

From Tertius to Theophila

Notes for a Bible Study, 2001

Dear Theophila

You don't know me, but I hope you won't mind receiving a letter from me. My name is Tertius and I was once a friend and associate of St Paul. I hear you're interested in Chapter 10 of Paul's letter to the Romans, and thought I'd tell you what I know of it.

First, I need to explain who I am, and how I came to meet Paul in the first place.

Although you don't know me by name, Theophila, I'm sure you have heard of me. For I am, alas, rather notorious. I was the elder brother in the story which Yeshua once told about the prodigal son. My good friend Luke included the story in his gospel, you will remember. But he didn't mention what happened to me afterwards.

Luke did mention – without exaggeration, I have to say – that I was furious, livid, beside myself with bitterness, Theophila, when my father welcomed back that younger son of his. I felt that all I'd ever done and been had been a waste – I felt totally unrecognised, Theophila, a nonentity, invisible. I left home, of course. There was no way I could stay there. I became a Pharisee – got more and more religious, studied the Torah day after day, kept myself pure and clean, searched to know what God wanted me to do, and not to do. My younger brother, meanwhile, went off and joined the Jesus movement.

But the more I tried to make God pleased with me, the more depressed and generally miserable I became. I came to the conclusion that basically, Theophila, God didn't like me. God found me boring. I couldn't really blame him for this, if I was honest, for I found me boring too. There was no novelty or freshness or surprise in my life, least of all in my religion. Nothing turned me on, nothing gave me a buzz. I felt I was chained to my body as if to a corpse, and my religion was like a corpse too, something heavy and lifeless that I was condemned to drag around wherever I went. I expect you know the feeling, Theophila?

One evening I actually spoke out loud to God. The words just came groaning out of me. I said to God, I almost shouted at him: 'Why do you hate me?' In my dreams that night I seemed to hear someone speaking. The voice was so distinct and loud that I woke up. It said: 'Tertius, Tertius, why do you hate me?' I lay there shivering in shock, my blood running cold, for I felt that the voice belonged to Jesus, the man whose movement my brother had gone off to join.

By then, Jesus had been dead several years, but his movement was still strong, indeed it seemed to be getting stronger. I knew someone in the movement slightly, and I told her about my extraordinary dream. She said: 'You ought to go and tell Paul. I'm sure he'll understand, and that he'll be able to help you.'

Absurd! Go and tell a complete stranger about a bizarre dream? But she was so sure that Paul would understand that indeed I went to see him. And she was right, he did understand. He was very gentle with me, and what he said to me was what a few years later he said in the first eight chapters of his letter to the Romans. The gist of it was that God didn't hate me but that I hated God. I hated God because I also hated myself, and life generally. But if I could love myself, and could love life I would realise that God loved me, he didn't hate me, he loved me regardless, totally regardless, of how religious I was. This is what Jesus had taught, Paul said, and this love of life is what makes the world go round. I expect you remember well, Theophila, those utterly amazing words with which Paul brought the first eight chapters of his letter to the Romans to a conclusion: 'For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, nor height, depth or any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

By the way, my impression was that Paul believed that the word 'God' refers to a being who really exists, 'out there' or 'up there'. Everybody did in those days. Now in the twenty-first century, however, belief in the existence of God does not *have* to be part of the good news that Jesus and Paul preached. Well that's my view, and I think it would be Paul's too. But I'm running ahead of myself.

What Paul said to me, that first day I met him, began to change me – turn my life round. I stayed in his circle and one thing I discovered was that I had a knack for writing legible Greek. Paul began to use me as a secretary – he would dictate his letters and I would write them down. I was the third main secretary he had, and that's why – incidentally – I became known by the Latin name Tertius.

I was Paul's secretary for the letter to the Romans. When he finished dictating Chapter 8, and when I'd finished writing it all down, I laid down my quill in admiration. 'Wow!' I said. If he was pleased, he didn't show it. But he did comment. 'I didn't actually invite you to make any observations,' he remarked (rather drily, I thought). 'But since you seem inclined to, I wonder if there's anything more you'd like to say?'

I thought for a while. 'Yes,' I said, 'I do have a question. And I think the people in Rome will be wondering about this as well. You say that Jesus is for Gentiles as well as Jews ...' – 'Indeed I do,' interrupted Paul. 'But the impression they'll get in Rome,' I continued, 'is that you're not interested in Jews, you're only interested in Gentiles. Many of our people in Rome, as you know, are religious. They're like me in the olden days, "the elder brother" who does all the right things, and when they get

your letter they'll think you're saying "forget it", you're saying that being Jewish doesn't matter.' – 'It doesn't, said Paul. – 'But you're simply going to upset them.' I continued. 'You don't want to write letters that upset people, surely? Do you? They're devout Jews, these people in Rome, so much so that they think it's impossible to follow Jesus unless one is also a Jew, and they'll be wondering where they fit in your scheme of things.'

'My scheme of things?!' said Paul.

'You know what I mean,' I said, 'the scheme of things you have set out in these first eight chapters.'

'All right,' he said. 'Let me see.' And he proceeded to dictate the next three chapters. In Chapter 10, the one you're interested in, Theophila, he stressed that he does care about Jews and wants them to love life and to know that they're loved by God. And he stressed that his message is there in the Jewish scriptures. 'So far as Jews are concerned,' he said, 'my message is not new. Moses, for example, made it quite clear that God is not in religion but is in life. He's not up there in heaven, but closer to us than our own breath and muscles, our own limbs and eyes. The very feet of people who bring good news are bright and beautiful, and Jews have been brought the good news, they really have, and most of them haven't realised it. When I preach to the Gentiles I'm not ignoring Jews, I'm telling Gentiles what Jews already know – our God is a god of great kindness.'

Privately, Theophila, I wasn't as sure as Paul was that Chapter 10 was crystal clear, and that it would satisfy those people in Rome. But I decided not to argue with him. I did, however, have one further question, a more general one.

'Does it ever occur to you, Paul,' I asked, 'that people are going to keep these letters of yours? They're going to file them away, and people will still be reading them a hundred years later. Perhaps even a thousand years later. Two thousand years later. And if your letters are kept, what do you think people in the future will make of this letter to the Romans? The scheme of things you portray in Chapters 1–8, and your discussion in Chapter 10 of where Jews fit in?'

'Well no,' said Paul. 'I can't say I think about that much. I am writing for people alive now. I really cannot bother my mind speculating what people in the distant future might be like, and what they'll think of my letters, if they happen to come across them. I'm a bit surprised at you, Tertius, asking such a speculative question. Live your life now, love God now, think and pray as you can now, not as you can't.'

He couldn't put me off. 'I really think we ought to think about this,' I said boldly. 'In the future there will still be religious people. They'll go to church on Sunday mornings and they'll study your letters in little Bible Study groups on Thursday evenings...'

'Why Thursdays?' interrupted Paul.

'Don't be silly, you know what I mean. People will study your letters, it will be part of being religious. And they'll want to know *why*. What's the point of doing religious things? What's the connection, if any, between being religious and loving God? Do you really think this section of your letter to Rome will help them? Particularly this Chapter 10 that you have just dictated?'

He didn't say anything, for once. So I carried on.

'And it's even more complicated than that, Paul. In two thousand years time it will be impossible, *impossible*, to believe in God in the way people do now. So the question will be this, can one believe in Jesus, whatever that means, without believing in God? And can one love life without believing in God? If so, is there any point in being religious? Or is the "elder brother" simply wasting his time?'

'A time will come, Paul,' I continued, 'when people will want "religionless Christianity". Christ and spirituality but not church and Bible study, and not even God. *Not even God*, Paul. People will want "to take leave of God", they'll say. Good people, Paul, spiritual people, Christian people. Will there be any point, when that time comes, in studying your letters? If so, what will the point be? That's what I think people will want to know on Thursday evenings in two thousand years time.'

'You may well be right,' said Paul. 'But when one writes a letter, Tertius, one writes for people here and now. Here in this world and at this time. And these particular people.'

Those words have haunted me, Theophila, ever since. When one writes a letter, one writes for people here and now. Here in this world and at this time. These particular people.

With my greetings and good wishes and wishing you well, very, very well,
Theophila.

Your friend (I hope, I wish) Tertius.

References: *Honest to God* by John Robinson, 1963; *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick, 1977; *Taking Leave of God* by Don Cupitt, 1980.