

## Paul's Epistle to the Romans

I have some good news and some bad news . . . that opening worked for Joseph in our skit a few weeks ago, and he is the *favorite*, after all, so I thought I'd try it here. Note my coat of many colors. The good news is that I'm going to talk about and try to put into context St. Paul and his Epistle to the Romans, which we have been hearing today, and, the really good news is that I will try not to talk too long. The bad news is that I am not a Pauline scholar. I don't know a lot about Paul myself.

Actually, I got off to the wrong start with Paul. When I was a kid, Amelia's age (wave, please, Amelia) I remember watching a children's pageant, much like the one we had this summer, but the skit I saw was of Saul of Tarsus riding to Damascus. Picture Ramsay Adams on his hands and knees as the donkey (no offense, Patricia), and picture Judith Katz or even David Barnes as Saul of Tarsus, riding on his back. Saul has some companions with him, and they are zealous Hebrew Pharisees, judgmental Jews heading to Damascus to arrest and persecute Jesus' followers. All at once there is a flash of bright light and Saul falls to the ground, blinded. We hear muffled voices. Jesus, who has both died and risen from the dead recently, is speaking to Saul, calling Saul to believe in Him and to become God's and His *apostle*, his messenger *sent away* to teach the Gospel of Christ to other lands. Finally, Saul rises, transformed and a Christian. Only, as I remember it from the skit, when Saul rises, he is suddenly and thereafter called Paul the Apostle, so I figured that his conversion included Jesus' renaming him: "I hereby dub thee Paul the Apostle!" No more mention of Saul—*ever* in my childhood version.

Not until decades later—more decades than I would like to admit — did I compute that Saul and Paul are the same name, but Saul is the Hebrew form and Paul is the Greco-Roman form. So the apostle still went by Saul when preaching to or talking with the Jewish Christians later and, for example, in debating with James, Peter, and the other original apostles about whether a Christian needs to follow Mosaic law or the Hebrew diet. (They said yes; Paul said no.) But he goes by Paul when working with the Gentiles, the Greeks and Romans, as he does in his epistle to the Romans today and throughout most of his ministry. It's a simple distinction, but I missed it, and it illustrates how Paul really *listened and directed himself and his message to the specific audience, Hebrew, Greek, or Roman.*

There are some other aspects of Saul alias Paul that made him an important choice, especially as Jesus' apostle to the Greeks and Romans to whom, over time, Paul increasingly preached. Paul spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; in fact, Greek may have been his first language. He was a Roman citizen. He also was well educated and literate, probably *far* more so than Christ's *original* twelve apostles. Often he dictated his letters, but we're fairly certain that he *could and did* write himself. Our New Testament contains 27 books of which 14 are generally attributed to Paul and 7 are believed to be his own. The book of *Acts*, which talks about the Acts of the Apostles, is more than half about Paul. More than anyone else, he was the first written word of the Christian community.

Paul also was always a zealous activist, even before he was a Christian. He always acted out his beliefs, whether guided by Judaic law as a Pharisee or by Jesus' calling. After his conversion, he would go anywhere, do whatever it took to get across Jesus' message of

redemption and salvation. The fact that he was a tent maker who could weave the tent cloth helped; he could make a living anywhere, and there is no doubt that he felt *called*. Paul was sure he had talked with the risen Christ on the Road to Damascus, and he was filled with God's Holy Spirit and hope for Jesus' imminent second coming. He was fearless and tireless in delivering God's Word as he experienced it. I was struck by how often, unplanned, Ed and I traveled in Paul's footsteps in exploring the Eastern Mediterranean. Paul had preached here and here, healed and performed miracles there, been stoned there, escaped from the Romans here, been imprisoned there, shipwrecked there, and established Christian communities there, there, there, there, and there. The only analogy I can give you, having grown up in New Jersey, is George Washington in our revolutionary war. Did you feel that, everywhere you go, Washington had been there first? His troops camped here, battled there and there, escaped the British there and there, and it seems like he slept in mansions in every town! My childhood was spent growing up on the sites of Washington's many lookouts and signal fires and meeting places. Paul was like that.

In any case, Paul built up and gathered together communities of early Christian followers and kept in touch with them, cheering them on through his letters, the Epistles from which we read most weeks in our church service. Today's epistle, written in 56-57 AD, is one that he wrote from Corinth, Greece, to the Christian community in Rome. Remember, this was a real letter with a real purpose. Most of Paul's letters were sent to strengthen communities of Christians he had converted, but this letter, his last and longest, was different. Rome, as you know, was where all the political action was in those days, but Paul had never been there—and he wanted to go. There was already a

thriving, established Christian community there, but it wasn't *his* and he wasn't their mentor. To the contrary, he was writing basically to introduce himself and his beliefs and to prepare to visit them. He planned to leave Corinth, where he was, and travel to Jerusalem to bring the home church moneys he had gathered from these newly converted communities. Then he wanted to go to Rome, meet and secure a base in the Roman Christian community, and then travel on to Spain for yet another crusade. He was no longer young, probably around 60, but you already know he was tireless, and he expected Jesus' second coming very soon.

Things didn't quite play out as Paul wrote in today's Epistle to the Romans. He did go to Jerusalem but was arrested there, and it isn't clear whether his enemies turned out to be the Romans or the conservative Jews or probably *both*. As today's reading notes, Paul believed that, beyond God's having a covenant with the Jews, ***"all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. . . . When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heir, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him."*** To Paul, God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins and free us from them. Paul felt that man was by nature drawn to sin, and we lived according to the flesh and in sin until Jesus brought us into Grace. Jesus was God's gift; he died and rose again so that we could be forever freed from a life of sin. If we believe in Jesus and are saved by the *Grace of the Holy Spirit*, then we are the children and heirs of God, whether by birthright (the Jews) or adopted (the Gentiles). We all can be saved by God's grace if we only believe. In this regard, Paul's is a philosophy of *flexibility, openness, inclusiveness, and hope* in the

unseen. From Paul's time to today—in fact, still markedly in Jerusalem today—these are *all* qualities that can bring us together and create at least the hope for peace in the future. In Paul's time, Jews believed that following the Law of Moses, sticking to the dietary strictures, and circumcision, in short following the *law*, was how to get to Heaven. Others believed that the key to salvation lay in our good works. By contrast, Paul's belief of salvation by *God's grace* flew in the face of these laws—and the bottom line is that Paul may have allowed his capture in Jerusalem to escape the ire of the Jewish priests.

*Romans 8*, our current passage, of course, was written *before* Paul traveled to Jerusalem, and Paul knew that the Roman Christians, too, were a diverse and discordant group. There had been a Jewish community in Rome since the second century BC, and the early, very early Roman Christian community was probably Jewish, but *then* Jews were banned from Rome, and so many of the original Jewish Christians were forced to leave. The Gentile Christians stayed and gained control of the Roman Christian community. But then the Jews were allowed to return to Rome, and the debate over who were the true children of God and *why* intensified. To Paul, the answer was simple. *You both are, so long as you believe in God's sending Jesus to save us from our sinful ways of the flesh, and so long as you are filled by Grace with God's Holy Spirit and love.* Paul goes on to say that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is revealed to us.” We can endure pain and suffering now, for our reward will come with our faith when Jesus returns. The bad news is temporary, but the Good News is eternal.

How did Paul's trip to Rome play out? Interestingly, after Paul was captured by the Romans in Jerusalem (whether by choice or not is not

clear), he spent two years imprisoned in Caesarea. Then he sailed to Rome to await trial, which was his right as a Roman citizen, and there he was held *not* in prison but under *house arrest*, being allowed to preach from his home and to continue his ministry. Ironically, he had come to Rome as he wished in today's Epistle, and he spent what may have been his last two years preaching there. According to early Christian belief, both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome. Peter (who was one of the original disciples but was not a Roman citizen) was crucified upside down, not a pleasant way to go. Paul is said to have been beheaded by the ever-capricious Emperor Nero (who often used the Christians as his scapegoat) . . . but then again, maybe not. Another strain of belief is that Nero actually freed Paul, and Paul went on to preach in Spain, which was, after all, his original plan as spelled out in his Epistle to the Romans. With Paul, as he would say, when you are open to God's grace and the Holy Spirit, all is possible. Maybe we could use just such an Apostle in Jerusalem or Gaza right now.