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Arrivederci Roma

Romans 16

We are better together. That's one of the central truths of the Christian life.

It's also the secret behind the phenomenal strength and stability of those Redwoods in Northern California. My wife Jennifer grew up east of those beautiful Redwoods. Some of those trees are so large you can literally drive a car through them.

These trees are hundreds of years old!! The secret to their strength and durability is the interconnectedness of the roots, which are shallow but go way out and are intertwined with the root systems of hundreds of other Redwoods. We see that same interconnectedness displayed in the relationships of the early Christians in Rome.

This morning we are saying "Arrivederci!" to Rome as Paul sends his final greetings – both to people he knows and to people he doesn't know!

What is intriguing about this section of Romans is how many people he greets! Paul greets twenty-six people, two families and three house churches in this closing chapter. That number is all the more surprising when you consider that Paul had never visited Rome. This has led some scholars to believe that Paul sent greetings to virtually every Christian in the early Roman church. If this is true, this is a special group of believers that is worth knowing more about. Here's why.

Historians surmise that Rome at the time of Paul's writing was somewhere between eight hundred thousand to one point two million inhabitants. Scholars believe that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans in 57 AD while he was in Corinth. Only seven years later in 64 AD Nero accused Christians of setting Rome on fire, unleashing a horrific wave of terror against the church.

What was it about this "small band of religious zealots" that made the Roman power base feel so insecure?

This morning we're going to get to know a few of our early brethren in the Roman church to discover what made them such a powerful lot.

Romans 16:17

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 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 to them.

Greet also the church that meets at their house.

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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The first person mentioned on Paul's list is Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. Cenchrea was about six miles away from Corinth. Paul tells the Romans to welcome her in the Lord in a way "worthy of the saints" and "to give her any help she may need...for she has been a "patron" (ESV) of many and of myself as well. Phoebe was not only a servant in the church but most likely a business woman, a "patron" who financially supported Paul and the work of the early church.

The church cannot thrive, let alone grow without the sacrificial financial support of faithful followers of Christ giving to the ministry. It's important to point out that a significant number of the financial supporters of the early church were women who gave sacrificially to support Paul and others doing church planting and going on missions.

The next on the list are Prescilla and Aquila. Many of you remember them from your studies in Corinthians. Paul calls them "my fellow workers."

The Greek word there is "synergos."

What English word does that remind you of? Synergy! You know the old saying "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." That's synergy.

Paul, Aquila and Prescilla were a synergistic team. Prescilla and Aquila were Paul's kind of people. They had GUTS! Paul says they "risked their lives for me! And not only for Paul but for all the Gentiles! They were so effective together that Paul took them to Ephesus after his year and a half long stay in Corinth. Synergy happens when each one in the Body of Christ surrenders their lives completely to serve the Lord using their unique gifts and talents that God gives them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul goes on to say greet my dear friend Epenetus, "agapetos", literally "beloved one" who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Imagine the courage it took for Epenetus to be the first Christian convert in Asia? We hear stories of missionaries who work among people groups who don't see their first convert for 30 years. Exam Alan and Joan Eubank.

Maybe you are the Epenetus at your work or in your family! Maybe you were the first to receive Christ before anyone else. Someone has to be the trailblazer! I know that's the case for Ryan Palmer

our director of Student Ministries. He was the first to receive Christ in his family. And then others followed.

There always has to be the bold courageous one who gets the ball rolling. Then others follow. It takes guts to be the first one.

Then there's Mary. Paul says "greet Mary, who worked very hard for you." We can't be sure of who Mary was because it was a common Jewish name but she worked very hard in ministry. Paul commends many people on this list for their hard work, for their help and their support, sometimes "risking their own lives" for Paul and the gospel. I hope it's becoming obvious there are no couch potatoes on this list. The Pareto Principle didn't apply for this group --- 20% of the people didn't do 80% of the work! They all worked selflessly and courageously to serve the Lord. It was a costly endeavor.

Andronicus and Junias. They were Paul's relatives. Kinfolk. They were Christians before Paul and they were in prison with him. Undoubtedly they prayed fervently for Paul when he was persecuting the church. And they all ended up being thrown into prison together at one point. They must have gotten a laugh out of that one! Paul's relatives praying that he come to know Christ. Then he becomes the most ardent evangelist in the church! Such irony! Brave souls, Andronicus and Junias. Paul said that "they are outstanding among the apostles." Wow. That's quite a statement. Did he mean that Andronicus and Junias go weigh back and were outstanding among the very first followers of Christ? We don't know exactly. But they were fully committed followers of Jesus. The kind you want on your team!

You couldn't be a Christian in the early church at Rome and go unnoticed. You couldn't come to worship and blend into the crowd. If your faith was real and you were sharing your faith with others eventually you would get the attention of the authorities or someone who didn't share Jesus' kingdom values. And you would probably pay a high price.

"Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus" – Aristobulus may have been the grandson of King Herod the Great, who lived in Rome. He was behind the scenes politically, but was purportedly a close friend of Emperor Claudius. When Aristobulus died, his household, that is, his servants and slaves, became the property of the emperor but it was still known as the household of Aristobulus. It is this group that Paul is probably referring to. If so, it means that even in the royal household there were a number of Christian servants and slaves exercising a witness to Christ among the leaders of Rome – even the emperor himself. This is supported by the fact that Paul mentions his relative, Herodion, in connection with these servants. You can see from the name – Herodian - that this man had connection with the family of Herod. This is also a hint to us that Paul himself had some connection with the ruling family of the Jews. His relative, Herodion, had become a Christian, and was living there in Rome as part of the household of either Aristobulus or Narcissus – though not holding power, close to those who pulled the level of power.

Paul says **"greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord."**

The most famous Narcissus we know in Roman history was a former slave who became the personal secretary of Emperor Claudius. He gained much wealth, because he was in charge of the emperor's correspondence. Anyone who wanted the Emperor to read a correspondence had to

“grease the palm of Narcissus” as it were for a correspondence to get through. Shortly after Nero came to the throne he forced Narcissus to commit suicide, as he did many others. But it is clear from Romans 16 that there were Christians in the household of Narcissus. We see a trend developing here in the early church – Christian slaves and servants following Christ, giving a witness to the Savior to the most powerful in Rome. Not easy.

“Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.”

Tryphena and Tryphosa were sisters who worked very hard for the church. We do not know what they did but there is irony here. When Paul wrote this he probably smiled to himself, for their names mean “dainty” and “delicate” --- yet they were hard workers. Their names suggest nobility, and perhaps they were born to aristocracy. And yet, they did not have to work for a livelihood but instead worked hard in the service of the Lord – a bit ironic!

Persis means Persian woman! What’s a Persian woman doing in Rome on Paul’s list? She was probably a slave brought to Rome – uprooted from her home country and taken to a foreign land. Did you know that refugees – people who are forced to flee their home country because of political turmoil or violence are some of the most open people to the gospel? The EPC supports a missionary family – the McKays – who minister in Germany to Syrian refugees. There is a “window of opportunity” when working with refugees when they are most open to the gospel...the chaos of a life turned upside down and then kindness shown to them through hospitality – some open their hearts to Christ, especially if they have been driven out of their country by violence and extremism from their own religion.

These are only a few of the people Paul sends greetings to.

Why does Paul spend so much time identifying and greeting Christians in Rome at the end of his epistle?

For one reason he wanted to **encourage** them. Being a follower of Jesus at the time of Nero may have been like being a Jew in Hitler’s Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s. Your life was in danger. In the span of seven years between 57 AD when Paul wrote to the Romans to 64AD when the city of Rome burned, the church in Rome grew tremendously. So much so that when Nero needed a scapegoat for Rome burning he found easy pickins with the Christians.

Paul not only wanted to encourage the Christians in Rome he also wanted them to realize the importance of their fellowship with one another. They were better together. The interconnectedness of relationship would be a key to their spiritual survival in the midst of persecution and travail. He wanted them to be like the Redwoods we talked about at the beginning of the service whose roots went way out and who were strong because of the intertwining of roots with one another.

To become like that you have to know each other well. And you have to learn to be dependent on each other. That’s why we encourage everyone one here to be in Life Groups....so you have others who know you well and can encourage you when life is tough.

We also have something in Celebrate Recovery called Step Studies. Step Studies also help you develop close community with other believers. I want to direct your attention to the screen as we watch a group of women who are going to share their experience in a step study.