

# The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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## **Words of Commendation and Salutations (16:1-16)**

This chapter is ignored by a great many people, probably because they think it is just a listing of names of people Paul knew in the church at Rome, and has no relevance to us. But this chapter gives the most extensive listing of the people Paul had come to know and love in his work as an apostle of Christ. It is an outpouring of his heart toward those saints he had come to love and respect, who had been so much help to him in his ministry.

Here he mentions more individuals by name than in any of his other writings. He sends greetings to at least twenty-six people by name, as well as giving us insight to the nature of the church at this time, in that he appears to be sending greetings to several churches that were meeting in homes. He also sends these people greetings from nine believers who were with him in Corinth when he wrote the letter.

What is the significance of this? It is apparent that Paul had a lot of people in his life, people he calls beloved, helpers, and saints. He obviously did not live as a cloistered holy man who only came down from the mountain to deliver a special message from God, or to rebuke the people. Paul appeared to take the flock imagery seriously; sheep seek out other sheep, they flock together, they don't live secluded lives, separated from other sheep; and they should always feel that the shepherd was near and watching over them.

### ***Commendation of Sister Phoebe (16:1-2)***

*I commend to you Phoebe **our sister**, who is **a servant of the church***

*in Cenchrea, <sup>2</sup>that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.*

The Greek name "*Phoibe*" (meaning "the bright one") was the name of a pagan goddess, the Phoebe of this letter was likely of the *ethnoi* - a Gentile. She was probably a member of a small house church which met in an outlying community of Corinth. Corinth had two sea ports, one facing Europe and the other facing Asia. The seaport of Cenchrea [Gk - Keg KREE ice] was located 7 to 9 miles from Corinth and was, essentially, a harbor town. It was a thriving town filled with idolatrous monuments and shrines, including temples for the worship of Venus, Aesculapius, and Isis. (Vincent, *Word Studies in the NT*). How Phoebe became a follower of Christ in this kind of atmosphere would be an interesting story. Perhaps, it occurred during Paul's stay in Corinth recorded in Acts 18. It was from Cenchrea that Paul sailed out in route to Ephesus after his stay in Corinth (Acts 18:18).

### *A Letter of Introduction*

This is an important part of the letter in that this section serves as a letter of introduction and commendation of Phoebe. Such letters were very common in the first century Mediterranean world. As one traveled, public accommodations were scarce and dangerous, especially for a woman. Such letters could secure private hospitality. Paul identifies Phoebe using three distinct endearing terms: "sister," "servant," and "a helper of many." To Paul, the church was a household of brothers and sisters (Eph 2:19). To refer to Phoebe as "our sister" meant that she was a devoted member of the family of God, and was especially dear to Paul.

The only means of sending letters from one place to another in this time was by courier. There were imperial couriers, but they only carried official communication. In all probability, Phoebe was the courier of "*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*," as it has become know to us. This would have been a tremendous trust on the part of Paul, and a great honor for Phoebe. One wonders if Phoebe had any idea that she was being used as a vessel to transport one of the greatest theological treatise ever written?"

The journey from Corinth to Rome would not have been easy, and would have involved considerable sea as well as land travel. When she

arrived in Rome and presented the believers there with Paul's letter, they must have realized that she was a very special person to have been entrusted with such a task. It would be immediately evident that she deserved their greatest respect and acceptance. No believer can fully comprehend the significance of the "least" tasks he or she faithfully carries out as a servant of God.

Very likely, the method of reading a congregational letter was like that of the Jewish synagogues. It would be read aloud to the church, or the various house churches making up "the church in Rome," when the church was assembled. When this letter was read aloud to the congregation, the people named would have been present, which would have made Paul's greeting to them very special.

### ***I Commend to you Phoebe***

The word commend is from the Greek *sunistao* (a compound of *sún* and *hístemi*) meaning "to stand with;" to commend someone is to stand with them. Letters of commendation were well known in the first century world. Whenever the early Christians traveled from one church to another, they often carried letters of introduction. This was a real courtesy to the church being visited and a help to the visitor (cf. 2 Cor 3:1).

The idea that Paul resented women or forbade the working in the churches cannot be drawn from this chapter. There are far more women mentioned here than in the typical literature of Paul's day. His tribute to Phoebe is followed by greetings to various people and groups. Among those greeted are eight women. Paul specifically comments on how much work five of these women did (Mary in verse 6; Priscilla, a fellow worker in verse 3; Tryphe'na and Trypho'sa in verse 12; and Persis in verse 12). The mother of Rufus was so dear to Paul that he calls her his mother as well (verse 13).

### ***Phoebe, Who Is a Servant of the Church in Cenchrea***

The word "servant" here is the Greek *diakanon*, which is the accusative masculine singular as well as the nominative and accusative neuter singular form. Some grammarians cite the form as an accusative feminine, but the accusative feminine form is *diakanian*. If taken as feminine in gender this would, supposedly, give precedence for the office of a "deaconess" in the early church. The word Paul uses, however, is either

masculine or neuter. To use the masculine with reference to Phoebe would not be grammatically correct, thus the neuter, which would be a generic usage, is what is intended. The terms *diakanos* (male servant) and *diakania* (female servant) are used to identify a house servant or any servant who is not a slave (*doulos*). It is used this way in John 2 of the servants (*diakanoi*) who drew the water that Jesus turned into wine (John 2:5, 9)

In the New Testament Paul uses it in the sense of one who ministers to another as someone's personal servant would do. It is the term Paul uses to identify himself and others as ministers of Christ. (*diakanoi tou Christou*). The translation of the term as "deacon" in the English versions is not a translation of the Greek word at all; rather, it is a transliteration of the term. At the time the English translations were done, the doctrine of celibacy was well in place in both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican church. To translate the word *diakanos* as servant or minister in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12 would have seriously challenged this practice, in that the *diakanos* was to be the husband of one wife. The solution was to transliterate the term as "deacon," thus removing the problem for English speaking churches.

Even though the term *diakanos* can be translated "minister," this is just one of the meanings of the term. Its most essential meaning within the Greek speaking world of the first century was that of a personal servant. Paul's use of this word for Phoebe is a case in point; as he says of her in verse 2, "for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also." The term "helper" is no more of a titular designation for a special office than is the term *diakanos*. The word for "helper" is *prostatis* (from *pro* and *histemi*) meaning, "to stand above or over." If the context demands, this term can mean a director or supervisor, but its most common meaning is that of someone who reaches down to help or support someone who is deserving. In fact, this term was used by Plutarch as the translation of the Latin *patronus*, a patron, a helper of a lower person. The word denoted those in Athens who were patrons, who took care of strangers. So Paul may have thought of Phoebe a patroness, a woman who supported others, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources.

In the first century Mediterranean world a patron of a religious association was normally a well-to-do person who allowed members of a religious or social group to meet in his or her home. The patron was generally a prominent and honored member of the group. Although most

patrons of religious associations were men, there were women patrons as well. There were women in the early church who served others by visiting the sick, assisting and teaching the young women, and helping the poor. This is the point of Paul's usage of the term here in this text and its context; Paul stressed her role as a servant and helper, not her "office."

The role of primary responsibility for the family (individual or tribal community) was placed on the man by God from the earliest times. He, as the head of the family, was the primary one responsible for the family as its provider, protector, and guide. In the whole of Biblical history the husband and father is the person in the first position of responsibility. Authority is given to him as it is necessary to the fulfillment of his responsibilities, so also with the woman.

### ***The Church in Cenchrea***

The term "church" here is the Greek "*ekklesia*" (derived from *ek* and *kaleo*), literally, "to call out from" or "the ones called-out," as to a meeting or an assembly or gathering. This was the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, the meeting of the people of Israel to stand before God to receive his instruction or to worship him (e.g., Deut 18:16, Neh13:1). In Classical Greek the term *ekklesia* referred to an assembly of citizens summoned by the town crier or herald (*kerux*), as in Acts 19:32-41.

### ***That You May Receive Her***

"Receive" is *prosdechomai* derived from *pros* [to or toward] and *dechomai* (to take into ones hands [from *deka* the 10 fingers of the hand]), hence, to receive, admit, grant accept; here in this context, to receive in hospitality. We are to receive, serve, and care for all those who genuinely name the name of Christ (cf. Matt 18:5-10).

***"In a manner worthy of the saints.*** "Worthy" is *axios* which refers to a set of scales that balance - the same weight on one side and the other side (what is expected). In Phil 1:27, Paul says, "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves worthy (*axios*) of the gospel of Christ." Conduct yourselves in such a way that will compliment the story of Christ. Here Paul exhorts the Roman saints to welcome Phoebe into their spiritual company in a manner "worthy" of the conduct of the holy ones of God.

William Barclay says,

There should be no strangers in the family of Christ; there should be no need for formal introductions between Christian people [i.e., to get an audience with-mwl], for they are sons and daughters of the one father and therefore brothers and sisters of each other. And yet a church is not always the welcoming institution that it ought to be. It is possible for churches, and still more possible for church organizations, to become almost little closed societies that are not really interested in welcoming the stranger. When a stranger comes amongst us, Paul's advice still holds good - welcome such a one as God's dedicated people ought to welcome each other. (*Liguori Faithware* on Romans 16)

***Assist Her in Whatever Business She Has Need***

"Matter" is *pragmati*, from which we get "pragmatic," and refers to something to be done, a matter of business – a task to attend to. It was often used of business transactions. Paul not only was giving a commendation of Phoebe as a faithful Christian but also was giving her a letter of reference, as if were, in regard to whatever business matter she may have had in Rome.

This idea is reinforced by Paul, who speaks of her as a helper (*prostates*); "for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also," he says. As already mentioned, *prostates* was commonly used to signify a patron, a wealthy person who financially supported an organization or cause, as with, "a patron of the arts."

Very possibly, Phoebe was no ordinary helper, but one of high esteem and very well could have been a businesswoman of some wealth. If so, it is noteworthy that she used her influence and her financial means, as well as her personal time and effort, as a helper of many fellow believers as well as Paul. He readily and graciously acknowledged his personal indebtedness to and love for this Christian sister, whom he memorialized in these two verses of his letter to the church at Rome. This woman, Phoebe, is the quintessential woman servant of the church. Here name should stand as a memorial of all the countless women God has used, who are, as their male counterparts, beings created in the image of God.