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**Romans 3:26, NRSV.**

*<sup>26</sup> It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.*

**Occasional Writings: *The Big One*.**

In a general sense, an “occasional writing” is a textual document written for a specific event or occasion. The letters in the New Testament are occasional writings. They were typically written to address problems or conflicts in individual churches. 1 Corinthians, one of the most frequently quoted letters in the Bible, was written by Paul to address theological lies being taught by early Gnostic teachers, to heal divisions within the church, and to manage immoral behavioral among church members. Paul tended to write what we might call “Pastoral Corrections”. The Gospels, on the other hand, are not occasional writings. The Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are sometimes called “Theological Biographies”, in other words, they are nominally about the life of Jesus but were written specifically to teach the spiritual beliefs of Jesus. The Gospels were intended by their authors from the start to serve an enduring audience. A question that has been discussed by countless people over the last two thousand

years is the appropriateness of using occasional writings like the letters of Paul to meet the theological needs of this same enduring audience – which of course includes us today. This is a major reason why scholars work hard to determine the original historical and cultural situation that resulted in a specific letter being written. We are more likely to extract the true long-term meaning of an occasional writing if we properly understand the context of that document. This becomes harder and more important to do as an occasional writing ages. We try to determine if the problems being addressed by the letter are reasonably identical to ones we confront today. If they are, then we're more likely to interpret deeper theological concepts in the text more accurately. But if we get it wrong and determine inaccurate motivation on the part of the author then we cannot be confident when we use an occasional writing as a theological document: we might be teaching a twisted interpretation of the author's beliefs.

The most impactful example of a New Testament occasional document that has been used very heavily as a theological treatise is Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Major religious figures over the centuries have been heavily influenced by it. Augustine, who was born in 354 A.D. was transformed by reading it. So was Martin Luther and John Wesley, the Anglican priest who started the Methodist movement. Scholars and theologians have worked hard to extract the timeless

theological lessons of the letter from any misleading conclusions that might be rooted in now irrelevant history.

There is something controversial about the letter to the Romans, besides it being an occasional document. There are those who claim that in Romans Paul strays from Jesus' focus on being kind, generous, and gracious, and on having repentance, and being obedient to the laws of God, and instead focuses on being saved through faith alone. Here are verses 26 to 28 of Chapter 3 of Romans:

*<sup>26</sup> it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.*

*<sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*

Paul states repeatedly that Christians are not bound by the old Jewish legal codes and he writes that Jesus marks the end of having to worry about the laws that at the time so strongly controlled the daily lives of Jews. Here is Romans 10:4:

*<sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

However, many argue that Paul does not contradict any of the teachings of Jesus, and in fact, Romans in particular complements the Gospels, expanding the story of the Messiah to the Jews to include all people, in particular pagan Gentiles.

Before we go any further, the reason I started to write this message is that I recently spoke to a pastor, not a Methodist pastor, who was arguing for what he

called “pure Christianity”, where the focus is on the Gospels, and not on the Old Testament, and not on the letters in the New Testament. Almost all his sermons, he told me, referenced only the Gospels, with only occasional references to Acts, the letters, and the Book of Revelation. Our conversation was broad and I spent a lot of time defending the significance and depth of the Old Testament, in particular. But today, I want to focus on this one issue of the letters, specifically, Romans, and its place in Christian teaching. When we started talking about Romans, this man, and we’ll call him Reverend Tom, grew particularly vehement in his determination to convince me that it is a terrible document to teach from. I discovered that his concerns had to do with him, in my opinion, not understanding the historical context of Romans. I will get back to Reverend Tom.

Let’s step back and look at the context of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The origin of the church in Rome is not known. The famous ancient theologian Irenaeus, who lived from 130 A.D. to 202 A.D. strongly associated both Peter and Paul with the early Roman church. There is evidence that the very first Roman Christians were Jews. But there were soon many Gentile Christians, and they were varied in their beliefs. Many Jewish Christians believed that all followers of Christ the Messiah had to observe all of Mosaic Law. There were gentile Christians who apparently followed one aspect of Jewish law, and that is the food restrictions.

There were other gentile Christians who adopted other parts of Jewish law, including circumcision and following Jewish holidays. There were others who did not adopt any Jewish traditions. Paul was thus writing to a very diverse population of Christians, many of whom did not believe what Paul believed – and that is that non-Jews were completely free of the Law.

Paul describes himself this way in Romans 11:1:

*11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.*

In Philippians he calls himself a Pharisee, that is, a member of a Jewish sect that followed extremely strong religious purity laws. From his letters, we know that he was fluent in Greek, and knowledgeable about Hellenistic logic and philosophy. He admits to previously being extremely anti-Christian and hunting them down. That was when he was known by his Jewish name, Saul. Later, he would adopt the Gentile version of his name, Paul, presumably to help connect with Gentiles. Saul had his great conversion when Jesus, after his death, appeared to Saul. Paul mentions this in multiple of his letters. This is the detailed story that Luke gives us in Acts 9:

*<sup>3</sup>Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup>He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup>But get up and enter the city, and*

*you will be told what you are to do.”<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

Keep in mind that there were many diverse forms of Judaism before Christ was born. There wasn't a single, long-standing, unified form of Judaism, but rather a long history of Jews seeking to refine and clarify their beliefs. Paul was not trying to start a new religion. He was not trying to found the Christian Church. Rather, he believed that he had found the ultimate expression of Jewish beliefs – and that the key to this was in accepting Jesus as the Messiah. He did not consider himself as having stopped being a Jew. He simply acknowledged that not everyone had to be a Jew to accept Christ as their Messiah. This is what he was trying to convey to the highly diverse Christian church in Rome, a city which at that time, he had not visited. The letter to the Romans is meant to carefully lay out, in a highly organized fashion, his overall beliefs about the teachings of Jesus, the life of a Christian, and how individual churches should conduct themselves. The letter discusses the need for all people to admit fault and accept God's grace, the fact that we are rescued simply by having faith, that a kind, giving life follows naturally from having faith, that living with the Holy Spirit brings joy and freedom, and that God will always be present for us. He wanted

the believers in Rome to unify under his perception of our faith. This is why Romans is such a theological masterpiece embedded within what would otherwise be just another of his occasional writings. This is a growing church that he was not able to influence early on, and so he is trying to pull them away from the remnants of Jewish law and instead focus on Jesus as a Messiah – and what that means to all people.

It's also clear when we read his rather long letter to Rome that Paul is hoping to one day visit the church in Rome and use it as a staging area for his own missionary efforts. So, he wants to set the theological and personal stage for his arrival. He wants the people there to know him, not just by reputation, but at a personal level, before he arrives. Interestingly, Paul did eventually get to Rome, and he did use it as a missionary homebase. But he did it as a prisoner, not as a free man.

In his letter, he focuses strongly on unity within the Church. Here is a passage from Chapter 12 of Romans:

*<sup>4</sup>For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*

Paul wants the believers in Rome to understand that, as Christians, we are connected through Christ. We have different skills and so we have an

interdependence on each other, whereby each of us serves the others in the best way we can. And very importantly, God deliberately created us to be diverse, to have differences, but we are unified as one church body. That is what it means to have Jesus as our Messiah.

If we take the historical context of the letter to the Romans into account, we can separate historical issues, like the difficult transition from Mosaic Law to a refined adoption of Jesus as a Messiah, and like the theological conflicts within the Roman Church, and get to the perennial issues it presents. We can extract what it means for us today. Briefly, here is a very high-level overview of this long, complex, and very carefully engineered letter. In the first few chapters, Paul makes it clear that whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, you are a sinner. You do rebel against God. But you are saved simply through your faith, not through any intricate religious system of law. In chapters 4 to 8, Paul continues with his idea of salvation through faith, not acts, and focuses on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us toward lives of righteousness. He talks about God's unconditional love for us. In chapters 9 to 11, Paul discusses God's faithfulness to us, and how diverse we are as people in God's kingdom. In chapters 12 to 16, he tells us to offer our lives to God, to avoid living for the things of this world. He urges us to

be united, as Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ, and to seek fellowship, harmony, and mutual support within the Church.

Getting back to Reverend Tom, he turned out to be focused on a long-standing complaint that many people have with the letter to the Romans, and that is its focus on justification by faith. Reverend Tom, like many before him, read many passages as excusing followers of Christ to be lazy believers, to rely only on their faith, and not show the traits of a true believer of Christ. But he missed or forgot two things. First, historically, Paul was trying to pull people away from a compulsive belief in following laws as a way of living out their faith. And second, Paul very much taught that we need to live our faith. There are several passages I could quote, but here is Paul in Chapter 2 of Romans:

*Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? <sup>5</sup> But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. <sup>6</sup> For he will repay according to each one's deeds: <sup>7</sup> to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; <sup>8</sup> while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.*

Further, Jesus himself taught us that it is our faith that determines our salvation, and that our acts flow from our faith. Here is Jesus, in Chapter 7 of Matthew, talking to us as he often did via a parable:

*<sup>17</sup> In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*

*<sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

And here is Jesus speaking in John, Chapter 16:

*<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

It's not true that somehow Paul took the teachings of Christ and twisted them.

We must understand that analyzing an occasional writing is very different than interpreting the words of Jesus in a Gospel. Historical and cultural context is critical to understanding how an author chooses to convey certain things.

I tried to convince Reverend Tom that a limited Gospel-only interpretation of the Christian faith robs us of much of the richness of Scripture. I don't think I succeeded: his views were very ingrained. To me, the biggest, most important example of this overly limited view is the letter to the Romans. I ended my conversation with Reverend Tom by quoting Romans 13:8, and asking him if this wasn't truly the heart of the teachings of Jesus:

*<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

Reverend Tom grudgingly granted me that this is indeed a powerful verse, and

then I offered him the two verses that follow from this verse, and that is what I

will leave you with today. I believe that Paul's words sound very much like Jesus':

*<sup>9</sup>The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*