

SIGNING THE BACK OF THE YEARBOOK

by Steve Zeisler

We live in a world that is desperate to understand and to succeed in having relationships. The disintegration of a culture is experienced most profoundly in the disintegration of relationships. I read the following opinion piece in the newspaper this week by James Jarvis, a professional psychologist:

The two main conduits of the information highway are the personal computer and the television. Both instruments tend to be used as solitary pursuits, and isolation is a crazy-making machine. It has become easier to ask a stranger a question on Internet than to walk down the hall at the office, or pick up the phone and ask the same question of a friend...The isolation and ease of using the information superhighway also tend to soften impulse control. Imagine the possibilities: a couple of glasses of wine, a handful of credit cards, and 24-hour shopping channels, where you just punch buttons and order. It won't take long to run up a bill you'll later regret. With access to every movie ever made only a remote control away, how many hours and weekends will we while away in escapist activity? What will happen to the already fragile social fabric of our society if we become even more isolated from one another?...I don't have answers to these questions.

But we as Christians are convinced that the answers are our heritage and our hope, and that they are found in Scripture.

We have come to the end of one of the great books of the Bible, the letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans. Knowing that we are living in a world that is disintegrating, that is experienced as a sadness by many as relationships deteriorate, we can be encouraged. The last chapters of Romans have wonderful insight into the nature of relationships: What does it mean to be friends? What does it mean to love somebody? What does it mean to reach out toward people who are different and may even be difficult? What makes possible the love within the Christian community that is greater than the love that can be experienced anywhere else?

In chapter 16 we come to a long list of names of people who come from two places. Paul is going to send his greetings to a couple of dozen folks in Rome who will receive this letter, and send greetings from those who are with him in Corinth, where he is writing. We want to look closely at these names and take seriously what we read here. In this apparently mundane passage, we have insight into the possibilities of relationships that can be thrilling to us and that give us a word to offer those around us who are hurting.

Let me attempt an analogy. You could say that Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome in many ways resembles a high school yearbook. High school years are meant to be building blocks for life. From ages fourteen to eighteen we are supposed to learn skills, knowledge, and an approach to life that will get us launched into early adulthood. These truths are to be remembered, and life should be built on them.

One of the records of high school experience is a yearbook. It is the history of the events, ideas, and accomplishments that took place during the year. The book of Romans is a bit similar. It is a record of truths that can be building blocks for life. What we read in this part of the Scriptures can serve as a foundation for us. These are the essentials that we ought to be reminded of again and again, upon which we ought to build our lives.

At the end of the school year most high school students approach their friends with yearbook and pen in hand and say, "Would you sign the back?" This week I dug out the yearbook from my senior year. It was a very interesting experience. I had completely forgotten a fair amount of the references in the handwritten notes in the back. I could hardly recall who some of the people were, and I could only barely remember the teachers and

classes they mentioned. And on the other hand, there were a few notes that were very poignant. I found myself thinking, "I haven't seen that person since I was eighteen years old, and I'd love to know how they're doing." So in the same way that at the back of most high school yearbooks we find a collection of handwritten names, greetings, memories, and thoughts about life at that stage; by analogy we find at the end of the book of Romans some very personal words, too.

Great Help and Godly Courage

Let's begin now with verses 1-5:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help that she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.
Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful for them.
Greet also the church that meets in their house.

Let's stop here in the middle of verse 5. The two longest references to individuals in this yearbook, an individual in one case and a couple in the other, are found at the beginning of the chapter. We are going to find much shorter statements naming and describing other people as we go on. These first individuals represent two groups that we will discover in the course of thinking through the chapter. One is the group of people whose origins are in Corinth where Paul is staying for three months and writing this letter, and Phoebe represents that group. It says that she was from the church in Cenchrea, which was part of greater metropolitan Corinth. She was known to Paul because of his ministry in Corinth.

Verse 2 turns our attention to Priscilla and Aquila, who are in Rome, as are the majority of those named here. Paul is writing to them and speaking of them words of encouragement, greeting, hope, and so on to those who will receive the letter.

One of the characteristics of the entire list of names is its variety. Most notably, we observe that men and women are named together in their ministries, their mutual involvement, their friendship, and their impact on the world they live in. It was unusual in the era in which this was written to see men and women so obviously enjoying fellowship and mutual ministry and involvement together. It is striking that the first person mentioned representing the Corinthian group and the first person mentioned representing the Roman group are each women: Phoebe in the one case, and Priscilla, with her husband Aquila, in the second. Further variety in Paul's list is seen in the combination of slaves and high government officials, couples and singles, Jews and Gentiles, and homeowners and itinerants.

Let's look at Phoebe first of all. There are two very strong words in Greek that are used to describe her. The first is *diakonos*: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *diakonon* of the church in Cenchrea." This is the word from which we get our word deacon. It means somebody who is called to serve, and is usually used of them when they have been tested, when their gift of service and their willingness to serve are widely recognized and well-formed. This is not someone whose service is occasional or sporadic. Phoebe was characterized by a heart of service, and the church appreciated her for it. She is the one who traveled to Rome bearing this letter to the Roman church. Paul is saying, "I commend her to you." They would have opened the letter and read it, and when they finally got to chapter 16, in response they would turn to thank her.

The second word that is used of Phoebe is *prostatis*: "She has been a *prostatis* to many people, including me." This is someone whose help is foundational or critical to other people. She was someone who did a tremendous amount for others. Her help established their lives so that they could be successful. To be called a *diakonos* and a *prostatis* was a very significant thing. He is speaking of her in very strong terms; she is someone he counts on. And he is personally grateful for the help he has received from her.

Marriage and Ministry

Then we turn to those in Rome. "Greet Priscilla and Aquila...." They are two of the people in the New

Testament whose history and lives are most stimulating to study. Prisca was the woman's name originally, and she was given a diminutive form of it, Priscilla, most often by Paul. The change was an expression of endearment. Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned six times in the New Testament. In four of the six times her name appears first, an observation that has led to speculation. One theory is that she was a noblewoman who married a slave and went off with him to serve the Lord. Another is that her personality was the more outstanding one and that she tended to be the one you thought of first when you thought of the two of them.

Whatever speculations are true, what stands out about Priscilla and Aquila is that they ministered together everywhere. Priscilla and Aquila are a wonderful example of having ministry as a couple. I commend the study of their lives to you if you would like to think about what it means to join with a marriage partner together in ministry. By persecution at times and by choice at other times, they traveled around the Mediterranean world in the service of Christ. They also worked together in the business of tent-making. Note carefully at what Paul says of these two: "...[They are] fellow workers in Christ Jesus." They had a teaching ministry that is mentioned specifically in Acts. Paul views them as his fellows or comrades. "They risked their lives for me," he says further. They were people who were willing to do the difficult, dangerous things that required courage.

"Churches of the Gentiles everywhere are grateful for them." the improper Claudius persecuted the Jews in Rome and banished many of them. Priscilla and Aquila fled Rome in this persecution. They went to Corinth where they met Paul, traveled with him to Ephesus, and ministered there. He left them behind and came back and joined them in ministry later. They went back again to Corinth and now finally are again in Rome. And everywhere they have gone, Gentile people especially have appreciated this Jewish couple for their courage and godliness.

Being Hospitable

Lastly, verse 5 says, "Greet also the church that meets in their house." That too is characteristic of them. Wherever they were, they always made their home available as a place for people to meet for fellowship, learning, growth, and challenge.

Let me observe something about our community. We live at a crossroads. This is a place where tourists come to enjoy the beautiful weather and the wonderful conditions of life, see the sights, and so on. People come to Stanford hospital for treatment of difficult medical problems. Frequently we have these folks in this congregation. They are often afraid, and they need to be treated hospitably. Many come to the great universities and to the multinational corporations that have their headquarters here. We have opportunity after opportunity to be welcoming to others, to show hospitality, to open our homes and our hearts, to be kind, and to extend ourselves. It is one of the great marks of real Christianity for people to take up the opportunity to make their homes a place where Jesus can minister to others.

Clearly Priscilla and Aquila were that sort of people. They didn't depend on having a specific location or on having things go well to practice hospitality. They were hospitable in Rome, Ephesus, and Corinth. They were hospitable when it was dangerous and when conditions were congenial; it didn't make any difference. They didn't have to be bolstered by everybody around them in order to succeed at their ministry. They were who they were from the inside. Their lives were created by Christ who lived within them.

Let's continue with the rest of the people who were in Rome who will receive greetings from the apostle. Verses 5b-16:

Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.
Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.
Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.
Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord.
Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.
Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ.
Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

Greet Herodion, my relative.
Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.
Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.
Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.
Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.
Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them.
Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them.
Greet one another with a holy kiss.
All the churches of Christ send greetings.

If you were to take my high school yearbook and read the names Jim, Nancy, Beth, Bill, Frank, and Duane; you wouldn't know any of these people. The little jokes that they wrote about what we experienced together would mean nothing to you. And to some extent we have the same problem here. Unlike Aquila and Prisca, most of the people in this list are known to us only because of their reference here.

Memories

Yet I would suggest five themes that draw these people together. The first is Paul's memories of people with whom he had specific experiences. Let's go through the list and pick out some of these. "Epenetus, my dear friend, was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia." Paul had tried on two missionary journeys to get into the Roman province of Asia and was unable to do so. The first missionary journey ended before he attempted going north. On the second missionary journey, we are told, the Spirit specifically forbade him entrance to the region, including the great city of Ephesus, which would later become a center for ministry. Eventually he was allowed to go there on his third missionary journey. I think he remembers longing to have influence in that area and seeing the first person finally come to Christ---this man Epenetus. I hope you have people in your life whom you have seen come to Christ. You can remember the time when they did not believe. Maybe doors were closed for awhile and later they were opened. It is an encouragement to remember specific people and the stories of their conversion.

In the beginning of verse 7 we see Andronicus and Junias, whom he calls "my relatives." Now, there are six people in this chapter who are going to get the title "my relatives." Often we think of Paul as having dropped out of the sky like the lone ranger, as if he came from nowhere and was loved by no one: the gunslinger for Jesus. But he mentions these people who are his relatives. We don't know exactly in what sense they were related to him. These two, Andronicus and Junias, may be husband and wife if the name Junias is actually Junia (there are some manuscripts that list it as the woman's name Junia and some that list it as the man's name Junias). Or they may be brothers and or cousins. What they are for sure though, are his relatives who had been in prison with him. "They are outstanding among the apostles [sent ones], and they were in Christ before I was."

What do you think it would have been like to have been Andronicus and Junias (or Junia), to have seen the young Paul when he hated Christ and his people, cheered at their deaths, caused their imprisonment, and traveled about breathing fire and anger against them; to have been in Christ before him and to have seen his hatred? Did they pray for him? Did they fear him and run from him? Probably both. And yet some time later they were in prison together. They were those who had become outstanding among the apostles; they were sent forth in ministry themselves. They were not apostles in the sense that Paul and the twelve were. But they were ones sent into the Lord's service. And Paul is grateful for them. Paul also greets another relative, Herodion, about whom he doesn't mention anything.

The man Apelles in verse 10 has a wonderful epithet attached to his name. He is "tested and approved in Christ." It doesn't say what the test was. I would love to know, wouldn't you? He went through some fire, some series of demands, some harshness; in which others would have failed the test; they would have quit and not been approved. But he didn't quit. The Lord put him through something, and Paul remembers it. He says of Apelles, "greet him, the one who has been tested and who has the stamp of Jesus' approval on him." I remember Ray Stedman's saying about this man once that he thought the statement "tested and approved in Christ" would be a great epitaph.

In verse 13 Paul says, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too." These are very interesting people. Do you remember the story of Jesus' crucifixion? He was arrested at night, spent the night before his tormentors, was beaten thirty-nine times with a cat-o'-nine-tails, and was bleeding. Weakened as he approached his execution carrying his cross to Golgotha, he stumbled. There was a man from Cyrene (Africa), a black man who was standing by the side of the road. The Roman soldiers pressed him into service and said, "You carry the cross." Simon was his name. We know from the gospel account of Mark that he later became a believer. His son Rufus is this man here. Simon didn't intend to become a Christian that day nor to carry Jesus' cross. Yet he was so impressed with Jesus, the one he had been drafted to serve, that he later became his slave for life. And so Rufus came to know Paul at some point, and they have a friendship.

Then Paul mentions, wonderfully, Rufus' mother. He doesn't name her, perhaps because she fills the role of a mother to him, and when you think of your mother you don't think of her name; she is just Mom. What a tender thought that is. Paul was probably an adult or at least a young adult when he met her, but she was there for him, as his own parents may well not have been. She was a source of maternal care and support.

Paul remembers a second group of people not so much for particular events that he refers to, but just for the feeling he has for them. He says Epenetus is his dear friend, and he will use that phrase again. "Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord." We don't know anything about him except that when Paul thinks of him, he says he loves him. At the end of verse 9 he says, "Greet my dear friend Stachys." How they came to be friends we don't know. Persis, who has a couple things said about her, is also called "my dear friend." And she is "another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord." These were his friends, his beloved, his comrades, both men and women. And for the most part all we know is that he cared for these people.

Hard Work in Humble and High Places

Then there is a third group of people we can characterize by what he calls their service to their Lord, using especially the phrase "hard work." In verse 6 he says, "Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you." We don't know whether he knows Mary well or has only heard that she was working hard for the church in Rome. We don't know whether he has feelings of affection for her---he doesn't say. He says only, "Greet Mary, who works hard." It is a good thing to have said of you that other people recognize that you are in it from the heart and your effort is serious. In verse 9 he says, "Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ." He too is highlighted for his work, his effort, his gifts, and his involvement.

There is a very interesting couple of names in verse 12: "Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who worked hard in the Lord." Many think Tryphena and Tryphosa were twins. These are the kind of names you give twins, especially identical twins. It may well be that these are elderly women, perhaps unmarried; they are not mentioned as having family. Their names mean Dainty and Delicate, and yet instead of daintiness---folded hands, sweet voices, and doilies adorning their home---what they are noted for again is hard work. And also, finally, Persis, as we have already seen, works very hard in the Lord.

Fourthly, there are people mentioned in groups without much more appellation given to them than the groups they are in. At the end of verse 10 he says, "Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus." And at the end of verse 11, "Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord." These were probably communities of slaves that were taken over by Caesar. When a slave-owner died, if his family couldn't sustain the holdings the slaves would be impressed into Caesar's estates. Though now owned by Caesar they would be designated as "the household of...." The names Aristobulus and Narcissus are known in secular history. Both of them have a position of some power and influence near the center of Caesar's court. Slaves were often the best educated and the most valuable people in the Roman court. They did very important work---writing, making economic decisions, and had many other influential responsibilities. They had a lot of influence. There is some possibility that instead of naming the individual people, in case this document should fall into the wrong hands, Paul just says, "Greet the brothers and sisters who are close to the emperor, who have opportunity for ministry near the center of governmental power." He is prayerfully aware of their service to Christ.

Together in Christ

Finally, in the last two groups Paul merely mentions series of names in verse 14 (and in 15 below): "Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them." These are all men's names. They evidently have a community, perhaps a bachelors' quarters or a fraternity of some kind. They may be young single men who were in training for ministry (like interns here at PBC). They, too, receive encouragement from the apostle.

I have very fond memories of my last two years of college and the subsequent year before getting married. I was living with a group of brothers, and we had adventures together going places, having Bible studies, and having people stay at our house. I never knew who would be there when I got up. Fun, excitement, and comradeship were part of that era of my life. Something similar may be in view here.

In verse 15 Paul mentions a house church or another community: "Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them." Again we don't know anything about them except that these saints gathered together. "Give them my best, let them know I care about them," he says.

One of the things about this list that is interesting to me, as I mentioned already, is the amazing variety of people and the variety of things Paul has to say about them. Not everything here is obviously spiritual, for one thing---hard work, someone's being a mother to him, memories, his relatives. And yet some of the concerns are deeply spiritual. In any case, everything here is Christian, whether it's conversion to Christ or just the caring of an ordinary group of people for each other. The Lord fills all of this. All the ways these people cared for each other grew from commitment to Christ, and that is what gives this passage its encouraging character.

We have Christian friends too. We are part of a community. We are people who will have memories of one another in the Lord. None of the other groups of people that call for our allegiance---clubs to which we pay dues or those we share hobbies with---have the weight, or depth of being together with brothers and sisters in Christ for fellowship, ministry, growth laughter, tears, and prayer.

My high school yearbook will someday be lost forever; no one will ever refer to it again. The notes at the back are of no consequence. But these names will never be lost, because the Scriptures will last into eternity. The world to come will have this letter to the Romans in it, and all of these people will be named. You and I will have a chance someday to meet them. We can ask about the story of Epenetus' conversion. We can ask Tryphena and Tryphosa what hard work it was that they did in the Lord. These memories, these friends, these greetings, as ordinary as they are, will last forever because Jesus Christ surrounds them. And we have an opportunity to live like that as well, to be engaged with each other in things that really matter. We live in a world where relationships are deteriorating, and yet we can swim against the tide.

A Great Honor and a Warning

Let me introduce you to the rest of the names beginning with verse 21 (we'll skip a paragraph for a moment). These are the people who are in Corinth sending the letter with Paul:

Timothy, my fellow worker, send his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

Note the last three of Paul's relatives who are mentioned. Timothy, of course, was one of the stalwarts who served with the apostle in various ministries. He is one of the great figures in the New Testament.

Verse 22:

I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.

Again we have slaves, high-born, city officials, itinerants, and relatives---a great mixture of folks. This was

the community that sent Phoebe with the letter with these greetings included.

One of the interesting verses in Romans is verse 22: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord." Tertius means third in Latin. His brother Quartus, or fourth, is also mentioned. Number three and number four were almost certainly slaves' names. They weren't even given the honor of an ordinary human name, just numbers.

Paul's habit when he wrote letters was to walk back and forth, composing out loud and thinking as he went along. He probably had very bad eyesight and would have found handwriting difficult himself, so he had a secretary taking dictation. In this case it was Tertius. And finally at the end of the great letter to the Romans he says, "Tertius, say a word of your own---" So we read, "I, Tertius, greet you." And this Tertius who is so disregarded by his station in life that he doesn't have a regular name, gets to be one of two people who include original material into what may be the greatest document ever written.

A Word of Warning

Finally, let's note the paragraph beginning in verse 17:

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.
The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

This is a warning from Paul that is similar to the warnings Jesus issued. Wherever you have real Christianity---lives that are being changed, communities of people that are built on love, people who are really joyful and honest in their care for each other; the real thing---you are going to have leeches who will attach themselves to it. They are in it for their appetite, not for Christ's sake. They are effective in deceit and flattery. They know the lingo and how to look right. But they will divide and put up obstacles. We must expect them, and not be surprised when we realize who they are. And Paul says, "Ignore them. The day will come when the Lord will crush Satan under your feet." We don't need to work especially hard at fighting back. We just need to forbid them influence or a voice.

In conclusion let's read the benediction in the last verses of the book of Romans. Now we move from the ordinary greetings to ordinary people, the signatures in the back of the yearbook, to remembering again eternal things, the lasting mysteries. We remember the prophets who have gone before and have written of these things, and the gospel that is life-saving. Paul casts our vision from the immediate to the horizon and bids us remember who we are in the Lord. He bids us remember that the gospel as he taught it and as we received it is sufficient to give life.

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him---to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Steve Zeisler
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