

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 34, Chapter 15

As we continue moving towards the conclusion of our study of Romans and undertake chapter 15, it is helpful to notice that Paul's instructions to the Believers of Rome shift and become more general in nature. Up to this point, all through this exceptionally long letter, Paul has switched back and forth between targeting the gentile part of his audience and then next targeting the Jewish part. Starting in chapter 15 he is addressing all the Believers of Rome without distinction.

We barely got started in Romans 15 last time so I'll briefly review what we discussed. Much of chapter 14 involved a discussion about the weak in faith versus the strong in faith. And interestingly in that chapter Paul dealt with the issue of ritual purity (clean and unclean) as the central focus of his definition of just who is weak and who is strong. As an example he drew attention to the issue of kosher eating. It is fascinating that almost any commentary on Romans that one can find will make a remark that it must be the Jews who are weak, and the gentiles who are therefore strong, because surely Paul is denouncing the Jewish custom of eating kosher and following the Levitical dietary laws. However if one is to accept that then the first verse of chapter 15 creates a problem because there Paul the Jew counts himself as among the strong. And as I pointed out last time, Paul has used multiple opportunities to characterize himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees, a Jew who continues to believe in and follow the Law scrupulously, and therefore without doubt he himself eats kosher. Many of the early Church fathers completely agree with that statement; but some (such as Chrysostom) explain it away by saying that even though Paul continued to follow the Law of Moses including eating kosher, he didn't really believe in it and only did so as a deception in order to keep up appearances of being a good Jew so that he could evangelize other Jews. I find that ridiculous if not offensive on its face. However it does demonstrate the length that otherwise excellent commentators will go to in order to uphold a doctrine they hold dear.

So Paul of course ate kosher and he also categorized himself as one of the strong in faith. However the difference between the strong in faith and the weak in faith is not so much whether one eats kosher and the other doesn't as it is about how bothered and judgmental they are to others who don't eat like they do. Thus the strong in faith, many of them personally eating kosher and knowing that it is God's command that we do, ought not to demean the Believing brother (certainly a gentile) who doesn't eat kosher nor should he demean the Believing Jewish brother (certainly a Jew) who goes overboard on trying to be nearly perfect in his diet by eating only vegetables (Romans 14:2) and abstaining from meat altogether. Recall that generally speaking it was ritually unclean meat that was always the danger in kosher eating. Vegetables and fruits had no prohibitions against them and extreme mishandling had to happen in order to render them unclean. But there were a number of Biblical prohibitions on various kinds of meats and how they were handled that made them legally edible or not.

So the strong in faith were to be kind and understanding of the weak in faith; not the other way around. Therefore says Paul in chapter 15 verse 1, the strong should bend towards the weak wherever possible in order to keep them in the fold. Let's talk about that for a moment. When a new Believer comes to faith they are in a vulnerable position. They are operating on the barest of knowledge and have almost no experience with God at all. The Holy Spirit has wooed them into the Kingdom of God and the new Believer may have little understanding of much of anything about the Lord and His ways. Therefore it would not be hard to convince them that their newfound zeal for God was but a moment of psychological vulnerability; or perhaps they were just mesmerized by a soaring message of salvation from an especially charismatic pastor and got caught up in the emotion of a crowd. Even more, to ask the new Believer to immediately begin to obey a long laundry list of commandments, some of which are daunting or even nearly impossible in his current environment, is to risk him or her quickly giving up and deciding that this is simply not doable for them to properly follow this new faith. It is the job of the strong to lovingly nurture and guide the weak and make allowances for their weaknesses; not to be harsh and demanding or to browbeat them. A good strong parent knows that you make the rules and boundaries as few and as simple as possible for a toddler; only the essentials that guard their safety and acquaint them with the concept of obedience. Otherwise you risk overwhelming them with things that they are not mature enough yet to do; and they will certainly fail and incur your wrath and this is bound to do damage to the relationship.

Let's re-read chapter 15 so we have it fresh in our minds.

RE-READ ROMANS CHAPTER 15 all

We've thoroughly discussed the first couple of verses already so let's move on to verse 3 where Paul uses a quote from Psalm 69:10 to validate his claim that even the Messiah (as an example of the strong) didn't please only Himself. The quote is: "***The insults of those insulting you fell on me***". So that we take this in the correct context, we readily know that the "me" in this verse is Christ, but who is "you"? Who was having insults directed at him, but Christ intervened and took those insults upon Himself? It is much easier to see when we look at more of Psalm 69, a Psalm of David.

Psalm 69:6-10 CJB

⁶ God, you know how foolish I am; my guilt is not hidden from you. ⁷ Let those who put their hope in you, Adonai ELOHIM-Tzva'ot, not be put to shame through me; let those who are seeking you, God of Isra'el, not be disgraced through me. ⁸ For your sake I suffer insults, shame covers my face. ⁹ I am estranged from my brothers, an alien to my mother's children, ¹⁰ because zeal for your house is eating me up, and on me are falling the insults of those insulting you.

So David was taking upon Himself the insults and offenses that were made against His Father in Heaven. Paul imputes the same upon Christ. Thus even the strongest man in faith who ever lived, Yeshua of Nazareth, did not hesitate to be insulted for the sake of another "person": His Father. Thus those who are strong in faith ought to bear the insults meant not only for God, but also for the weak.

Verse 4 has caused some amount of heartburn among Christians over the centuries, but none more than in the past hundred years or so with the rise of what could be called modern Evangelical Christianity. Here Paul refers to everything written in the past in the Scriptures that was meant to give us (“us” here meaning Believers) encouragement and patience in hope. The heartburn arises in that Paul of course only ever quotes the Old Testament, at least partly because there was no such thing as a New Testament in his era; and here he says bluntly that this is the source of a Christian’s encouragement and hope. But the Evangelical Church says that while it believes in both the Old and New Testaments, in fact the only relevant testament for Christians is the New. So this verse is rather at odds with such a doctrine. Perhaps now is a good time to repeat a hermeneutical principle that is important to the Hebrew Roots approach to Bible study: it is that in the Bible, Old and New testaments, the term Scriptures only ever refers to the Old Testament; the New Testament does not reference itself as being “Scripture”. Thus to read the Bible correctly we must understand that any use of the term Scriptures automatically means the Old Testament. So to properly analyze the Bible we need to see it as consisting of two pieces: The Scriptures and the New Testament. And for Paul, the Scriptures (the Old Testament) is his Bible.

Let’s move along now to verses 5 and 6. Here Paul says that while the Scriptures represent the words of God, it is God Himself who actually gives us the encouragement for patience of hope. And so it is God that we are to look to in order that we can obtain the same attitude as our Messiah Yeshua of constantly wanting to glorify the Father in everything that we do. This is directly connected to the issue of the strong in faith serving and protecting the weak. Therefore in this context Paul is telling the strong that it glorifies God the Father for us to bear insults made against Him, and for us to bend in service to the weaker in faith and to bear their burdens. What I’d like you to notice here is Paul’s specific reference to God the Father. He says that our obtaining this attitude of Messiah glorifies the God and Father of our Lord Yeshua; not that it glorifies Yeshua. Yeshua’s goal, as ours should be, is always to glorify the Father. I only point this out because too much within modern Christianity there is a belief that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are co-equal. That is, there is no hierarchy of authority or order of importance. Yeshua says otherwise and Paul’s every statement denies this possibility as here he once again puts the Father as above Yeshua and puts the Father as the one to whom we are to direct our praise and glory. I only say this because due to the populist doctrines of 21st century Evangelical Christianity there is this subtle implication among Believers that we are essentially replacing God the Father with God the Son since God the Father is the Old Testament God and God the Son is the New Testament God. And since the Church is to be a New Testament Church, then obviously we are to worship the New Testament God: Christ. Yet even Yeshua Himself (the supposed New Testament God) disputes that when He directs us in just how we are to pray. He begins by saying: **(Matt 6:9-10 CJB) ⁹ You, therefore, pray like this: ‘Our Father in heaven! May your Name be kept holy. ¹⁰ May your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.**

Christ says we are to pray to the Father; not to Him. We are to endeavor to keep the Father’s name holy; not His. And this isn’t the first time Messiah has said something like this. In Matthew 12 we read this:

Matthew 12:31-32 CJB

³¹ Because of this, I tell you that people will be forgiven any sin and blasphemy, but blaspheming the Ruach HaKodesh will not be forgiven. ³² One can say something against the Son of Man and be forgiven; but whoever keeps on speaking against the Ruach HaKodesh will never be forgiven, neither in the 'olam hazeh (the present world) nor in the 'olam haba (the world to come).

I'm certainly not encouraging you to rashly say something against Christ or to diminish His authority or high position as sitting at the Father's right hand. But clearly for Yeshua God the Father and God the Holy Spirit hold a place of preeminence above Him and we need to keep this in mind. Let us never stop praying IN THE NAME OF YESHUA; but we must always pray TO the Father. The Old Testament God is the Creator God and the Father of us all; and He remains as the New Testament God. Let us never try to relegate Him to the dust bin of history as is all too common in some of the more popular pockets of the modern Western Church.

Verse 7 is essentially the conclusion that we are to draw from all that Paul has taught starting with chapter 14 verse 1 and proceeding up to this point in chapter 15. The idea is that all Believers are to welcome all other Believers into the congregation of Believers just as the Messiah has welcomed all of us. Whether weak or strong in faith, whether brand new in the faith or having held the faith for some years and thus are more spiritually mature; whether one regularly stumbles and falls or one is more devout and consistent in their faith, we all belong to the Kingdom of Heaven thanks to what Christ did for us and we should not be judgmental towards our fellow Believers or question their place in the Kingdom.

Verse 8 puts the spotlight on the reality that Yeshua is the Messiah of the Jews. Whatever benefit gentiles receive from Yeshua it is because of the covenants God made with the Hebrew Patriarchs. I want to quote to you from C.E.B. Cranfield's commentary on Romans that I'm not sure can be improved upon as regards this verse.

Christ has become the servant of the Jewish people (the people of the circumcision)....inasmuch as He was born a Jew, of the seed of David according to the flesh, lived almost all His life within the confines of Palestine, limiting His personal ministry almost exclusively to Jews, and both was in His earthly life and atoning death and also still is, as the exalted Lord, the Messiah of Israel.

This fits hand in glove with what Paul had to say in Romans 11 about Yeshua being the Messiah of Israel and that it was for the sake of saving all Israel that God has shown mercy to the gentiles. Now he adds to it that Yeshua's advent and life's mission, and the inclusion of gentiles into the Kingdom, were also to keep God's promises that He made to Israel's Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once again, as in Romans 11, we see Paul highlight the special priority and place of the Jews in God's eyes so that gentiles won't get the wrong idea of where it is that we fit in God's plan.

What does this mean? It means that Christ is NOT the **gentile** Messiah because there is no such thing. It means that the Jews have already received their Messiah even though the vast

bulk of Jews are still waiting for someone else. If Christ is not the Messiah of the Jews, and if He is not the fulfillment of the covenant promises made to the Hebrew Patriarchs, then gentile Christians have no Messiah and our faith is but foolishness. We are alive in our sins and dead to God. We are doomed to an eternity of torments and without hope. Key to properly understanding the New Testament is to internalize and realize that Christ was Jewish. Several years ago I was giving a 10 part lecture at a church and I began my talk with the words that Christ was, and is, a Jew. An elderly man made a sour looking face, looked over to his wife and mouthed the words "that's not true"; she said something back and he got up and left. The next week as I was starting part 2, to my surprise the man returned and before I could get started asked if he could speak to the group. He stood up and apologized and said that after being a church-going Christian for 50 years, he had never understood that Jesus was actually a Jew. He had never come to grips with the reality that His Savior was Jewish and the initial thought of it had made him angry and uncomfortable. Understanding Yeshua in His Jewish context is what helps us to understand His actions and His immutable instructions to us.

In verse 9 Paul gives us a second reason for God the Father making His son Yeshua a servant to the Jewish people; it was to demonstrate the depth of the Father's mercy so that seeing it, it would cause gentiles to seek what the Jews had received and thus glorify the God of Israel. And even this had a reason behind it: it was to fulfill what had been prophesied in the Scriptures. Paul paraphrases from Psalm 18:50, which David took from 2nd Samuel 22:50, to make his case: **Psalm 18:50 CJB ⁵⁰ "So I give thanks to you, ADONAI, among the nations; I sing praises to your name.**

I realize that the CJB uses the term "nations" in Psalms 18 but uses the term "gentiles" in Romans 15:9; however those two terms mean essentially the same thing. The word nations and the word gentiles are the same word in Hebrew thought: **goyim**. This is because in the Bible, since early in the Torah when through Abraham God separated the world into 2 distinct categories of people (Hebrews and gentiles), the term nations then evolved to automatically mean **gentile** nations. This is because prior to the covenant God made with Abraham there was no need to specify Hebrews versus everyone else because only 1 unified category of people existed throughout the entire planet. This passage from Psalm 18 is the first of four Old Testament quotations that Paul is going to use to support his case as concerns the prophetic inclusion of gentiles into the redemption equation. It is important to notice something that the Jewish Believers would have caught on to quite quickly: he used quotes from the 3 recognized divisions of the Hebrew Bible as it was seen in his day: from the Prophets, from the Torah, and from the Writings. Actually he went so far in his four quotes as to take one from the Former Prophets plus one from the Latter Prophets, one from the Torah, and one from the Writings (these are called **Torah, Ketuvim and Nevi'im** in Hebrew). Why did Paul do this? To show conclusively how the entire Old Testament pointed not only to Christ, but also to the eventual inclusion of gentiles as a result of Yeshua's advent.

Thus Romans 15:10 is a passage taken from Deuteronomy 32; 15:11 is a passage taken from Psalm 117; and 15:12 is taken from Isaiah 11. And as we see they all prophesy the future inclusion of gentiles into the congregation of God. So the conclusion is that the Jews of Rome should welcome gentiles and not look down upon them as suspect, or as unworthy, or as not belonging, or as the weak in faith just because they know so little about the Hebrew Bible, the

redemption history of Israel that begins in the Torah, nor even of the Hebrew Prophets who foretold of gentiles coming to worship the God of Israel. Rather they should be fully welcomed to join the Jewish synagogue congregations and prayer groups in the same spirit that Messiah Yeshua welcomed Jews and gentiles alike to participate in the redemption that He brought to them.

Verse 13 is a rather typical Jewish-style blessing; it is a prayer mixed with a wish. It begins by speaking of God as the God of hope. I'll remind you yet again that when Paul speaks of hope he means it in terms of hope for resurrection from the dead. Little has unnerved and occupied the minds of humankind as has our own death. Some cultures glorify death, others dread it. Some welcome death; others see it as unnatural and the result of upsetting the gods. Some had elaborate death cults (such as the Egyptians), and for others it was simply a mystery and death rituals were simple (like with the Hebrews). Thus among Jews what happened after death was mostly unknown; life was, and remains, the most important and pleasant part of human existence in the Jewish mindset. However the concept of resurrection (reanimation, coming alive again after death) was a hot topic in Paul's era. Thus perhaps the most welcoming and attractive news Paul brought along with the Gospel of Messiah Yeshua was the hope of bodily resurrection after death. Paul teaches that this hope is available for anyone, Jew or gentile, who puts their trust in Yeshua as Lord and Savior. However the actual power to make this hope a reality and not merely a comforting theory is contained in the power of God's Holy Spirit; it does not come from within us or from other humans. Once again I'd like to demonstrate to you that as true and profound as that line of thought is it was not an original thought of Paul or something that was new to Jewish theology as a result of the advent of Christ. Redemption and an accompanying hope for resurrection by the power of God is not something that was born anew from Christianity.

Listen to this excerpt taken from the Dead Sea Scrolls, written by the Essene Jewish community before the birth of Christ. This is taken from scroll 1QS.

For to God belongs my justification, and the perfection of my way, and the uprightness of my heart are in His hand; by His righteousness are my rebellions blotted out. For He has poured forth from the fount of His knowledge the light that enlightens me, and my eye has beheld His marvels and the light of my heart pierces the mystery to comeFrom His wondrous mysteries is the light in my heart, in the everlasting Being has my eye beheld wisdom because knowledge is hidden from men and the counsel of prudence from the sons of men. The fountain of righteousness, the reservoir of power, and the dwelling place of glory are denied to the assembly of flesh; but God has given them as an everlasting possession to those whom He has chosen. He has granted them a share in the lot of the Saints, and has united their assembly, the Council of the Community, with the Sons of Heaven. And the assembly of the holy fabric shall belong to an eternal planting for all time to come.

But now in verse 14 Paul switches both his tone and the subject. It is my opinion that the purpose of these words is that after considering the forceful thought, theology, and impressive list of ***Halakhot*** (religious rulings) that Paul has laid out for Believers, Paul is now trying to soften his tone a little. He fears he might have come off too heavy handed, especially

considering he didn't start the congregation of Rome and yet is declaring his authority over it. He doesn't want the Believers of Rome to think that he thinks they are much in need of a good dressing down or that they are ignorant, so he says that he is convinced that the Believers of the Roman congregation are full of goodness, and have a great deal of knowledge, and are well able to teach one another proper doctrine. Howeverthere are some things that Paul thought needed to be addressed as more of a reminder than as teaching new doctrine that they didn't know. Paul's statement goes a long way in destroying the rather standard contention of most Christian Bible commentators that Romans is essentially a carefully crafted systematic theology for Christians created from scratch by Paul and he sent it, in full, to the Believers of Rome (perhaps as a trial balloon to see how well it might be received). Rather it is clear that the subjects he covered were because of something he must have heard about the congregation in Rome; things he felt they needed to be reminded of.

But by what right should Paul be able to intervene in a congregation that he had no hand in creating? He says it is because the grace that God gave him of being a servant of the Messiah for gentiles, and because he had the priestly duty of presenting the Good News so that gentiles would be made an acceptable offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit. There's much here to discuss. First Paul has taken quite seriously the commission he received on the road to Damascus by none other than the risen Christ Himself. His commission was to be as the Apostle to the gentiles. But clearly Paul was not the only Jew who was evangelizing gentiles in the name of Yeshua. Even so, Paul took Christ's commission to mean that he was to be the chief evangelist and was to be head of the spear in taking the Gospel to the gentile world. In fact, he was to be the authority over the gentiles who came to faith. So he felt that he had been given the authority to intervene virtually anywhere in the known world outside of the Holy Land where James, Jesus' brother, was the head of the congregation of Believers that consisted almost exclusively of Jews.

So what does Paul mean by his "priestly" duty to present the good news? Here's the thing to understand: according to the Torah it was one of the prime duties and great honors of the Levite Priests to keep and teach God's Word to God's chosen people. For centuries they had failed at that and instead the office of priest had become politicized and an occupation meant to enrich oneself or merely to gain special privilege and social status. The synagogue was now where most actual Bible teaching took place and it certainly was not priests who taught in the synagogues. However in a sort of restoration-of-the-Torah mindset, Paul describes the duty of preaching the Gospel as being priestly in its fundamental nature since the Gospel is contained in the Word of God. Thus it was always the priests who had been intended to teach God's people the Gospel. So in continuing the metaphor of Temple and priest Paul explains that those gentiles who come to belief in Yeshua are as an offering made holy by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which is then presented to God. That is, all offerings made to God at the Temple begin as ordinary and common things; but by setting them apart and devoting them to God this makes them holy property and thus suitable for presenting them to God. The Holy Spirit, through Yeshua, makes the gentiles holy and in this way they become an acceptable offering to God.

Further explaining himself to the receivers of his letter in Rome, in verses 17 and 18 Paul makes it clear that whatever he has said that might feel to a reader as a personal boast about

his accomplishments is not. Rather he is proud, or boasting, about what Yeshua has done through him. As a modern day application it is not at all wrong to be proud of what God has done with Seed of Abraham Ministries and Torah Class as long as we understand that we are merely tools in God's toolbox and everything good that has come from our efforts is Him operating through His willing vessels. It is God who merits the glory and not us. **Philippians 4:13 CJB** ¹³ *I can do all things through him who gives me power.*

So in verse 19 Paul continues to explain that because of the power of God through him, he has spread the Gospel to the far reaches, all the way from the center of Yehoveh worship in Jerusalem to Illyricum in the pagan Roman Empire. We have not seen in any of Paul's writings that he had been to the province of Illyricum, but that hardly means he didn't go there. The notion that all of Paul's letters have survived, or all of his writings are known to us, or that contained within those letters and writings are complete journals of everything that he did, all the adventures and circumstances that he encountered, and detailed lists of every place that he ever went cannot be taken seriously. Since Illyricum is north of Macedonia and we know he was in the area of Macedonia then it is entirely probable that he made it as far as Illyricum; there is no reason to doubt him in this. The idea is simply to inform his readers of the furthest reaches of his ministry to the North West.

We'll pause here for today and finish up chapter 15 next time.