

When the Books Are Opened (Romans 16)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing individual people in the gospel and living a life that counts for Christ, highlighting the sovereignty of God in the affairs of daily life and the significance of each person's life in Christ.

Scripture: Romans 16:1

Topics: "Significance of Individuals in Christ", "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of individual believers in Romans 16, highlighting that each person matters to God and contributes to the body of Christ. He reflects on how the names listed are not just statistics but represent lives transformed by the gospel, urging listeners to consider their own impact 'in Christ.' Sparks challenges the audience to evaluate their own lives in light of God's sovereignty and the eternal records that will be opened, questioning what will be said about their faithfulness. He concludes that every believer has a role in God's plan, and it is the collective effort of individuals that furthers the kingdom of God. Ultimately, he reminds us that it is people who matter, and each life is significant in the divine narrative.

Transcript

Reading: Romans 16.

An outstanding feature of this chapter is that people are appreciated as people. The Letter itself is a masterpiece of spiritual instruction, Paul's supreme exposition of the infinite range of redemption. The more striking, then, that place should be given for the names of these simple people. 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?

When a person is led to trust in Christ he does not become one more cipher for statistics, but a live being who matters to God. The phrase "in Christ" is repeated eight times here, for 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 merely of paying compliments; what mattered to him was the degree in which these friends of his were counting for Christ. This, of course, presents a personal challenge to me. I wonder what Paul would have written against my name if I had lived then. If he had needed to write a salutation to me, what could he have said about the quality of my life "in Christ"?

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 have been giving in my preaching. Are God's people being helped, are they being made better servants of Christ by reason of my labours? If not, then in my case all that Paul wrote and all I teach goes for nothing.

In Rome there was one of the churches that Paul had not yet visited, but even at this juncture there were a number of people there whom he 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 established. For one reason or another, for business purposes or by political compulsion, people had to move about the world, even as they do today. This may have been inconvenient and at times most unjust, but behind that movement there was the sovereignty of God, using everything for the speeding up of the work of the gospel.

This gives us encouragement, to know that once our lives are wholly given over to the Lord, His sovereignty will govern and over-rule all the ordinary affairs and circumstances of daily life and make them contribute to His purposes and glory. Because of the cruel decree of the Emperor Claudius, Aquila and Priscilla had to abandon their home and business and become displaced persons in Corinth, but the sequence of events and their commitment to Christ resulted in the honoured place which they have in this list which we are considering. Their case opens up to us a world within a world, a world of spiritual romance. No doubt as we pass from one of the names to another in this list, we would discover that there had been marvellous providential working of God in each case.

What is more, when we look more deeply into the 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 just 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 and in their journeys. 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", just as His was.

In the final book of the Bible we are told of the book of life being opened, but we are also informed that there are other records which relate to our personal histories: "the books were opened" (Revelation 20:12). May it be that these books represent God's evaluation of the lives of His children? If so, what will be the eternal verdict concerning my life? What will the books have to say of my response to the divine imperatives of grace in my life? Thank God that all my sins are blotted out by the wonder-working power of the blood of Christ, so that there can be no accusations against me. Of that we can all be certain. But I have to realise that although there is no mention of my faults, there will also be no record of any personal features or virtues which seem to assume so much importance to me now. No, what will be recorded for eternity will surely be that which has been true of me "in Christ". It is what is being enacted daily in my life and walk with God which will be written there, and that alone is what matters. What will history - God's history - say about me? What will be His verdict?

In the case 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 necks" for him;

Rufus's mother had been like a mother to him and Tertius wrote for him. None of these were apostles, yet by helping Paul they had contributed something, however small, to an apostolic ministry. They could not do it all, and neither for that matter could he, but the whole divine purpose was realised because each played their part, labouring in Christ and for Christ.

So the reading of this heartening list of Paul's friends challenges us as to how much our lives are counting for God as the days go by. We are led to believe that the apostle could not always give such cheerful comments on those whom he knew and worked with. There were unhappy exceptions, those who, like Demas, seem to have shrugged aside divine imperatives and taken their own course. They are not mentioned here. Paul writes appreciatively of each of those who in simplicity remained devoted to the Lord Jesus.

It is people who matter! Nobody is a nonentity in Christ. There is a place for each one of us in the divine record. And when the stories written in the books are disclosed, we will exclaim, as Paul does at the end of this chapter and this Letter to the Romans: "To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ... be glory for ever." Amen.

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