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FACES IN THE CROWD

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We sometimes find ourselves gazing at faces of people assembled for a portrait. A wedding party. A confirmation class. A family reunion. It might be a picture taken last week. Or fifty years ago. The older the picture, the less likely it is that we will recognize the faces. Near the end of the movie *Hoosiers* there is a photo of the team from a tiny Indiana school that accomplished the improbable and won the state high school basketball crown in 1954 over much larger rivals. “Faces in the Crowd” is a regular feature in *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* magazine. Down the edge of the page are photos of ordinary people who have considerable athletic accomplishments, but are almost certainly not known to the readers of the magazine.

The end of Romans has such a gallery of people. Since there were no cameras, all we have is a list of names. Paul shares greetings with more than two dozen people, few of whom are familiar. They are simply “faces in the crowd” who’ve long since joined the great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) that look on as we run the race set before us.

Biblical lists are often skipped over as we read, but if “all scripture is inspired by God and profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16 RSV), this Scripture is too!



Now that Paul has articulated the wonders of the Gospel, he shares his travel plans, extends personal greetings, and makes an appeal for support and prayer. The “faces in the crowd” we see in passing are a window into Paul’s world and a mirror to our own as we attend to these final sections in Paul’s great letter to Rome.

PAUL’S TRAVEL PLANS: WESTWARD HO! *ROMANS 15:22–33*

The chief purpose of the epistle has been served. Now Paul turns to his future mission plans. The itinerary for his journeys, it appears, was fluid at best. Things did not always go according to plan. At times, violent opposition forced an early exit (Acts 13:50–51, 16:19–40). Luke records that at one point the Holy Spirit re-directed the mission from Bithynia to Macedonia (Acts 16:6–7). Paul was convinced that Satan threw up some roadblocks too (1 Thess. 2:18).

Paul had a desire to come to Rome, but that had been put on hold more than once. Earlier he told them he was “prevented” (1:13), but with no further explanation. Here he talks of being “hindered” (v. 22). After describing his work, he says “This is the reason [for my delay],” which leads us to believe that it was the sheer rush of opportunities that left Paul “tied up” with responsibilities and unable to come at the time originally planned. Presently he is in Corinth. The next stop is an interim journey to Jerusalem. Then at last he hopes to come to Rome “in passing” (v. 24) on the way to Spain as he makes his “relentless march westward” (Middendorf).

Most doubt that he ever reached Spain since Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome. But ancient writer Clement of Rome believes that he eventually made it, “having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West” (1 Clement 5:6–7). In that scenario, he would have been released from

imprisonment in Rome, made the trip to Spain, and then later re-arrested and finally executed. Luke’s purpose in Acts was to demonstrate the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, from the heart of Judaism to the capital of the Gentile world. Having shown that Gospel triumph, he ended his account. Was that the end of Paul’s travels, or did Luke break off the story deliberately? In his book *The Constantine Codex*, Dr. Paul L. Maier helps the reader imagine the discovery of “Second Acts,” a lost biblical book that describes Paul’s journey to Spain. We can only wonder!

The reason for Paul’s interim journey to Jerusalem is important. He had gathered a special offering for the poor in Jerusalem (see 2 Cor. 8:1–15) that he must now deliver. “I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints” (v. 25). He had made an agreement to do this with James and Cephas and John (Gal. 2:9–10), and he intended to keep his word. But more important was the fact that the offering provided tangible evidence that Jews and Gentiles were united! The word ESV translates in v. 26 as “contribution” is literally “fellowship” (*koinoonia*), a word, so the lexicons tell us, that could denote a gift that was a “sign of fellowship” or a “proof of brotherly love.” N. T. Wright explains the offering’s significance this way: “For Gentiles to give money for Jewish Christians was a sign that the Gentiles regarded them as members of the same family; for Jewish Christians to accept it would be a sign that they in turn accepted the Gentiles as part of their family.”

As he anticipates the trip to Jerusalem, Paul pleads for prayer. “I appeal to you, brothers...to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints” (vv. 30–31). The word “strive” is literally “agonize,” a strong word that indicated some deep concern. He obviously fears for his safety in Judea. The danger posed

by the “unbelievers” came true. Acts records that Paul nearly lost his life in a riot near the temple (Acts 21:30ff.), then later became the target of an assassination plot (Acts 23:12–15). The fact that Paul was rescued (by a Roman officer and his troops! – Acts 21:31–34) is certainly an answer to that prayer for deliverance. The second petition that the offering would be “acceptable” also appears to have been granted. Luke reports, “the brothers received us gladly” (Acts 21:17). Paul himself later tells Governor Felix, “I came to bring alms to my nation” (Acts 24:17), an indication of its acceptance.

With that task finished at last, Paul anticipates finally making the trip through Rome. With characteristic humility, he does not say he will come to teach them, but simply to “be refreshed in your company” (v. 32). The final benediction, “May the God of peace be with you all” (v. 33) actually says, in Greek, that He and His peace “*is with you*” already! Even though trouble waits for Paul in Rome (and, much later, persecution for the church), there remains a blessed peace, a true *shalom*, for him and them. He continues with the sharing of greetings.

PERSONAL GREETINGS

ROMANS 16:1–16

There is a strong temptation to skip over this last chapter because it is, in large part, “just a bunch of names” similar to the genealogies in the Old Testament and the Gospels. In one of his homilies, Chrysostom says, “I think there are many... who hurry over this part of the epistle because they think it is superfluous and of little importance.” Instead, we will linger and look at the gallery of people Paul mentions.

Before those greetings, Paul sets before us the name Phoebe, who is called a “servant” (*diakonos*) of the church in Cenchreae, not far from Corinth (v. 1). Paul is “commending” her to them, probably as the bearer of the letter, since the word *diakonos* can denote one who is an “intermediary” or “courier.” She likely had a larger serving role in Cenchreae, though an order of female church workers distinct

from male deacons “would not be invented for another three hundred years” (Wright). It is clear she had been a “patron” to Paul in some fashion, and he asked them to “help her in whatever she may need” (v. 2).

Now comes the parade of people greeted and greeting. There are 34 names to be exact, 26 named people in Rome, eight more who are with Paul in Corinth, whose greetings he sends. In no other letter does Paul include such a lengthy list. By naming as many as he can, both in Rome and Corinth, he provides something like a list of references since he has not met them face to face. In the letters to churches he knows well, there are few named greetings like this.

The first two are the most familiar. Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul calls “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (v. 3), first appear in Acts 18, where we learn that this husband and wife duo had originally fled from Rome because of a decree by Emperor Claudius. They worked alongside Paul as tentmakers and hosted him. They later accompanied Paul to Ephesus and while there helped in the theological formation of Apollos (Acts 18:24–26). Eventually they returned to Rome when the decree of Claudius was relaxed, probably when the emperor died in 54 AD. Here in Romans 16 we read that they hosted a house church (for the first two centuries there were no public church buildings) and that, at some point, they had “risked their necks” to save Paul (v. 4). We wonder what adventure story is behind that phrase!

The names continue. Here’s the lineup of those who follow in vv. 5–15:

Epaenetus, “who was the first convert to Christ in Asia,”

Mary, “who has worked hard for you,”

Andronicus and Junia, “my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me,”

Ampliatius, “my beloved in the Lord,”

Urbanus, “our fellow worker in Christ,”
 Stachys, “my beloved,”
 Apelles, “who is approved in Christ,”
 “Those who belong to the family of” Aristobulus,
 Herodion, “my kinsman,”
 “The family of” Narcissus,
 Tryphaena and Tryphosa, “those workers in the Lord,”
 Persis, “the beloved...who has worked hard in the Lord,”
 Rufus, “chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well,”
 Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas
 “and the brothers who are with them,”
 Philologus, Julia, Nereus “and his sister,”
 Olympas, “and all the saints who are with them.”

There’s much to learn from this list. It is clear, first, that Paul was no “lone wolf.” He was part of an extended team of co-workers. Second, he sets a good example in expressing appreciation and affection for those co-workers, something pastors and heads of church staffs would do well to imitate! It is clear, third, that the names include both Jews (he calls them his “kinsmen”) and Gentiles. The ethnic teamwork Paul so desired was taking place! In the fourth place, it is very striking, contrary to the frequent labeling of Paul as a “misogynist,” that he valued the women who helped with God’s work. If “Junia” (16:7) denotes a female, there are nine women among the 26 people greeted in Rome — Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, the mother of Rufus, and the sister of Nereus. Six of them earn explicit grateful recognition (a higher proportion than the men!).

One of those women has drawn considerable attention. A debate has developed among scholars and students about the identity and role of Junia (v. 7). The name itself may be feminine (Junia) or masculine (Junias or Junianus), depending on

how it is accented, something that differs among early manuscripts. If Junia is taken as a woman, the names are likely those of a husband and wife. Further, they are called “well known to the apostles” (so the ESV), meaning highly regarded *by* the apostles. But other translations render the phrase as “outstanding *among* the apostles” (so the NIV), thus allowing the possibility that they themselves are numbered among the “apostles,” and outstanding ones at that! If both conjectures are true, this verse becomes evidence for a woman being included in what has been thought of as an exclusively male role. Paul’s teaching elsewhere (1 Cor. 14:33–35 and 1 Tim. 2:8–15) seems clearly against that understanding. Further, there is the possibility that “apostle” may be used in a looser sense here simply to denote a “messenger” or “emissary” rather than the narrower, more authoritative term we normally understand (Douglas Moo).

A few other names deserve further comment. Both Ampliatus and Urbanus are common names for Roman slaves, so scholars tell us. It is generally understood that a majority of those who became Christians in Rome were slaves, and these names would be evidence of that. “Rufus” (v. 13) is likely the son of Simon of Cyrene, one of two sons mentioned by name in Mark 15:21. If so, the son of the man forced to carry the cross of Jesus would have made a powerful witness to the events of that Good Friday. You see, it is worth taking time to study these lists!

FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

ROMANS 16:17–27

As the letter ends, Paul gives a final warning, another set of greetings, and a concluding doxology. The warning is directed against false teaching: “watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles (*skandala*) contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them” (v. 17). This recalls his directive to the Corinthians that they refuse to associate with manifestly immoral “brothers” (1 Cor. 5:9–13). It is hard to identify a

*So hear him once more: “to the only wise God be glory
forevermore through Jesus Christ!”*



particular group or teaching Paul singles out here in Romans. More likely it is a general caution against future false teaching they will almost certainly encounter.

In summary he says, “I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil” (v. 19). Is he recalling the word of Jesus about being “wise as serpents” and “innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16)? A word of encouragement concludes the warning: “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (v. 20). A better translation than “soon” would be “suddenly” or “swiftly.”

This encouraging word recalls the ancient prediction to the serpent in Gen. 3:15 that the woman’s seed would “bruise your head.” Ah, more than bruise!

Now there come more names. Paul sends the greetings from his current co-workers in Corinth. Noteworthy among them is Timothy, the person most frequently mentioned in Paul’s letters and coauthor of six of them! Other identifications are less certain. Acts 13:1 mentions a “Lucius of Cyrene,” a prophet in Antioch. Is this Lucius the same one? Acts 17:5 tells how the home of one “Jason” is attacked by a mob in Thessalonica. Acts 19:22 pairs Timothy and Erastus as an “advance team” sent into Macedonia. Acts 20:4 names “Sopater the Berean” who accompanied Paul on his journey through Macedonia. Is he the same man as “Sospater”? Lucius, Jason, and Sospater are labeled “kinsmen,” and it is possible they would be accompanying Paul as he delivered the special offering soon in Jerusalem.

What happened to verse 24? Observant students will notice that the ESV text goes from v. 23 to v. 25. A footnote informs us that “some manuscripts insert verse 24: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.* This difference between early manuscripts is just one part of some divergence in how Romans ends. The appearance of a “doxology” (vv. 25–27) is not unusual, but its placement at the end of a letter is. No other epistle ends this way. Almost all others have, instead, a benediction. Compare 1 Thess. 5:28 and 2 Thess. 3:18, which are nearly identical to the footnoted v. 24.

That aforementioned doxology reprises the “mystery” mentioned earlier in Romans, where Paul describes the “partial hardening” of Israel “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (11:25). Twelve other times Paul uses this word (six of them in Ephesians!), sometimes as a synonym for the Gospel itself, and sometimes pointedly for the wondrous inclusion of the Gentiles. “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6).

How else would “the apostle to the Gentiles” praise God for what has finally been “disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations” (v. 26)? So hear him once more: “to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!” (v. 27).

What more can we say than “Amen”!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Heavenly Father, gracious God, thank You for this epistle, my instructor, and my fellow students. As I look back on what I've learned, bring to mind those things that will be helpful for my life. Give me the resolve to trust what You have promised and obey what You command, that I may glorify You and encourage others! For Jesus' sake. Amen.

For Review:

1. Take time to page through the course notes and P. A. questions you answered. Highlight things you will most want to remember. Use the four questions below as a way to categorize.
2. Review once more the memory verse challenges. You may want to put some (or all) on 3 x 5 cards (location on side A, verse on side B) and carry the cards with you. Reviewing the cards is a profitable way to use time when you must wait in line or at the doctor's office!

List what you've learned using these four questions:

3. What DISCOVERIES have I made that I could share with someone else?

4. What PROMISES does God make in Romans that I need to claim?

5. What COMMANDS does God give in Romans that I am being called to obey?

6. What ACTION STEPS have I taken or do I intend to take as a result of this study of Romans?
