

Romans 16:1-2 Phoebe

Romans 16 is a list of personal greetings to those Paul either knows or knows of. Of the 28 people mentioned, mostly by name, 18 are men and 10 are women. Some consider that Romans 16 would fit better at the end of Ephesians, but it seems to fit in well where it is, and the connective 'and' (included in many Greek translations, and often not included in English translations) supports the view that it belongs to the letter of Romans.

Romans 16 is a great chapter because it is about real people like you and me. Hebrews 11 lists a *great cloud of witnesses* (Hebrews 12:1), and it seems here we have another great cloud of men and women who lived out their faith in the harsh reality of the 1st century world, living as they did at the heart of the Roman Empire. We are all called to be witnesses to Christ, and to be salt and light in our families and communities. This is not first that we go to Church or meet together, as vital as this is. It is rather that we also live out our faith day by day as we seek to follow Jesus and put His teaching into practice (Romans 12:1).

Michael Green in his book 'Evangelism' says that it is a matter of history that it was the ordinary men and women who had been transformed by the power of the gospel who contributed most to the spread of the gospel in the 1st century. Itinerant preachers and apologists had their place, but it was the 'salt and light' effect of ordinary believers which brought about change.

The first person Paul mentioned is Phoebe (pronounced Feebe), who was clearly a woman of exceptional Christ-like character. Her name is Greek, found in Greek mythologies, so it is almost certain she was a Greek speaking Gentile. Her name means 'bright, radiant' and was associated with the Greek god of light. But I think she became a bright and radiant light for Jesus. Paul describes her as *a servant of the church in Cenchreae* (pronounced Sen-cree). Cenchreae was about 5½ miles from Corinth, a flourishing port town, and part of the city state of Corinth. Today it is a small village. Paul was working in this area and I think it is very likely he established the believing community in Cenchreae and knew Phoebe well. She could have been one of his converts. It is widely assumed in the light of Romans 16:1-2 that Paul entrusted Phoebe with the task and responsibility of carrying Paul's letter to Rome. This was a journey which would have required considerable commitment and stamina. It is also possible that Phoebe would have been in the position of being able to explain some of the letter! Paul instructs the Roman believers to welcome Phoebe *in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints*.

As a Greek speaking Gentile Phoebe represented the heart of Paul's teaching, that is, that membership of the body of Christ did not depend on ethnicity but on faith in Jesus Christ. We should not therefore conclude that God abolishes ethnicity. Paul says on several occasions that there is no difference between (or neither) Jew and Gentile (Romans 10:12, Galatians 27-29), but this refers to the way we can be put right with God, through repentance and faith in Jesus. There is still a distinction between Jew and Gentile just as there is still a distinction between male and female, and social status. The spirit of antichrist seeks to obliterate national, gender and social boundaries in a man-made and desperate attempt to find unity and peace. However, we can only find true peace in the Spirit of Christ. Through Him we receive new birth and he makes the two one, a celebration of diversity, resulting in true unity and peace to the glory of God. In marriage male and female are different yet also one. Jew and Gentile are different in ethnicity and in obligation to Torah, yet can be one in Christ.

Paul uses two words in particular to describe Phoebe, *servant - diakonos* (16:1) and *a great help prostates* (16:2). We can all think of Christian people who are both servant-hearted and a great help, but what do these words really mean?

Servant, diakonos is where we get the word deacon from. Since Phoebe is described as a *servant of the church at Cenchreae* and not simply as *a servant* it is most likely that she held a church office, for

example as a deacon. Being a deacon in one of Paul's churches Phoebe would certainly have been a woman of good character and mature faith.

1Timothy 3:8-10 *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.*

Churches always need deacons and in our busy world it can be difficult to find those who are both qualified and have the time for the work. But there is also a great reward for those who serve as deacons,

1Timothy 3:13 *For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

It is interesting however, that *diakonos* is also translated as 'minister' in the New Testament. Tychicus (pronounced: tick-i-cus) also delivered one of Paul's letters. Paul said,

Colossians 4:7 *He is a dear brother, a faithful minister (diakonos) and fellow-servant in the Lord.*

Why *diakonos* is translated as *servant* for Phoebe and *minister* for Tychicus is curious, and possibly culturally conditioned. However Paul also described himself as a *diakonos*, in the context of a minister as one who declares the gospel,

Ephesians 3:7-8 *Of this gospel I was made a minister [diakonos] according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*

Although I can't see there is evidence to conclude that Phoebe was a leader or elder at the church in Cenchreae, she clearly had a significant role, which could well have also involved proclamation (Acts 2:17).

The second word is translated in the NIV as a **great help, prostatis**. But this means much more than something like volunteering to do the washing up every Sunday after coffee. It means, *A female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and helping them with resources*. It is possible Phoebe was a benefactor of the church, or perhaps someone who could give help, or had access to people who could help with legal matters. Phoebe was a woman of influence, education and considerable distinction, a description not immediately obvious from use of the words *servant* and *great help*. A slate was discovered on the Mount of Olives dated to the 4th century. It is fascinating because on it are inscribed the words, *Sophia, the diakonos, the second Phoebe*. To be called *the second Phoebe* was clearly considered a great honour. Phoebe was not only held in high esteem by Paul, but also by the whole Christian community even centuries later, because of her Christ-like character, her wisdom, her generosity and selfless ministry.

