

Romans (16:1-5a)

Paul's P.S. (Precious Saints)

Part 98 - March 11, 2007

LOVABLE PAUL

Paul has finished his “heavy lifting”. He’s done instructing, and now he’s greeting all of his friends and family in Rome. And as chapter 16 shows, Paul had a lot of friends. In this passage he says, “Hi” to 24 people by name!

Q: Paul was respectable, but do you think of him as lovable?

Just before he boarded a ship from Ephesus (to take the offering to Jerusalem), Paul said his goodbyes to the leaders there:

And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship. - *Acts 20:37-38 NAS*

To us, chapter 16 is a list of strangers, but to Paul it’s warm relationships. Today, we get to meet three of his most precious: an *unmarried* woman named Phoebe; and a *married* woman named Priscilla (and her husband Aquila).

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchræa [SEN-kree-uh ... think: sin + Korea] I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. - *Romans 16:1-5a NIV*

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

So, the first person mentioned by name in Romans, is: “Phoebe”

Paul doesn’t greet her, he “commend[s]” her. Phoebe isn’t *living* in Rome, she’s *traveling* to Rome. In Paul’s day, travelers carried letters of recommendation, because food and lodging was generally secured through networks of personal relationships. And, it helped the early church identify valid Christians.

Not such a bad idea. Imagine if visitors (to any church) were required to produce a reference from their previous church. It would sure sort the troublemakers from the trustworthy!



We live in a disconnected and unaccountable culture.

If you were required to produce a letter of reference to authenticate your faith; who would you ask to write it? Who do you hold yourself accountable to?

Phoebe's the only person commended in this letter. The natural conclusion being, that she's the one delivering it. There was no post office in Paul's day. You had to find someone you trusted to deliver your letter for you.

And Paul trusted Phoebe, who was most likely a widow, since Greek manners prohibited mentioning a woman acting independently if either her husband was living, or she was unmarried. I picture this petite widow, heading to Rome, with the greatest declaration of inspired Christian doctrine, in her purse.

Paul gives her two labels; he says she's a "sister" and a "servant". And notice, not just "a" sister, but: "our sister". The name "Phoebe" comes from a pagan Corinthian goddess. She was almost certainly raised as a gentile idol worshipper. And Paul needs to make it clear that she's now a sister.



We are siblings because we have the same Father. You and I, and every other believer, are strangers only in the sense that siblings separated at birth are strangers until they meet. And think about the joy that's involved in their reunion!

We will be motivated to care for and pray for other believers to the degree that we see them as brothers and sisters.



And notice, it doesn't just say "a" servant, but: "a servant of the church in Cenchrea". Paul spent a lot of time in Corinth, and most likely wrote this letter from there. And Cenchrea was Corinth's eastern seaport. This is Cenchrea's shoreline. In Paul's day it may have been a port warehouse, or a temple, that was later turned into a church dedicated to Phoebe.



Notice Paul doesn't say Phoebe is a servant of the *Lord*, but of the *church*. This indicates a very active role in ministry. Do you tend to think of the church as a place to serve, or a place to be served? Which side of this photo best reflects your relationship with the body of Christ? It takes a conscious choice and a concerted effort to grow from consumer to contributor.

[Jesus said:] Who is more important, the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? The one who sits at the table, of course. But not here! For I am among you as one who serves. - *Luke 22:27 NLT*

I was in the church's restroom (at the urinal) a while back, when a volunteer cleaning lady burst in and started working without noticing me. I quietly zipped and buttoned and said, "I'm sure glad we're family!" She was a very embarrassed sister *and* servant!

Paul says:

I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you (16:2a)

- Give her food and lodging and lavish her with Christian love!

For she has been a great help to many people, including me (16:2b)

The term for "great help" can be translated: "patron," which has caused many scholars to speculate that Phoebe was a wealthy woman who financially helped *her* church and *Paul's* ministry. What a role-model; a single, widowed female believer, supporting and serving in a paganistic, heathenistic, chauvinistic culture!

FELLOW WORKERS

And then Paul salutes his favorite husband and wife team:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila

These two are mentioned six times in the New Testament! And in Paul's day the husband was normally mentioned before the wife. And yet, four out of the six times, it's: *Priscilla* and Aquila. This indicates that Priscilla was the front person; the more prominent, more dominant, and the stronger of the two teachers.

Paul calls them: "my fellow workers"

This was true in two different ways:

1. It was true in ministry: "in Christ Jesus"
2. It was true in industry:

... Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. - *Acts 18:1-3*

So, they get kicked out of Italy, wind up in Corinth, and cross paths with this outgoing, adventurous, fellow tent maker, who's making his way from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum. And as Paul lived and worked and shared with them:



Their business became a place of ministry. They even relocated to Ephesus for the sake of ministry. And God used them there to shape the faith of a teacher named Apollos, who hadn't heard about the resurrection of Christ.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard [Apollos], they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. [And Apollos] vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. – *Acts 18:26, 28 NIV*

Priscilla and Aquila most likely paved the way for Paul in Rome. Isn't it amazing how the Lord will turn around the calamities of our lives in such remarkable ways?

Paul then gives us this little tidbit: "They risked their lives for me"

The literal translation is that they "laid down their own necks" for Paul. It's a figure of speech that probably comes from the Roman method of execution, which was beheading. We don't know exactly what they did, but it jeopardized their own lives, and it must've been heroic, because Paul adds:

Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them (16:4b)



Together as husband and wife, or should I say wife and husband, this couple risked their lives for the cause of Christ! Devotion involves willingness to die. I must die to self and to sin to live for Christ. I must die to the world, to live for His Kingdom. And I must die to man's praise to live for God's approval.

- The cause of Christ must outweigh my craving for comfort.

A final hello: Greet also the church that meets at their house (16:5a)



Not only did their business become a place of ministry, their house became a place of worship. In our spiritual life, if all we have is what we have at church, we don't have much. Our home must be as much about worship as our church is.

Like Phoebe, we've been entrusted to deliver the message of the Gospel to those who are longing to receive it. And like Priscilla and Aquila, we must prefer being wounded in battle to settling for sitting on the sidelines.