

# Professorin für Neues Testament – Turku

## Nina Nikki

MI)I A VIITTAUSJÄRJESTYS  
OJEN UTRAALI  
MUISTA AKAMINEN!

*Avaa Raamattu!*

Welcome! It is lovely to see you all here. My name is Nina Nikki and I come from Finland, the city of Vantaa.

Today I invite you to receive Paul's letter to the Romans as a member of the Roman church to whom the letter was originally addressed.

We begin with a visit the city of Rome in the first century and look at some ways in which plants, animals, and elements of the non-human creation were present (or absent) in the city. Then we will take a brief look at the historical situation of the letter. This will take about 15 minutes. You can just sit and relax.

From the historical situation of the letter we will move, hopefully seamlessly, to a *biblio/og*.

As a reminder, this is how a *bibliolog* goes: You can sit in your chair for the entire session. We will not be moving around. I will narrate our story, and from time to time I will read bits from the Bible, from the letter to the Romans. A few times, I will stop and ask you to be someone from the world of the letter. I will ask you questions, interview you. If you want to answer aloud, please raise your hand, and wait for my permission to answer. We will talk one at a time and all communication will go through me. Since we are such a big group, not everyone who has raised their hand can speak aloud. We simply don't have time for that. But please remember that what you experience in your mind is still important and

1  
6

valuable and real. Also, when you answer, I will echo your answer. I will talk in first person. I'm not doing this to correct you in any way, echoing is only a tool for making sure we hear you and understand you. Please remember, that everything is voluntary, and you cannot make mistakes. Only I can make mistakes in the next hour.

\*\*\*

**(1)** The city of Rome, in the 50s, was a buzzing place. The capital of the Empire was home for almost one million people and it was filled with

incredible monuments and buildings. Since beginning of the imperial time, after the end of the Republic in 27 BCE, the city had grown into what has been called a Julio-Claudian theme park. The city centre was full of imposing buildings, honorific statues, and triumphal arches. Inhabitants of the city of Rome would have seen statues of important men, especially of the first real emperor of the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus.

**(2)** This statue of Augustus at Prima Porta illustrates the cosmic dimensions of the rule of Augustus and all the Roman Emperors. In the breastplate we see conquered peoples, but also, at the bottom, Mother Earth, holding a cornucopia of abundance, with gods Apollo and Diana riding their cult animals. On the top we see the Sun god Sol, the heaven Caelus and the dawn, Aurora busy with their cosmic tasks. The emperor Augustus is here presented as holding together and ensuring peace and stability on earth, but also in the whole cosmos. Augustus was the bringer of a Golden Age. He was the Savior, a bringer of an age of universal peace and prosperity.

**(3)** A vital element for life in all creation is water. One sign of the Golden Age was that water was available to every human and animal in the city of Rome. It was distributed especially through fountains and enjoyed in baths. There were over a thousand public fountains in the city and about 800 public baths and over 200 private baths. A lucky person might be invited to bathe at a private heated bath house. The water to the

fountains and the baths came from **(4)** aqueducts which originated in natural hillside springs. Aqueducts were a magnificent feat of practical engineering and a celebration of domestication of natural resources.

(5) The Emperor Augustus's wife, Livia, had a beautiful villa just outside of the city. A fresco in this villa represented both an appreciation for wild creation and the wish to domesticate it. **(6-7)** In the mural, wild birds are feeding on all kinds of fruit from all kinds of trees. The wild forest is an endless depth. **(8)** But the visitors entertained in the room were separated from the forest by two fences, a wicker fence, and a cement fence. Man made order was separated from creation in its natural state. Some birds are also captured into cages as a sign of the order humans have placed over nature.

(9) The desire of humans to rule over the rest of the natural world was visible in entertainment as well. Gladiators would not only fight each other, but they also fought animals, often exotic ones (lions, bears, panthers, rhinos) and they hunted them for a show. Although the front seats were reserved for senators and aristocrats, even the poor, slaves and women could sit in the back row, watch the show and cheer it on.

\*\*\*

We are in the year 55 of the Common Era. [Of course, that year was not known as year 55 back then, but it was rather named according to the Roman consuls who were in office that year.] Although Augustus was always remembered as the greatest emperor, the current Nero, was considered to continue Augustus's Golden Age and accomplishments, a big part of which was the rule of the Emperor and humans in general, over creation.

This is the year Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. When he wrote, was staying in city of Corinth, in Achaia, Greece. He was about to leave on a ship to Jerusalem to deliver a collection, a great sum of money he had gathered from Macedonian and Achaian Christians. He was going to give

the money to the community of believers in Jerusalem, many of whom had been followers of Jesus when he still walked among them in the flesh. Paul's plan was that after visiting Jerusalem, he would come to Rome. He had never been there before. He wanted to stay there for a while and get the support of the Roman church and with the help of that support travel further to Spain to continue his mission for Christ. He is now writing, among other things, to remind the Roman Christians of that plan.

From the author the Acts of the Apostles, we know that Paul did eventually come to Rome, but not in the way he had planned. He was put in jail in Jerusalem and sent as a prisoner to Rome. Some years later, we hear from other sources, he died in Rome as a martyr under the emperor Nero. He never went to Spain. But for our text, that is all still in the future.

I. The Roman church had members of very different backgrounds. Of some Paul says: "you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God". Others are clearly not of Jewish ethnicity. For early in the letter Paul says he is "obligated both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Not only were the believers Jews and Greeks, they were men and women, rich and poor, slaves and free citizens. They were in fact many groups who gathered in many houses, but likely visited each other's meetings.

\*\*\*

In fact, there is a meeting of the church tonight, at sundown. The meeting is hosted by a wealthy man who has a city mansion, a *domus*, with a real *triclinium*, a dining room - one large enough host a bigger group of people. Most of the church members lived in tall apartment houses, *insulae*. We don't actually know this wealthy man's name who is hosting the meeting in his *domus*, but let's call him Lucius.

Bea member of the Christ-believing church in Rome. You are planning to go the meeting of the church later tonight, at sundown. But first you must finish your day's work.

*Who are you?*

*(What has your day been like?)*

2. Tonight, there will also be a special guest at Lucius's house. It is a woman called Phoebe [Foibe]. She has travelled on a ship, by sea, all the way from Cenchrea, a city with a big port, right next to Corinth. The Cenchrean church has sent Phoebe, she is a servant of that church, and she is bringing with her a very special gift, a letter from Paul, the man who is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Phoebe will read the letter aloud after the meal.

Phoebe has arrived early that morning. She is now resting in the house of her host, Lucius.

Be Phoebe, the servant of the church of Cenchrea, sent to Rome to read and give Paul's letter, recommended by Paul to represent him.

Be Phebe, at Lucius's house, on the day of the meeting.

How was your trip to Rome?

*What does it feel like to be in Rome?*

*{Are you excited about tonight?}*

Now everyone has arrived at Lucius's house and the meeting thus far has followed the usual protocol. Dinner was served. The dinner at the meetings of the Christ-believers is called *agape*, a meal of love. It included bread and wine and some vegetables. Tonight, there was also a little bit of

meat, not for everyone, only for the leading men and women and, of course, for the special guest, Phoebe. The meat was bought from a Jewish butcher and had not been sacrificed to idols or demons. Lucius blessed the bread, broke it, and distributed it to everyone. After the meal, a cup of wine circulated. It was a reminder that the risen Christ was present at the meeting.

After the meal tonight, there was only one hymn which everyone sung together, but no prophecy and no teaching. There was no time for those, because the letter, it was told, was going to be very, very long.

3. Now Lucius invites Phoebe to get up and read the letter.

Phoebe begins.

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures - - - To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

*Bea member of the church, reclining in your couch, having just finished your meal. Look at Phoebe standing in the middle of the dining room, reading the letter. What do you see?*

*What are you thinking and feeling?*

And so Phoebe reads the letter. She uses the intonations and hand gestures Paul instructed her to use. She reads that both Jews and gentiles have committed sins and need Christ. It becomes clear that Paul knows that the Roman church is a diverse group, that some are Jews and that others have followed Greek, Roman, and even Egyptian gods before. Paul has heard the church members sometimes fight. He wants to show them

a way to live together as children of Abraham and children of God, as one family.

Phoebe reads: "God is the god of all whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the gentiles."

Phoebe reads on. The sounds of the city are getting quiet, the audience is quiet too. Some look like they are immersed in their own thoughts, they have forgotten to listen, a few of the youngest and oldest seem to be nodding off, others are listening intently, every now and then someone interjects with a "yes", "Paul is right! What a wise man he is!"

Paul speaks about slavery and freedom. Phoebe reads: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

3. There are slaves in the room. Not only slaves to the law or slaves to sin, but real slaves, owned by other people.

In the corner of the room sits Lucius's slave, Amon. Lucius has purchased him from an Egyptian merchant. Amon has served water and wine and bread throughout the meal. He has run back and forth, never uttering a word. After the meal Lucius told him to sit down in the dark corner, by the door, ready to jump up and serve at his master's command. Lucius told him to listen to Paul's letter, because he too has ears and has been baptized.

Be Amon, Lucius's slave. Listen to Phoebe's next words:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the

creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Be Amon, sitting in the dark corner, ready to serve as your master wishes.

*What are you hearing in these words?*

\*\*\*

It is getting very late. Phoebe reaches the end of Paul's letter, which has a long list of greetings for many people he knows by name in Rome. It now sounds like he is saying good night to them all. "Greet Prisca and Aquila, greet my beloved Epaenetus. Greet Andronicus and Junia, greet Ampliatus, greet Urbanus, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus."

And finally, the letter closes: "to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever! Amen."

4. *Final question:* For the last time, be a member of the Roman Christian church. The meeting is over, it is a dark night as you walk home. In a few moments, the sun will rise, and the creation will awaken again. The birds will sing, the city will be filled with sounds, slaves will collect water from the fountains. As you are walking home, you are thinking about everything you heard. Take a moment to think about what you would like to ask Paul when he finally comes to Rome and you can see him.

You can keep that question in your mind. Maybe you will find an answer to it in the next days.

We now end our visit to the moment where Paul's letter to the Romans was first read to the audience it was first written. Thank you!

*Sulje Raamattu!*

JAKAMINEN: Now you can turn to the person next to you and talk about what happened to you during this *biblio/og*.

What did you experience as a member of the Roman church? How does that experience relate to your own life? Is there perhaps a wider connection to the life of the church, or society, or the whole world?

- - - Would someone like to share aloud?

\*\*\*\*

Romans 8:18-28

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

