

"Phoebe"

Romans 16:1-2

Baxter Exum (#978)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
July 13, 2008



Introduction:

If we were to choose a favorite passage of Scripture, most of us would probably choose a good story. Others might choose a profound statement that is easy to memorize. Perhaps others would choose a parable, or maybe part of the Sermon on the Mount, or maybe a Psalm or a Proverb. But whatever our choice might be, we can be fairly sure that no one would choose a list of names. We know that the Bible does, in fact, give a number of lists. We have genealogies, we have listings of the fighting men of Israel, we have the listing of the twelve apostles, this morning in Bible class we read a list of kings that had been defeated by Joshua, but generally, the lists of the Bible are not among our favorite passages of Scripture. Generally speaking, if we really wanted to read a list of names, we could simply stay home and read the phone book—at least there is a chance of finding someone we know!

And so when we get to a list of names in the Bible, sometimes we get a little bit frustrated. With all of the questions that are not answered in the Bible—like what Jesus was doing between the ages of 2 and 12, or what He was doing between the ages of 12 and 30—with all of these unanswered questions—all of these things we would like to know, why did God ever decide to (as some people might see it) “waste” a page of Scripture on a list of names of people who we have never met, who have been dead and gone for hundreds of years? Why would He do that?

This morning, with this frustration in mind, I would like for us to look at one of these lists, as it is found in **Romans 16**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on page 1780. As far as I can tell, 29 people are mentioned by name in the last chapter of the book of **Romans**. Many of them are only mentioned here—they are not mentioned anywhere else in the entire Bible. Some are just referred to by name—with others we are given a little background information. For just a moment we need to consider the significance of such a list. If we sat down this afternoon with a piece of paper, I wonder how many of us could list 29 members of this congregation. Hopefully most of us could, but as we might remember from our studies on Wednesday evening, Paul had never been to the city of Rome. He was writing from the city of Corinth (in Greece). And so maybe we can try to think of another congregation roughly 850 miles away from here (the distance between Corinth and Rome), and maybe we can challenge ourselves to write down the names of 29 people from a church 850 miles away! How many of us could write down 29 names and say something intelligent concerning a congregation in Atlanta, Georgia—a place where most of us have never been? And yet that is exactly what the apostle Paul was able to do concerning the church in the city of Rome.

We will get to this particular list on Wednesday night in about two weeks, but for now I would like for us to focus in on one of those names, and the reference is to a woman by the name of Phoebe. When we hear the name Phoebe, most of us probably have a picture that comes to mind. »PPT» We think of Lisa Kudrow. We think of the television show Friends. And maybe that is the face that we attach to the name Phoebe. Perhaps some of you know someone named Phoebe. I personally do not. I have met several animals named Phoebe, but never a person. The same is true with the name Baxter. I have known far more dogs than people who answer to the name Baxter. Nevertheless, Phoebe is a very distinctive name.

The scholars tell us that Phoebe was the name of the Greek moon goddess. And so it appears that Phoebe most likely either had pagan parents or that she was born as a slave and was named by her Greek master. But somewhere along the line she obeyed the gospel. We know that she was a member of the church in Cenchrea, »PPT» a port city just east of Corinth. If we compare the Madison area to Corinth, both were built on an isthmus. Corinth would be located where the UW is located, and Cenchrea would be somewhere around Olin Park. Again, Paul was in Corinth, so it is certainly possible that he had played a role in Phoebe's decision to become a Christian.

And for those who may look at what Paul wrote concerning the role of women in the church in his other letters—for those who might consider the apostle Paul to be a woman-hating old man, it is interesting that he apparently entrusted this particular woman with a very important responsibility. As we look at the two verses about Phoebe in just a moment, it appears that Phoebe was chosen by Paul to actually carry the book of Romans to the church in Rome! Before the days of the postal service, you had to find someone who was going where you were wanting to send a letter, and you would ask them to take it there for you, you would entrust them with the letter. And it appears that Paul chose Phoebe to carry the book of Romans! For whatever reason, she was headed to Rome, and Paul sent her there with the book of **Romans**. »PPT»

But as we begin, let us please look together at the first two verses of **Romans 16**—these are the words of Paul. ***Romans 16:1-2, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; 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."***

What can we learn from this woman who is only mentioned in these two verses? With all of the unanswered questions elsewhere in the Bible, why was this tiny bit of information ever included in the Bible? With these questions in mind, I would like for us to look at three very powerful words that Paul uses to describe such a faithful woman.

I. First of all, as we look at verse 1, we find that Paul refers to Phoebe as a SISTER. »PPT»

He says in verse 1, "***I commend to you our sister Phoebe....***" The word "***commend***" means that Paul is standing beside her. Paul is letting her borrow his reputation. Paul is saying, "***When you read this letter, treat this woman just as you would treat me.***" But the most significant part of this is that Paul refers to this woman as a "***sister.***" What a wonderful description!

We look around us today, and we see all kinds of distinguished titles being thrown around—especially in the religious world. The most common is probably, "***Reverend.***" People do not realize, though, that the word "***Reverend***" is only used one time in an older translation of the Bible, and in that one reference, the word refers to God! In the KJV, in Psalms 111:9, the Bible refers to God and says, "***Holy and reverend is His name.***" How can any religious leader take that name upon himself? And yet we now have all kinds of combinations: The Right Reverend so and so, the Most Right Reverend so and so, the Most Holy Right Reverend so and so, and on and on. It is so bad, in fact, that even non-religious people have a hard time with it. I have told you before about being called in for jury duty several years ago. While I was being interviewed by the prosecution, and the defense, and the judge, the prosecutor found out that I was a minister, and from that point on he kept referring to me as "***Reverend Exum.***" I gently explained that that was not necessary, that I was just a normal guy. He kept slipping back, I tried to correct him a few times, and finally he said, "***Well, what do you want me to call you?***" And at that point I told him once again that "***Baxter***" would be just fine! Not long after that, the prosecutor said, "***I think I'll pass on this guy.***" And so people in the world, even while meaning well, even while trying to be respectful, have a hard time with the simplicity of the Lord's church. We do not use any titles in a religious sense.

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "***Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh....***" And so if you ask me, the greatest way that we can describe our relationship as Christians is through the use of the words "***brother***" and "***sister.***" That's it! When it comes to our Christian family, we are brothers and sisters in the Lord!

We remember what Jesus said in Matthew 12:50, "***For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.***" Paul understood what Jesus had also said in Mark 10:29-30, "***Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.***"

When we obey the gospel, we are born into a spiritual family—a family so large that it literally covers the earth. Wherever we go, if we look, we can find brothers and sisters in the Lord.

I have only one physical sister, I love her so much, and yet apart from my natural family, a woman becomes my sister when she is born into the family of God—when she turns away from sin, when she confesses Jesus as being the Son of God, and when she is immersed in water for the forgiveness of her sins. At that point, we are joint heirs of the grace of God—we are a part of God's family.

One of my favorite songs is a song that we do not sing very often—**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 we're part of the family that's on its way home.***

***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.***

When we are a part of the family of God, it should mean something to us. And if we are like Phoebe, we are to take that responsibility seriously. There is no greater honor in this life than being described as a brother or sister in the family of God.

II. But even beyond this, we find in verse 1 that Paul goes on to describe Phoebe not only as a sister, but also as a SERVANT. »PPT»

He refers to Phoebe, "***...who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.***" And again, Cenchrea was basically a suburb of Corinth. Like Madison, the city of Corinth was built on an isthmus. The isthmus was several miles across, and Cenchrea was the port city on the east side of the isthmus. Cenchrea is referred to one other time in the Scriptures. In **Acts 18:18**, as Paul was leaving Corinth, the Bible says that, "***Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow.***" And so Cenchrea was the only city where we know that Paul got a haircut!

Nevertheless, Paul referred to Phoebe as a "***servant of the church.***" And again, what a great honor! She was not just a member of the church. She was not someone who just came on Sunday morning and sat there for an hour or two, but she was a "***servant of the church.***" Phoebe was a woman who did stuff! She was active in her Christian faith.

I should point out here that there has been some controversy about Phoebe. Some people think that she was officially appointed as a "deaconess" of the church in Cenchrea. And the misunderstanding goes back to the fact that the word translated here as "***servant***" goes back to a word that can also be translated as "***deacon.***" A deacon is a servant, and the feminine form of that word is used here in **Romans**

16:1. And so the question is: Did Phoebe hold the office of deaconess, or was she a simply a servant as all of us as Christians are also called to be?

To come to an answer to this question, we need to understand that the word for servant is used all throughout the New Testament, without referring to the “office” of “deacon.” It would be a little bit like referring to someone as “elderly.” By using that word, we do not imply that they actually hold the office of elder in the church, any more than an old woman in the Bible is an “elderess.”

As far as I can tell, there are only two major translations that refer to Phoebe as being a **“deaconess,”** the RSV and the NRSV. All of the other translations I consulted for this morning’s lesson simply refer to Phoebe as being a **“servant.”** So, I guess if someone went into this passage trying to prove something, they could make a big deal out of those translations that use **“deaconess,”** but at least as I see it, that is not the point that Paul is making here. Paul is simply recommending this woman and he describes her as being a servant of the Lord’s church. And as we find in **verse 2**, she was also a servant to Paul personally—she is described as being, **“...a helper of many, and of myself as well.”**

If you are a member here, then you might have noticed that there is an article about the “deaconess” question in the cubbyholes this morning. If you are visiting with us, there are extra copies on top back there. But I certainly hope that everyone has a chance to read a little more about this if you are interested.

Phoebe, therefore, is referred to by Paul as being a sister and a servant.

III. As we look back to Romans 16, we also find that Phoebe is referred to as being a SAINT. »PPT»

In **verse 2**, Paul begs the church in Rome, **“...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.”** We can only imagine that it would have been rather dangerous for a single woman to travel those 850 miles from Corinth to Rome, and so Paul basically gave her the book of **Romans** as a letter of recommendation. Before the days of Holiday Inn, people had to rely on the hospitality of friends and relatives along the way. Paul, therefore, was arranging for Phoebe to be cared for upon her arrival in the city of Rome.

Near the end of the New Testament, we have a very short book that addresses this custom and gives us some information on how the process worked. This is what John wrote in **3 John 5-8**, **“Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.”**

And so John encourages the early Christians to care for those who are traveling. In his previous letter, he gave a warning, though. This is what John wrote in **2 John 9-11**, ***"Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds."*** And so they were to be careful who they supported, because by supporting someone who was a false teacher they would actually be participating in their evil deeds. Paul, therefore, commended Phoebe to the church in Rome and told them to treat her, ***"...in a manner worthy of the saints."***

The word saint refers to someone or something that has been set aside for some special purpose. As Christians, we have been set aside; we have been called out of the world as people who are special to God. We are unique. We are different from the world.

Contrary to one of the world's largest denominations, becoming a saint does not require a long drawn-out process. I went to their website last night and printed out the 20 steps that are to be taken in order to declare that someone is a saint. Please listen very carefully, and I will read step #1. Here it is, ***"Choosing of a vice-postulator by the postulator-general of the cause, to promote all the judicial inquiries necessary in places outside of Rome. Such inquiries are instituted by the local episcopal authority."*** What does that mean? I don't know! But I do know that Paul was able to use the word ***"saint"*** and associate that word with Phoebe without calling on any kind of ***"postulator-general of the cause."***

And again, Biblically speaking (as we like to do here), a saint is someone who has been set apart for some special purpose. I would suggest that a saint is simply a Christian. When someone has been buried with Christ in baptism, that person has been "set apart" in the eyes of God. That person is a saint! Paul, therefore, told the church in Rome to receive Phoebe, ***"...in a manner worthy of the saints."***

Conclusion & Invitation:

This morning, then, we have learned...

- ...first of all, that Phoebe was a sister—she was an important part of God's family.
- We have learned that Phoebe was a servant—she used her God-given abilities to serve the church and to personally help the apostle Paul
- And we have also learned that Phoebe was a saint—she was set apart for a special purpose, and she was fulfilling that purpose in her life.

But even beyond these basic descriptions, we have learned something from the apostle Paul. Right here at the end of one of the deepest books in the entire Bible, we find that Paul valued people. Paul expressed gratitude for those who had helped

him in various ways. Paul was looking out for people like Phoebe, and he was making sure that they were cared for by the church. Paul was concerned with truth, and he was also concerned with the people to whom that truth was written. We do not need to choose between truth and relationships—Paul valued both!

Please remember that Phoebe is the first of many in this chapter. Nearly 30 people are referred to by name or by relationship. Paul valued people. We should also value people!

As we close our thoughts on these two verses, we should point out that people are important to God. In fact (as brother Stuart read for us earlier from **John 3:16**) the Bible says, ***"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*** In response to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Bible tells us to turn away from sin and to be immersed in water so that our past sins can be washed away. If you are ready to obey the gospel, you can let us know about your decision as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org