

***Exodus 23:14-17 (Opening)***

*<sup>14</sup> “Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. <sup>15</sup> You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. <sup>16</sup> You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. <sup>17</sup> Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD.*

I was looking at a survey a few weeks ago. It was done by the American Bible Society back in August of last year. They called people in one hundred cities around the US and asked them questions about how “bible minded” they were. Almost 50,000 people were interviewed. From this information they compiled a list of the 100 most and least Bible-minded cities in the US.

The results are not totally surprising, but are somewhat disturbing at the same time. The top five cities were Chattanooga Tennessee, Birmingham Alabama, Roanoke/Lynchburg Virginia, Springfield Missouri, and Shreveport Louisiana. (Just as a point of reference, Shreveport Louisiana is close to where the Robertson family lives, the Duck Commander family). Not really a surprising result because they're mostly in what is known as the Bible belt anyway.

But let's look at the bottom five: Cedar Rapids Iowa, the San Francisco California metro area, the Boston Massachusetts/ Manchester New Hampshire area, the Albany New York area, and at the bottom of the list is the Providence Rhode Island area. Portland Maine actually made the list, but it's not good news, they came in at number 91, just below Las Vegas.

For some more points of reference, the Richmond Virginia area, where Danny moved to, came in at number 36 on the list. Of all the places in the US my family has lived, Dayton Ohio is the highest on the list at 38, followed by Saint Louis Missouri area at number 58, Washington DC area at number 80, and Denver Colorado at number 81.

It's been said that New England is a difficult place to spread the Gospel. This survey just kind of reinforces the idea, and not really in a good way.

It's ironic to me that the area that was initially colonized by people fleeing Europe because of religious persecution is the area that is the least Bible-minded in the US. Things change. I mean, even Harvard

University, when it was founded in 1636, was primarily a college for training ministers. Not so much anymore.

But just because we're surrounded by so many people who don't believe and don't seem to want to believe in Jesus, doesn't mean we should give up and close our doors like seems to be the norm around here. According to the Portland Press Herald back in July, from 2000 to 2010 the Congregational Church has lost 22% of its followers, Baptists about the same percentage, Episcopal Church about 21% and Methodists about 11 percent. The article didn't talk about non-denominational groups.

Looking at all this decline around us, it would be easy to get depressed and give up. But that's not what we should do. What we should do is keep getting together to encourage each other, and pray for each other. We should also try to reach out to the people around us, and give them a taste of the truth that we have from the Gospel.

Paul understood problems in churches. He had dealt with some real problems, both in person and by sending letters of encouragement and admonition. He knew that being there in person was the best way to make an impact on a church.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome to encourage them, and also to keep them going in the right direction. They weren't perfect; none of us are. But they were trying to keep the good news going, and they had faith that God would support them through hard times.

Let's look at Romans chapter 1, verses 8 through 15.

### ***Romans 1:8-15***

*<sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. <sup>9</sup> For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup> always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's*

*will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—<sup>12</sup> that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. <sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*

How did Paul hear about the faith of the Roman Christians? Well, it's quite possible that he heard about them first from Aquila and Priscilla. Let's look at Acts chapter 18. That chapter begins like this:

### ***Acts 18:1-3***

*<sup>1</sup> After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.*

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tells us that Aquila and Priscilla had come from "Italy", possibly Rome because of a command from Claudius. Claudius was the Roman Emperor from January of AD 41 to October of AD 54. He was reasonably nice to the Jews living in the Roman Empire. His nephew, Caligula, who was Caesar before him, wasn't so nice. He had even put up a statue of himself in the temple in Jerusalem so the Jews would have to worship him. That didn't go over too well, as you can imagine. It's rumored that some Jews were involved in his assassination. But Claudius gave the Jews freedom to worship God, and not have to worship Caesar.

During the time of Claudius, Christians were still heavily involved in trying to convert primarily Jews, so there was no noticeable difference between Jews and Christians in the eyes of the Romans. They were both strange. A second century Roman historian, Suetonius (soo-tun-e-ous), wrote in his history of Claudius that:

### ***Suetonius 25.4***

*“Since the Jews of Rome were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus (impulsore Chresto), he expelled them from the city”*

Many scholars feel that Suetonius simply Latinized the Greek word Christos, the Greek word for Messiah, and mistakenly wrote a common slave name, Chrestus. That would explain the controversy; Jews upset about the teachings of Christians that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. This edict from Claudius was probably during the late 40's in the first century. And since Paul is never said to have converted Aquila or Priscilla, it's likely they were Christians, expelled from Rome because of the problems Christians had caused in the Jewish synagogues.

Not only did Paul know about the Roman church, he prayed for them constantly.

Paul was an amazing prayer warrior. He prayed for or about just about everyone that he wrote to or preached to. He prayed about the Christians in Corinth.

### ***1 Corinthians 1:4-8***

*<sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— <sup>6</sup>even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus*

*Christ,<sup>8</sup> who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

He prayed about the Christians in Colossae, and encouraged them to pray for him and the work he was doing:

***Colossians 4:2-4***

*<sup>2</sup> Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. <sup>3</sup> At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— <sup>4</sup> that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*

I think Paul is a good example for us that we should be praying constantly for our brothers and sisters around the world, and not just for them individually, but for each church that meets as children of God. And not just the people we know, but the people we don't know as well.

Paul starts in verse 11 of chapter 1 saying that he wants to come and visit the Christians in Rome. Things must have calmed down for them somewhat since Claudius kicked them out for causing problems. But by now Claudius' adopted son Nero was Caesar. Nero was not a nice guy, when it came to how he treated the Jews or the Christians. Nero was responsible for the execution of many Christians during his reign as Caesar. It's likely the churches in Rome met in people's homes, because the catacombs, the underground tombs in Rome used by Christians, weren't dug until during the second century. Christians likely moved the meeting place from house to house so that they weren't discovered; all the more reason for Paul to be praying for them.

Why on earth would Paul want to go there during this time? Why not try to get them all out of Rome so they can worship freely somewhere else?

Paul says in verse 11 that he wants to impart “some spiritual gift”. What kind of spiritual gift? Well, Paul probably isn’t talking about spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues or the gift of prophesy. It’s more likely that Paul is simply talking about a “gift” of mutual encouragement.

Well, Paul also explains it later in his letter, in chapter 5.

### ***Romans 5:1-5***

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

Paul knows that their suffering has made them stronger in their faith, and closer as a church family. When everything seems to be against you, you draw closer together with people who think the same way you do.

Paul wanted to encourage the Christians in Rome, but he also wanted to be **encouraged by them**. He wanted to share in their encouraging of each other. He looked forward to the day that he could be there with them.

The writer of Hebrews encouraged Christians to do the same thing in chapter 10, verses 24 and 25.

### ***Hebrews 10:24, 25***

*<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

How do we stir up one another to love and good works? We do it by getting together and encouraging each other, like we do every week. Paul and the writer of Hebrews both knew that if people stop meeting together and encouraging and witnessing to each other about what God has been doing in their lives, they would slowly drift away, like the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 2 verse 1.

### ***Hebrews 2:1***

*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*

The Greek word translated as “drift away” is *pararrhēo* (par-ar-hroo-**eh**-o), which can be used to describe a boat or ship without an anchor, at the mercy of the currents around it. It’s also used in ancient Greek literature to talk about someone slipping in by stealth, or a memory just out of reach, disappearing from memory.

The only way we can pay closer attention to what we have heard is to get together and remind each other at every chance we have, what it is we’ve heard, what the good news is, and how it affects us.

People have been drifting away from God for many years. This isn’t the first time it’s happened. We probably have better access to information than people did over the previous centuries, so it’s easier to see when it happens around us. You would think that because of the access to information, people would be more likely to come to Christ. But the adversary knows that information is easy to get, and he wants to confuse people, so he tries everything he can do to make it hard to believe the simple truth of the Gospel.

There are people who live and work around you that know a little bit about Jesus, but have formed a particular opinion about Him that makes it hard for them to believe the truth about Him.

What is that truth? Jesus was a man, but was also fully God. He died as a sacrifice for our sins so that if we believed in Him, we could be saved from our sins. Our faith in Him allows us to be righteous in God's sight, not the sinful creatures that we are. When God looks at us, if we've put on Christ through baptism, all He sees is Christ, not our sins, and we are His children. As Paul explains it in Galatians 3:25-28:

***Galatians 3:25-28***

*<sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

## **1 Peter 4:12-19 (Closing)**

<sup>12</sup> *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

<sup>13</sup> *But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.* <sup>14</sup> *If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.* <sup>15</sup> *But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.* <sup>16</sup> *Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.* <sup>17</sup> *For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?* <sup>18</sup> *And*

*“If the righteous is scarcely saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”*

<sup>19</sup> *Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

## Questions:

1. Have you ever had a time in your life when you “drifted away” from the Church? What are some of the things that cause people to “drift away”?
2. Paul talks in Romans 1:11, 12 about mutual encouragement of the church. How can encouragement or the lack of encouragement affect your faith?
3. Paul implies in Romans 1:14 that he is obligated to preach the Gospel to everyone, no matter their ethnic background or their level of education. In the last half of 1 Corinthians 9:22, he says “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” How can we do that today?