

July 21, 2011

In July we spent some time with the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans is Paul's longest letter and probably his most important. Romans is also Paul's most difficult letter. After reading straight through Romans, if feel like you have understood it, then you can be sure that, in fact, you have not understood it. If, however, you feel a little dizzy or confused after attempting to read Romans, then you are right where you should be. You are in good company. Romans has been both inspiring and baffling Christians for 2,000 years.

The scholar N.T. Wright has said of Shakespeare's Hamlet that it is full of quotations. That is, lots of people know some lines from Hamlet but fewer know much about how those pieces fit into the whole. I find that the same is true with Romans. Lots of us are familiar with the famous quotes. Here are just a few:

"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation..." (Romans 1:16)

"Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23-24)

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...God proves his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6 & 8)

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword...No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39)

The difficulty comes in trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Context matters greatly in our reading of the Bible. The Bible is not a collection of free-floating quotable quotes. The Bible is gem mine, but the gems are still embedded in the earth.

On July 3 we read Romans 7:14-25, Paul's well-known statement on the power of sin. Sin, Paul says, is an enslaving power, one that we learn to serve willingly. Sin is more than doing bad things. Sin is a power at work that pulls us away from God. Paul paints a dismal picture in these verses. If these were the last words on sin in Romans (or in the Bible for that matter), what a sad ending that would be!

Thankfully we are not helpless in the face of sin and death, doomed to be only slaves of sin destined for death. The message of Romans 8, which we read on July 10 and 17, is like water in the desert. God has intervened to set us free from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and God has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us as we live into God's new creation. We need to be forgiven of sin, and we talk a lot about this in church. But what we don't talk about as much is the freedom and power for new life that God gives us through the Holy Spirit.

We have been set free from the Egypt of sin and death, and God's Spirit goes ahead of us to guide us toward the Promised Land. May the new life we live be good news for our neighbors and indeed for the whole creation, which is longing for God's redemption.

**Blessings,
Paul**