was one who had exceeded all his contemporaries in zeal and enthusiasm and commitment for his religion, who now says I count all of this as dung, or garbage, because it was in opposition to JESUS CHRIST.

*****Please note that while the word Pharisee does have a connection with separatism, remember that the Pharisee is also a lost man. Biblical separation is a most important doctrine of our faith in light of our Christian distinctives. The Pharisee was separated from GOD because of unforgiven sin, while the Christian is to be separated from the world and its evil philosophy (as well as those that embrace it even if they are themselves brothers in**

CHRIST)* BBB**

It was Paul's very religious zeal which made him GOD's enemy. The supreme expression in history of man's rebellion against GOD is religion, whatever you call that religion - Buddhism, Shintoism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity. ***Christianity is not the hope of the world - JESUS CHRIST is!*** Christianity has no power to save - only CHRIST has the power to save but the Western world has settled for a Christless Christianity, just another religion powerless to save, just another ethical system incapable of producing ethical man.

Paul leaves no latitude of interpretation in the matter of his call and purpose as he declares himself to be "**separated unto the gospel.**" There is no mistaking his message, "**the gospel of God.**" What is the Gospel of GOD? The word Gospel means "good news." Have you heard the good news of GOD? Many Americans are unfamiliar with the good news of GOD. They have been Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and other denominations; but they know not the good news. Christianity to them has become a burden. It has become a form of piety which is obnoxious and unrealistic. Paul was separated unto the good news of GOD!

The word *separated* is important. It is one of the most abused words in the Bible. It has led Christians to isolate themselves from the world so that they have no contact with those whom they are commanded to reach. From the security of their position, they lob messages over the walls of their isolation to the world outside; but there has been no contact - and love does not work without contact. JESUS said, "**Ye are the salt of the earth.**" Salt works only on contact. JESUS said, "**Ye are the light of the world,**" and light is meant to dispel the darkness. ***Where it is dark, there they need light!*** To the person who understands the term correctly, separation means two things: It means to be singled out by GOD from others and to be assigned to a specific duty or call or purpose in the same sense that we the electorate, for example, separate one man to be President of the United States. So Paul (each one of us for that matter) was called of GOD and separated from others to a specific task, the Gospel of GOD.

*****Biblical separation is not isolationism, for Paul says that it is impossible to leave the world in order to get away from sinners - but it is sinful Christians that we are to avoid.**

We separate ourselves from the world, but not from lost seekers for truth. When it is apparent that a person is only looking for a fight - we warn once or twice - and then we reject as a heretic. But we always give them a chance to change their heart first - and then we understand that we can not toss pearls before swine.

His point is good though, at the beginning of the paragraph - that Paul was separated unto the Gospel of GOD, which means that he was not interested in the gospel of the world - the social gospel, or the other false gospels.* BBB**

What about this Gospel? For one thing Paul says it was, "**promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures.**" The Gospel was not an innovation of Paul's, not a New Testament nor apostolic invention; it was the message of the prophets, the message of Moses. Indeed we shall see that by this Gospel, Abraham, the first Hebrew, was justified. The message of the Old Testament is identical to that of the New. ***It is rightly understood, there is no cleavage between***

Israel's faith and Christianity; they are two halves of the whole. They belong together as the Bible combines Old and New Testaments between its covers. The Gospel, which was promised to Abraham and Moses and the prophets, was fulfilled in JESUS CHRIST.

Further, Paul declares it was the Gospel "**Concerning his Son Jesus Christ.**" You can take Mohammed out of Islam and the message of Islam remains. You can take Buddha out of Buddhism, and his message retains its integrity; *but you remove JESUS CHRIST from the Gospel, and you destroy it. It is the Gospel concerning His Son, JESUS CHRIST is absolutely central and indispensable to Christianity.* The Gospel is about JESUS CHRIST, GOD's Son. This is what makes it good news. Christianity was not meant to be the intolerable burden of rules and ritual which it had become and by which Luther was enslaved until he understood Romans, but a Person, JESUS CHRIST, Who came to do for man what man was incapable of doing for himself.

Who is JESUS CHRIST? The apostle tells us that he was "**was made of the seed of David according to the flesh,**" he was a man; and He was "**declared to be the Son of God,**" *He was GOD!* He was both man and GOD, not half man and half GOD, not a demigod. He was fully man and fully GOD. He was man's perfect representative before GOD, and He was GOD's perfect representative to man. He was the one true mediator between GOD and man. This is Incarnation, GOD in human flesh. Paul suggests two witnesses to His Deity: "**Declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.**" Amen!

When JESUS stood in the Jordan River after having been baptized by John, the SPIRIT descended as a dove and a voice from Heaven proclaimed, "**This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased**" (Matthew 3:17). GOD the HOLY SPIRIT witnessed to JESUS CHRIST; and the second evidence is the resurrection from the dead. Four days after they buried JESUS, the tomb was empty. His resurrection was physical. His was a bodily resurrection, and today, 1900 years later wherever JESUS CHRIST is, He inhabits that resurrected body in which some day, soon we trust, He shall return to earth again.

One historian has said, "Physical death is the most absurd fact in history." It is! It is utterly irrational! Consider the compounded frustration with which death thwarts history - the lives that are snuffed out without having an opportunity of accomplishing their ambitions and fulfilling their aspirations. Think how generation by generation death blasts man's hopes, collectively and individually. It is humanity's Number One enemy. But JESUS CHRIST has destroyed that enemy by dying Himself and rising from the dead, and He holds out to any who will receive Him the hope of everlasting life. Not just spiritually, but physically, for these bodies which you and I now inhabit will some day be redeemed and raised from the dead as was His body on the Day of Redemption.

You will notice that the apostle speaks of "**obedience to the faith,**" which is another way of describing the Christian's response to JESUS CHRIST - obedience. Furthermore, he points out that this is for the whole world, for all the nations, for Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish (verse 14). The Gospel is for everybody everywhere. It is universal! Why foreign missions? Because there is a need? No! Foreign missions because JESUS CHRIST said "**Go ye into all the world.**" The need is there, and it is felt and is an incentive, but the real justification for foreign

missions is a mandate. JESUS CHRIST said go everywhere preaching; and if the Church of JESUS CHRIST is not going everywhere preaching, she is disobeying her LORD and MASTER.

There is some thing else to be said, which is that one of the evidences that the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST has broken into the heart of a man is that he is restless until everybody hears this message, which is exactly what motivated the apostle Paul to Rome.

Undoubtedly, Paul was interested in Rome because it was the greatest city of the empire. Undoubtedly, he was interested in Rome because it was the capital. There was Caesar's household; there were the leaders of the world. Undoubtedly, he was interested in Rome because it was influenced as no other city. But he longed to go to Rome not simply because of its influence nor because it was the capital. He longed to go to Rome because, as he said in verse 14, "**I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.**" I must do this. I am under obligation.

Christian, there is some thing radically wrong with your faith if it has not burdened your heart so that you must share it. Paul had to go to Rome in order that he might have fruit there. He had to go to Rome in order that he might strengthen the Church that was there. He had to go to Rome in order that he might benefit from the faith of the Church in Rome. All of these things were true, but he had to go to Rome because the Gospel had made him every man's debtor.

In his introduction Paul intimates how he prayed earnestly that somehow by the will of GOD he might be able to go to Rome, which intimation leads to two very practical facts; namely, the two answers to his prayer. First of all, he was prevented from going to Rome. We are inclined, you see, to think of GOD's will in our lives as signifying always the green light, always an open door, always an easy access. No, *often GOD's will includes a red light, a closed door, a brick wall. Often GOD's will prevents us from doing that which we feel is most important to do. in this too GOD is leading. He sometimes prevents us from doing that or being that which we feel is important for the cause of CHRIST, the permissive will of GOD!*

But there was a second answer in the affirmative. Paul got to Rome - in chains! He entered Rome a prisoner; this too was GOD's answer. Through that prison and beyond its walls the message of the Gospel blazed to the far reaches of the empire. In that prison were born epistles which have succored and nourished the Church for nineteen centuries. From that prison in the very household of Caesar the message penetrated. *The Roman prison became a pulpit from which thundered the Gospel to that empire and all the empires to follow until CHRIST returns to claim His eternal crown and throne.*

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8, 9). Although quoted as Scripture, it is not, yet still true, "GOD works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform." *Quit trying to predict GOD's plans. He cannot be second-guessed. Be open to His surprises. Relax in the confidence that His ways are always best. Surrender yourself to Him in the knowledge that He will lead; that He has led; that He indeed is leading right now unless you refuse to be led. And whatever happens, receive this as GOD's will. Maybe it means prison, chains, confinement, frustration; but if it is GOD's will, it is GOD's victory.*

The older I grow in the LORD, the less disposition I have to manage the affairs of CHRIST either in my life personally or in the life of the Church; the more I desire just to let CHRIST do what He wants to do and take my hands off of the situation. That is the way a slave operates, you know; he just takes orders and keeps busy.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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