

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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A Healthy Desire to Build Up and Be Built Up

by Dan Trygg

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, ¹⁰ always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be strengthened; ¹² that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.” Romans 1:8-12

Paul exemplifies a healthy balance between appreciating and recognizing the value of others versus clearly understanding who he was and the benefit he could bring to the Body of Christ.

In this letter of introduction to the Roman church, **Paul begins by describing how much he thanks God for them, because they have done well in regards to living out their faith.** He had traveled around half of the Roman Empire, and everywhere he had gone he had heard stories of the believers who were from the church in Rome. There they were, at the heart and capitol city of the Roman Empire, with all its pomp, political power and potential danger to those who were portrayed as followers of a rival King. Yet the disciples in Rome were not willing to be cowed or to retreat into secrecy. They continued to have a vital witness, even though at the whim of politicians they could be banished (e.g., Acts 18:2), their houses and goods could be confiscated (e.g., Heb. 10:32-36), or they could even be arrested for treason against the emperor (Acts 25:7,8). Christians were still viewed as a sect within Judaism (Acts 24:5), and generally given allowances and privileges which had been accorded to the Jews. Because of the influx of Gentiles (non-Jews), however, the Christian movement was rapidly growing beyond those narrowly defined parameters. **It would have been expedient to live quietly, and keep to themselves, but the Christians of Rome kept reaching out, proclaiming the gospel message, and living out their faith in love and in the bold power of the Holy Spirit.**

There is no record of any apostle starting the church in Rome. It apparently was seeded with people who had been in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The record clearly indicates that there were people from Rome who were present to hear the apostles speak in tongues and who listened to Peter's Pentecostal sermon (vs. 10). We know, also, that over 3,000 people came to identify with the Lord Jesus on that day (vs. 41). Certainly, some of those new converts would have been visitors from Rome, who brought their new found faith with them back to the empirical capitol. Many of them also had spent some time in the home meetings of those early days, before returning home (vss. 42-47). Thus, **they would have learned how to have a home church of Christians, following the example of the apostles.** Furthermore, being the cosmopolitan city that it was, Rome was always receiving travelers and new transplants, and other people were moving away, as well. Thus it was, when Paul writes this letter some 25 years later (ca. A.D. 55), there are 27 people he mentions by name, and at the very least three home churches are mentioned (Cf. 16:5,14,15. Could most of these 27 people have been home church leaders?). Since there were no church buildings being used in those days, **the church in Rome would have been comprised of a number of home groups, loosely connected together by relationship and communication, but with no central authority or governing body.** This was the nature of the church in Jerusalem, as well as in every major city where Jesus Christ had followers. **Thus, this letter was not read to the whole church in some city-wide meeting. Rather, it was probably copied and passed around from group to group until everyone had a chance to hear it or read it.** Thus, it was important for Paul to write in such a way that would be clear, both in terms of theology and in regard to practical matters.

Note that, after thanking God for them, Paul describes how **he prayed for them unceasingly**, or constantly. He regularly brought the Roman Christians before God in prayer, mentioning them in his times of interceding for other believers. **Paul had a very extensive prayer life** in this regard. He told the Corinthians that he daily felt a burden of concern for all the churches. He often thanked God for the Corinthian believers (I Cor. 1:4), and prayed for them (II Cor. 13:7). Paul mentioned his prayers on behalf of the believers in Ephesus (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21), Philippi (Phil. 1:3-11), Colossae (Col. 1:3-12) and Thessalonica (I Thess. 1:2-8,13; 3:9-13; 5:23; II Thess. 1:3-12; 2:16,17), as well. He also asked these fellow believers to whom he wrote to pray on his behalf (Rom. 15:30-33; Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-4; I Thess. 5:25; II Thess. 3:1,2; cf. Heb. 13:18,19). **The example of men and women of God is that prayer is essential to a healthy walk with God, and that God's purposes in the earth advance in response to the prayers of His people.**

As he spoke of his prayer life in relation to the Roman Christians, **Paul mentioned that he often wished, and even planned, to come to them, but he had been hindered or prevented from doing so** (Rom. 1:13; 15:22). **Sometimes, this can be as innocuous as circumstances and busyness getting in the way** (Rom. 15:22). Paul may have intended to come, but circumstances did not allow for a good time to break away in order to do so. At other times, this

“hindering” is definitely a reference to the spiritual warfare that is set against the advance of the gospel. **We are at war with evil spiritual powers, who actively oppose what we are doing** (Eph. 6:10-12; I Thess. 2:18; cf. Dan. 10:10-21). The word for “hinder” here means to “cut off, to prevent, impede, check or block, withhold, forbid, restrain, refuse, to cause something *not* to happen”. It indicates that something was at work to keep him from making it to Rome. **Sometimes, however, God Himself is at work to prevent the human-intention of His people, ...in order to direct them in a different direction** (Prov. 16:9; 19:21). We have an example of this in Acts 16:6-10. Paul and his companions had come through to a crossroads. They tried to go in a couple of directions, which the Holy Spirit blocked, ...until He could direct them in the direction that He wanted them to go. **More often, however, it will be people who will oppose us and attempt to hinder the advance of the Kingdom of God**, in one way or another (e.g., Matt. 23:13; Lk. 11:52; Acts 13:8; Gal. 5:7; I Thess. 2:14-16; II Tim. 4:14,15; III Jn. 1:10). **Behind the human opposition, however, are often spiritual powers who are blinding their minds and manipulating them to do their will** (Eph. 2:1,2).

We must always remember the nature of the spiritual warfare going on around us, as described by Jesus in Matthew 16:18. By saying that He was going to build His church, His assembled people, and that “Hades’ gates shall not stand against it”, Jesus was alluding to a word picture that every first century person would have immediately grasped. In warfare, the invading force would lay siege to a fortified city, especially directing the attack against the city gates. If the gates were destroyed then the invaders could swarm into the city and capture it. As long as the gates held firm, however, the forces outside and inside were pretty much at a standstill. If the gates were breached, then the city would generally fall to the attacking force. **In the word picture Jesus used, He presented Hades as being on the defensive.** The powers of darkness are in the entrenched, fortified cities that the church is here to capture. **We are the ones who are advancing against the strongholds of the enemy. We are on the offensive.** We are promised that the gates will not be able to withstand the assembled strike force of God, which we call the church. *We are at war. Just as ancient Israel took the land of promise through a series of God-led battles, we are now the invaders, taking territory away from the entrenched forces of evil.* We are liberating people, setting them free from the deception, bondage and destruction of the enemy. Of course, *the enemy is not happy about this. In fact, he is enraged, and seeks to make war against God’s people* (Rev. 12:7-17). He prowls about, looking for opportunities to attack us, to lead us into sin and bondage, or to debilitate and destroy us (I Pet. 5:8). **God, however, can open doors for us which the enemy cannot shut** (cf. Rev. 3:7-13; I Cor. 16:8,9), **but we must be bold enough and obedient to step through them when they open, in order to seize the tactical advantage which the Lord makes available to us.**

Ultimately, God *did* bring Paul to Rome, ...though not at all in the manner that he had envisioned, or would have chosen for himself. He came as a Roman prisoner, exercising his right to a trial before the emperor (Acts 21-28). **God’s way, while looking like defeat, actually brought about a greater purpose** (cf. II Cor. 12:9). While in prison, Paul was able to testify to Roman guards, high officials in government, even Caesar’s own household, giving him the opportunity to preach to people he never would have had access to had he come to Rome on his own. Most of his letters which are found in the NT were written from his imprisonment, as well. **The adversary may have hindered Paul for a time, but in the end a greater advantage was won for the Kingdom.**

Why did Paul wish to come to Rome? Was it just to see the sights? Was it to visit the great capitol of the empire, and to be wowed by the great buildings and trappings of power and wealth? No. Not at all. Paul was sold out for Jesus. As he himself said, his spirit was in service to God. Every breath was for Him. No, **he had little interest in Rome as an earthly city, but he had a great interest in the work of the Kingdom of God going on there.** Jesus had taught that the Kingdom of God was like leaven, spreading quietly through dough, until the whole lump was leavened. Unbeknown to Caesar, the Roman senate, the legions of Rome’s mighty army, or the teeming multitudes, God was working in their midst, under their very noses. Paul wanted to be part of *that*. **He wanted to come and (1.) impart some spiritual gift to them; (2.) gain from their input in his life; and (3.) obtain some lasting fruit from his visit.** He knew how the Roman church was living in very difficult and dangerous circumstances. The believers needed to be encouraged and strengthened. **Paul knew who he was, and how his ministry affected others.** He longed to come and share with them what it was that God did with him. He could see how *the gift of God* strengthened others. It was always a humbling, joyful experience to be used in that way, and he knew he could make a difference in their lives. **He also knew that he was not complete in himself.** We all need others in our lives. God made the Body of Christ to be like our physical bodies, an interactive, interdependent organism. **We don’t have everything we need to prosper by ourselves. We need the ministry, the service, of other people who can also share their gifts (the expressions of the Holy Spirit) with us** (I Cor. 12:4-27). Together, as we interact in love and serve one another, we will be encouraged, healed, strengthened, and equipped to do the Kingdom work God has for us (Eph. 2:8-10; 4:15,16). **As we obediently invest in one another’s lives, the Spirit causes growth, and we will see the fruit of lives that are changed.** We will have made a lasting difference that will bring honor to Jesus. That’s exciting!