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## Significant Salutations

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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Reading: Romans 16

This is a chapter which I expect you do not often read. The letter proper seems to end with the "Amen" of 15:33, and it is easy to regard the final chapter as of little importance. But even though it may be a struggle to read it, I suggest that the effort is well worth making. Like some of the Old Testament chapters devoted to names and genealogies, this should not be skipped as irrelevant, for these are included by divine inspiration and with a purpose.

Two preliminary observations may be of interest. The first is that the list of names here is so comprehensive that it might almost be called universal. Roman names are in the minority, being outnumbered by the Jewish and Greek ones, yet taken together they represent the world of their time. This was not a Latin church, a Jewish church nor a Greek church, but a true representation of that Church which is composed of men from every nation.

The other point is that this is one of the two churches which Paul had never visited, the other being Colosse. Paul had yet to go to Rome, which he later did, but that was some time later. Even at this juncture, however, there were quite a few people whom he already knew personally and even intimately. This is more than a mere item of interest. It seems to indicate something of how in those days the gospel spread abroad and the churches were built. For one reason or another, for business purposes or by political compulsion, people had to move about in the world. This may have been inconvenient and at times most unjust, but behind that movement was the sovereignty of God,

using everything for the speeding up of the work of the gospel.

This gives us encouragement, then, to know that once our lives are wholly given over to the Lord, His sovereignty will govern and overrule all the ordinary affairs and circumstances of daily life and make them contribute to His purposes and glory. Take the cruel decree of the Emperor Claudius which expelled all Jews from Rome. Whether he was following some political scheme or simply venting his spite, the fact remains that people like Aquila and Priscilla had to abandon their home and business and become displaced persons in Corinth. This, however, not only brought them into contact with Paul but later, at Ephesus, made them such a great help to Apollos and gave them an honoured place in this list which we are considering. Their case opens up to us a world within a world, and it is a world of spiritual romance. If we could pass from one of the names of this chapter to another, we would doubtless find that in each case there were marvellous evidences of God's sovereign working, even at times before those concerned were actually converted to Christ. Some have even thought that the fact of there being saints in the Praetorian guard (Philippians 4:22) suggests that the centurion who stood by the cross at Calvary went back from his foreign service in Palestine to his headquarters in Rome and there witnessed to the Saviour. This may be only imagination, but it is at least possible, and just the kind of way in which Christ is always building His Church.

What is more, when we look more deeply into this chapter we find that the people here referred to not only had their lives overruled by God but were themselves intent on the Lord's business and ready to take responsibility for His interests. They were not passengers, just people who happened to come and go, individuals in the crowd; they each got involved to the utmost in the affairs of the kingdom of Christ. Paul's comments and allusions make it clear that the gospel was furthered and the churches established because these men and women put the Lord's interests before everything else in their work, their journeys and their circumstances. They had the urge of the divine imperative. Like their Lord before them, their lives were not at the mercy of chance but characterised by the word 'must'.

The Lord Jesus used this imperative when, at twelve years of age, He told Mary that He *must* be about His Father's business. From time to time this same spirit emerged in His conduct: "I *must* preach the good tidings of the kingdom of God to other cities also" (Luke 4:43); "other sheep I have... them also I *must* bring..." (John 10:16). Then, as He moved towards the end of His ministry, He announced that He, the Son of man: "*must* be delivered up into the hands of sinful men..." (Luke 24:7), and right on to the eve of His crucifixion, He behaved in accordance with His principle that, since the Scriptures foretold it, then "thus it *must* be" (Matthew 26:54). His whole life was governed by this imperative - must! must! It seems to me that this list brings before us disciples whose lives were also characterised by this imperative, this 'must'. For them this was the priority, the only consideration worthy of their attention; they were devoted to the will of God. It is to be regretted that so many names which can rightfully be included in the list of God's children cannot truly be described in this way. There seem to be so many passengers, so many who want to enjoy God's will but seek to avoid taking responsibility for it. Their lives lack the Christ-like, 'must'.

This, of course, presents a personal challenge to me. I wonder what Paul would have written against my name if I had lived in those days and been associated with him. If he had needed to write a salutation to me, what could he have said about the quality of my life, 'in Christ'? The phrase 'in Christ' is repeated eight times here, for you notice that this is the significance of the names listed, not what the people were in themselves, but what was their spiritual measure in Christ. The apostle had no thoughts of social niceties or of paying compliments to ensure good relations. No, what

mattered to him was the measure in which these friends of his were counting for Christ. What, I wonder, can be put alongside my name in this connection?

At the end we are told not only of the book of life, but also of personal histories - "the books were opened" (Revelation 20:12). May it be that these books represent God's evaluation of men's lives? If so, what will be the eternal verdict of my life? What will the books have to say of my response to divine imperatives? Thank God that all my sins are blotted out. By the wonder-working power of the Blood of Christ there can be no accusation against me. And there will be no record of the purely personal virtues or failings which during this life assume such great importance. No, what will be eternally recorded will surely be what is true of us, 'in Christ'. So the reading of this heartening list of Paul's friends challenges us as to how much our lives are really counting for God. We know the story of these disciples. We know also the regrettable comments which Paul had to make about others of his former colleagues, men like Demas who seems to have shrugged aside divine imperatives and taken his own course. What will history - God's history - say about me? What will be my story, 'in Christ'?

Nothing seems to be forgotten. Phoebe's kindness, Aquila and Priscilla's self-sacrifice, the labours of this one and the hospitality of that - even the writing of the letter 'in the Lord', by Tertius (see margin of verse 22). Every aspect of devotion to Christ in these lives was noted and appreciated, even the humblest service finding its place in the inspired Scriptures.

One more feature of this chapter is the fact that people are appreciated, as people. The letter itself is a masterpiece of spiritual instruction, so profound that it has engaged and defeated the greatest brains in the Church, and still remains far from exhausted in its wealth. In a sense this was Paul's *magnum opus*, his supreme exposition of the infinite range of redemption. The more striking, then, that place should be given for the names of these simple people. It means that the apostle, with all the divine wisdom and revelation given to him, was more concerned with persons than with truths. Doctrines can be considered and held in a detached way, but what value is there in abstract truths if they are not expressed in terms of individual people?

Great as was the ministry and spiritual significance of this notable apostle, he was clearly a man who took real interest in people. He remembered their names, he recorded their special features, he gave thanks for them, and he prayed for them individually. How easy it is for the servants of the Lord to become so absorbed in their ministry and so pre-occupied with their messages, that they neglect the very individuals to whom the messages are directed. When a man or a woman is led to trust in Christ he does not become one more cipher for statistics, but a live personality who matters to God and should matter to God's servants. And they matter not just as those who must be given instruction as to Christian doctrines, but as individuals in whom those spiritual truths should find outworking and expression. For the apostle, truth had to be incarnate, it had to be personified - and these names show that it was.

Why was Paul so lovingly drawn out to these people? Perhaps because he could observe the fulfilment in them of the revelation given to him of the power of the gospel of Christ. It must have been refreshing to pass from his exposition of the theory of redemption to the living outworking of his doctrines. So it is that I ask myself what fruit there is in my own life from the volumes of teaching which I know and communicate in my preaching. Are God's people being helped, are they being made better servants of Christ because of my kindness or self-sacrificial labours? If not, then in my case all that Paul wrote and all that I teach goes for nothing.

In the case of many of these people, it was Paul's own life which had been enriched by them, as he readily acknowledged. Phoebe had succoured him, Priscilla and Aquila had "laid down their own necks" for him, Rufus's mother had cared for him and Tertius wrote for him. None of these were apostles, yet by helping Paul they contributed something, however small, to an apostolic ministry. They could not do it all, and nor could he; but the whole divine purpose could be realised because a number of people played their part, labouring in Christ and for Christ. People matter! Nobody is a non-entity in Christ. There is a place for each one of us in the divine record. And we shall be glad to finish the chapter as Paul did: "to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ... be the glory for ever. Amen".