

The Book of Romans

By Doug Hamilton

Romans 16:1-16 “A Biography of a Church Family”

Romans 16:1-2, “*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; ² that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.*”

Phoebe:

Who is the woman named Phoebe? Like most of the people in this chapter, there is not much known about her. She was a faithful servant from the congregation in Cenchrea. This was a tiny port town located about nine miles east of Corinth. Paul stopped there in toward the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:8). She likely made the two-hour walk to Corinth many times and likely met Paul while on his eighteen month on one of her many trips to Corinth. The text indicates that the church met in her house and she was likely a wealthy business woman.

It appears she was heading to Rome for travel and became the deliverer of the letter from Paul to the Roman church. She was described in three terms by the apostle.

1) She was a Sister:

This is a familial term adopted in the early church. It recognized a strong sense of relationship among the Christian women of the congregation. It is the highest title that could be ascribed to any female in our society.

2) She was a Servant:

Phoebe was well-known for her quality service to the people of God in Cenchrea. The word used for *servant* is *diakonos*. The word can refer to the office of a deacon (1 Timothy 3:10), to a specific ministry (Acts 6:4) or to a specific person who serves (Romans 16:1). The only context which would fit is that Phoebe was a servant.

This has sometimes been an issue of well-intentioned liberals to misapply their agenda in the Christian assembly. They take the word “servant” and make up a new word in the English called “deaconess”. It first appeared in the Revised Standard Version in 1946. *Romans 16:1*, “*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae...*” They attempted to transliterate instead of translating, resulting in a brand new word to mean *the female office of a deacon*. By 1989 in the New Revised Standard Version, they officially changed Phoebe into a *deacon*. Since then liberals have used that version to dismiss the actual words of Paul concerning the office of a deacon, “*Deacons must be husbands of only one wife*” (1 Timothy 3:12).

Paul vouched that Phoebe was a great servant to Christ in the church Cenchrea. Perhaps we should just leave it as that.

3) She was a Saint: She was a Saint, saved by the blood of Jesus and placed in the China hutch of God. The word “saint” in the New Testament is not someone who is deified in the Catholic church and receives a statue in a cathedral. It is *hagios* in the Greek, meaning “set apart”. She was a saint because Jesus set her apart from her sins and the world. Phoebe was a *saint* because she had set herself apart for the sacrificial work of the kingdom. All Christians who enter covenant with and follow Jesus are labeled as saints.

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Phoebe was a sister, a servant and a saint. These three terms has identified here in the scriptures for nearly twenty centuries.

Romans 16:3-5a, *“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house.”*

Priscilla and Aquila:

They were a married couple who had been close friends of Paul for more than five years at the time of the writing of the letter. Priscilla and Aquila were kicked out of Rome during the expulsion of the Jews by Claudius in A.D. 49 and ended up making tents in Corinth. Paul met them on the Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:1-11). They spent eighteen months together in Corinth, working with together for the furtherance of the gospel. They would have likely known Phoebe from nearby Cenchrea. It was from Phoebe’s hometown that Paul, Priscilla and Aquila departed to travel to Ephesus.

They spent a short amount of time with Paul at Ephesus, assisting in establishing the church in that community. When Paul headed out for Syria, he left couple in Ephesus to continue the work.

Not long after Paul departed, they met Apollos at a Bible study. He was a man mighty in the scriptures and a great debater of the word. His only drawback was that he had known only the baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila showed him a *“way of god more accurately”*, presumably baptizing him in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Acts 18:26; Matthew 28:19). They saw his potential to strongly debate stubborn Jews and sent him to Corinth to aid the church in such.

At some point Priscilla ad Aquila risked their lives for Paul, likely during the Ephesians riots of Acts 19. They also appeared to have stayed on at Ephesus for some time, but later departed for Rome in A.D. 54, following the death of Claudius (Romans 16:4). At the end of Paul’s life, they were again in Ephesus, supporting the evangelistic mission started there may years prior (1 Corinthians 16:19, 2 Timothy 4:19).

Romans 16:5b, *“Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.”*

Epaenetus:

He was one of the first converts of Paul’s in the region of Asia. One might remember all the resistance that Paul experienced in Asia during his missionary travels. To have a new brother like Epaenetus under those circumstances would have generated much hope in the apostle. It is no wonder that he referred to him as *“my beloved”*. Paul held him very fondly in his heart.

Romans 16:6-7, *“Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”*

Mary of Rome:

Very little is known of her except she was a good worker for the church. When you think about it, that is all that really matters.

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Andronicus and Junias:

Who are Andronicus and Junias? They were likely another Christian missionary couple like Priscilla and Aquila. They converted from the Jewish faith, for they were “*kinsmen*”. Andronicus and Junias were converted long before Paul, likely on or around the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9) and later went back to the region of Asia. They shared the common factor of having been imprisoned for their faith like Paul.

Romans 16:8-10, “*Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.* ⁹ *Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved.* ¹⁰ *Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.*”

Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys and Apelles:

Nothing extra is known about the four others mentioned here other than they were beloved, fellow workers and approved in Christ. The four were likely part of a core group of believers in the church at Rome.

Household of Aristobulus

The word household does not occur in the Greek, but was an implied ancient term which was implied to occur the family and all their servants under their home. It applied to a well-established structure of a wealthy established, family name. The greeting was extended to the household, but not directly to Aristobulus. Clinton Arnold wrote in his Romans Commentary something of interest.

“While we cannot be certain, the Aristobulus mentioned here may have been the brother of King Herod Agrippa I, ruler of Palestine under Roman auspices from A.D. 41–44 (his death is described in Acts 12:19b–23). Aristobulus went with Agrippa as a hostage to Rome and died in A.D. 48 or 49. But servants in his household may still have been identified with their famous deceased master.”

Romans 16:11-12, “*Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord.* ¹² *Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord.*”

Herodion, the household of Narcissus, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis:

Herodion was referred as a kinsman. Perhaps he had a Jewish background like Paul. Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis were all three extremely active sisters the church family. They had a proven track record of being servants for the people of God, just like Phoebe.

Paul also sent his greetings to the household of Narcissus. Notice he used the phrase, *those who are in the Lord*. This has led many scholars to believe that this is a reference to the confiscated household of a well-known freedman named Narcissus, who served under Emperor Claudius. He died shortly before the writing of the letter and his slaves would have been still attached to the name of that household. Apparently many of the slaves of this man’s home had converted to Christ.

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Romans 16:13-15, *“Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.”*

Not much is known about Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas and Hermas other than they were Romans Christians. Philologus and Julia were another couple like Priscilla and Aquila. Nereus and his sister were part of the church of Rome. There was another man named Olympas. All there have been recorded into the text because they had a relationship with Paul.

There is an interesting history about Rufus. Many have concluded that this is the same Rufus who Mark speaks of in *Mark 15:21 They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.* He singled out in the assumption that the readers were familiar with them. It is believed the Gospel of Mark was written to Rome following the death of Paul (2 Timothy 4:11). Perhaps Mark was singling them out of familiarity from previous encounters with them. We do not know this for sure, but it appears likely.

What was the Roman church like in the first century?

There was a diverse group of many active Christians, seeking to make a difference for the cause of Christ in Rome. There were missionaries from various backgrounds. There were couples and singles, Jewish and Gentile converts, men and women, free and slave, old and young, rich and poor, and everyone in between.

They were so different from each other, yet united in Christ. This is the reason Paul could write in Romans 16:16, *“Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.”* They could do that because they were all in the family of God.

God's Family

We're part of the family, that's been born again
Part of the family, whose love knows no end
For Jesus has saved us, and made us His own
Now were part of the family, that's on it's way home

Chorus:

And sometimes we laugh together
Sometimes we cry
Sometimes we share together
Heartaches and sighs
Sometimes we dream together
Of how it will be
When we all get to heaven, God's family