

Phoebe

Rom. 16:1-16

16:1 I commend unto you **Phoebe** our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: **16:2** That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also.

16:3 Greet **Priscilla** and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: **16:4** Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. **16:5** Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ. **16:6** Greet **Mary**, who bestowed much labour on us. **16:7** Salute Andronicus and **Junia**, my kinsmen, and my fellowprisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. **16:8** Greet Amplias my beloved in the Lord. **16:9** Salute Urbane, our helper in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. **16:10** Salute Apelles approved in Christ. Salute them which are of Aristobulus' household. **16:11** Salute Herodion my kinsman. Greet them that be of the household of Narcissus, which are in the Lord. **16:12** Salute **Tryphena** and **Tryphosa**, who labour in the Lord. Salute the beloved **Persis**, which laboured much in the Lord. **16:13** Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord, and **his mother and mine**. **16:14** Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them. **16:15** Salute Philologus, and **Julia**, Nereus, and **his sister**, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them. **16:16** Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you.

Rom. 16:21-23

16:21 Timotheus my workfellow, and Lucius, and Jason, and Sosipater, my kinsmen, salute you. **16:22** I Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord. **16:23** Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth you. Erastus the chamberlain of the city saluteth you, and Quartus a brother.

Who and what were important?

Phoebe is only one of several women who are named or mentioned by Paul in the final chapter of Romans. (Notice the ten individuals highlighted in red on the left.) Yet, she stands out among the others for a number of reasons.

Though we do not know anything about Phoebe beyond what is recorded in the first two verses in Romans chapter sixteen, she is mentioned first in the chapter, and more is said about her than about any other person in Paul's long list. Moreover, she is the only one who is formally introduced to the Roman church. Because of this, many believe that she was in charge of taking the Roman Epistle to Rome. The Letter was written by Paul's secretary, Tertius, a man (16:22), but it may have been a woman who delivered it.

Phoebe apparently often helped traveling Christian workers who came through her home area near one of the two ports of Corinth, but in Rome *she* herself probably receive material help from the believers there. The importance of mutual assistance is stressed in 16:1-2.

negatives

Supporting and helping in the Lord’s work is undoubtedly important, but that subject and Phoebe’s role therein are not mentioned until the final chapter. In Romans, Paul obviously placed more emphasis on doctrinal content.

Although everything that is said about specific individuals in chapter 16, including Phoebe, is positive, there are some important lines of warning as well. Phoebe was to be received, BUT false teachers who caused division were to be opposed and rejected (16:17-20).

Generally speaking, it is wrong or at least unprofitable to speak about the relative importance of various people. Nevertheless, some individuals in the Bible are mentioned far more than others. This is the focus of some of the worksheet lines below.

Phoebe is described in some positive detail. (See the worksheet lines on the next page.) Nevertheless, there is also some confusion and debate about her position in her church and exactly what she did. There are various things that we do not know about her with certainty.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() Phoebe is not a front-page character.
A-1	() She is only mentioned in two verses (Rom. 16:1-2).
A-2	() She is not mentioned until the last chapter of Romans.
A-3	() Timothy is mentioned before her (Acts 16:1. Rom. 16:1, 21).
A-4	() She needed an introduction to the Roman church (Rom. 16:1).
A-5	() Priscilla and Aquilla were better known (Acts 18:2, Rom. 16:1-4).
A-6	() Nothing is said about Phoebe’s husband or family (16:1-4, 7, 15).
B	() We do not know the details about what Phoebe did.
B-1	() We do not know why she went to Rome.
B-2	() We do not know who went to Rome with her.
B-3	() We do not know how she helped Paul and others.
B-4	() Dorcus’ ministry is explained more clearly (Acts 9:36-39).
B-5	() Rom. 16:1-2 does not directly say that Phoebe was wealthy.
B-6	() Rather than helping the Roman believers, she needed their help.

positives

God expects us to think carefully about what is written AND about why it is recorded as it is. So rather than complaining about the fact that there are only two verses about Phoebe (A-1), it is far better, for instance, to think about why she is mentioned before so many others in Romans chapter 16. (It is probably significant that she is mentioned before Priscilla and Aquilla.) We do not know the reasons for all this with absolute certainty, but lines C-4 and D-2 are not wild speculation. She was undoubtedly mentioned before all the others for a reason.

The most controversial lines below are probably C-5 and D-5. There is no doubt about Phoebe being an active servant in her local church (16:1), but it is less clear whether this involved having an official position as a deaconness. (1 Tim. 3:11 is also controversial.)

Most of the lines regarding Phoebe’s ministry are correct, but each should be considered with care. For instance, in answering line D-4 about her hospitality, information about her family should be taken into consideration. (See lines A-6 and D-2.)

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() Phoebe is positively described in various ways.
C-1	() Paul commended her (16:1).
C-2	() She actively served in her church (16:1).
C-3	() She was a sister (16:1) and a saint (16:2).
C-4	() She probably delivered Paul’s Epistle to Rome.
C-5	() She may have been a deaconness (16:1, 1 Tim. 3:11).
C-6	() She obviously used her wealth for the Lord’s work (16:2).
D	() Phoebe should be appreciated and imitated.
D-1	() Her service is emphasized (16:1-2).
D-2	() She was willing and able to travel for the Lord.
D-3	() She shows that church membership is important.
D-4	() She probably hosted Paul in her home (16:2, 23).
D-5	() Paul stressed what she did more than her official position.
D-6	() It is good to give and accept support (3 John 7-8, Lk. 22:36).

worksheet answers

Because of the great importance of hospitality in the early church (Cf. 3 John 7-8.), it is natural to suspect that Phoebe helped Paul and others by hosting them in her home. This was unlikely however (D-4), because Paul was instead hosted by Gaius (16:23). Moreover since no mention is made of Phoebe's husband or family (A-6), she probably was unmarried or a widow. Her willingness and ability to travel to Rome (D-2) supports this view. Therefore she probably helped traveling Christian workers financially but did not host them in her home. Her ministry was closely connected to her local church (16:1, D-3), and nothing is said about the use of her house. (This contrasts with Priscilla and Aquilla, 16:3-5.) Line B-3 is partly correct.

Although Phoebe's wealth is not directly mentioned (B-5), her home city (16:1) and her helping (16:2) implies that she probably was not poor. Yet she apparently did not take a large sum with her when she went to Rome. This may be because it was safer and easier to depend on the hospitality of other believers there and along the way. Christian workers were not to depend on unbelievers, however. Lines D-6 and B-6 are only partly correct.

So what?

Like many believers, Phoebe was an amazing person in various contradictory ways. She is mentioned long before Timothy in Romans chapter sixteen, yet she is not mentioned in Acts and elsewhere like he is (A-3). She was probably well-known in her home area and church, yet she needed an introduction to the Romans (A-4). She was closely associated with a specific local church (16:1, D-3), yet she traveled to Rome (16:2) and was probably in charge of taking Paul's longest letter, to believers there (C-4). She needed the material help of believers in Rome; yet she was able to financially help workers who came through her home city. In her own way, she was "unknown yet well known" like Paul himself (2 Cor. 6:9).

Perhaps the most important things to learn from Phoebe are two somewhat contradictory points. The first is that church membership and active service in the local church are very important (D-3), and the second is that the Lord's work is not just local. It is not surprising that Paul had friends and coworkers in Corinth (Greece) and Rome (Italy). Yet Phoebe shows that even a lesser known, local servant of the Lord can have an international ministry.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
