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### Romans 16:1-2, English Standard Version.

**16** I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, **2** that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

### I, Phoebe.

I thought I would bless you with mercifully short Bible passage today – a record short passage for me, I believe. You're welcome; next week, I will read the entire New Testament to you. But seriously, I'm also treating you to a sermon that is a bit shorter this week.

Our passage is from Romans, which as we saw last week, is arguably the most important of Paul's letters and the most important Book of the New Testament, after the four Gospels. This letter, the only one Paul wrote to a church that he did NOT found, has, from the early days of the Christian church, defined much of what we believe. While our basic beliefs about how we should act as Christians, with respect to empathy, forgiveness, regeneration, and kindness, comes from the words of Christ, our more formal beliefs are largely derived from Romans. This

letter has been used to differentiate true Christian theology from derivations of Christianity, like Gnosticism, that have, over the centuries, threatened to draw us away from the teachings of Christ. There is so much to say about Romans that I want to say again that we will only barely touch on it today, and we will return to Romans many times in the future. For now, we note that in this letter, Paul is giving guidance to a small church that met in a number of homes, but it would eventually become a large, vibrant church.

Our passage comes from near the end of Romans. In it, Paul is beginning to sign off, to end his letter. He's telling the recipient of the letter to Rome: *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae,<sup>2</sup> that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.* Phoebe is the person who is delivering this letter. It's thanks to her that it was apparently passed among a number of churches in Rome, and it is thanks to her that it was preserved for us today. But who was Phoebe? Well, there was no U.S. Postal Service to drop the letter in the box of the Roman church. If you wanted to get a letter to them in this time and place, you had to find someone to deliver it for you. Paul regularly dispatched fellow evangelists to do this. But they would do much more than just drop a letter off. They would read the letter aloud, over and

over. Phoebe's voice would be the voice of Paul in Rome. He would have chosen her very carefully. How she delivered the letter with her voice would have been critical. She would have answered questions. She would have interpreted passages from the letter. She would have had first-hand knowledge of Paul and his thoughts. She would even have had to elaborate and explain the letter in ways that Paul would not have been able to predict when he wrote it. Phoebe was critical to delivering the words of Paul to Rome.

She is only mentioned very briefly in this letter. This is all we know of her. That is her imprint on history. This brief passage consists of a request on the part of Paul for the people of Rome to care for her, to listen to her, to help her. Keep in mind that travel in the ancient world was dangerous. There were no guaranteed places to stay along the way, no sure way of getting food. There was a lot of violent crime on Roman roads. Phoebe probably took big risks delivering Paul's letter. Phoebe was from a city called *Cenchreae*, which was very far from Rome. She probably had to travel by boat around Greece and under Italy, up to the Roman port of Ostia, where she probably took a boat up the Tiber to Rome. Or, she could have walked the road up the east coast of the Adriatic and then walked down to Rome. We don't know. But back then, this was one hell of a trip.

Why did Paul choose Phoebe? She's a "sister", a term that Paul uses elsewhere for fellow female believers in the teachings of Christ. To be a brother or sister was to be a trusted fellow Christian, someone who should be treated like a biological brother or sister. Phoebe is a Gentile name, and in fact, it refers to the name of a Pagan God. The Phoebe in this letter is also a deacon in the church. The word in Greek means "servant". The word servant was used to refer to Roman officials, and to Paul himself as an evangelist for God. But a deacon was also an official term in the growing Christian church. She had the formal role of a primary leader in the church in her home city of *Cenchreae*. She is also called a "patron" by Paul; the original Greek word can also mean "benefactor". That means that she had some assets; she was not poor and not uneducated. She was almost certainly from a leading, pagan family in her home city. She could have lived a comfortable life back home; instead, she took a letter from Paul and went off on a long, dangerous mission in order to serve God.

When Phoebe entered Rome, she had to find her way to the individual houses where the believers met. And people didn't have addresses like we do now. She didn't program her phone to tell her how to get where she needed to be. She probably wandered around for a few days, talking to people, taking some risks by revealing that she was a member of this emerging sect that was not held in high

regard by either pagans or Jews. Then, when she found these houses, she had to gather together members of the church. Almost certainly, she met with multiple Christian groups there, in several people's homes. At each place, she would perform the letter, not just blandly read it. Paul would have prepared her well, teaching her his underlying theology. This might have been a lot of work for Paul. He started out with an educated, intelligent, articulate person, but she was a convert, not someone trained in Jewish Scripture, like him. He would have spent a lot of time with her, so that when she was forced to vary from his literal words, she would convey the right ideas. She would have used inflection in her voice. She would have known when to pause, when to speed up, when to make eye contact. Delivering letters to people who, for the large part, were far from fluent Greek readers, was a substantive skill. She in no doubt practiced this letter over and over before leaving Paul, probably presenting it to a mock audience and fielding many questions before Paul would have been confident enough to send her on her away.

Just imagine all that could have gone wrong. She could have gotten sick or attacked along the way and died. She could have gotten captured and executed in Rome. She might have not gotten along with the Christians in Rome. The letter could so easily have been lost to history. But we have it, and the letter to the Romans has been referenced over and over by people who themselves were

heavily influenced by it. Over the millennia they went on to grow the church. These people include Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, and John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Even nonbelievers acknowledge that Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most influential letters ever written. It is a letter that changed the world – and Phoebe conveyed it to us. She preserved it for us.

I would have loved to have had Phoebe's job. Imagine having that kind of impact on the faith of many millions of people over a period of two thousand years. The mention of her in the letter to the Romans is such a tiny reference, so brief, something that our eyes pass over as we're reading Romans. She probably had no idea of what she was going to accomplish. She was just a believer who delivered a letter, right? A letter written by one man who had no home and no paying job. It was a letter delivered to a handful of people following a fringe faith. But she believed enough that she took on this crazy, dangerous mission. It was her contribution to God's work - and I'm sure she saw it as being very modest.

We don't know what impact we might have on the faith of others. We don't know if some simple thing we do will make us the next Phoebe. Our faith tells us to trust God, to take every opportunity that comes to us to impact the hearts of others. We might influence someone who goes on to change the world. We might be a single person in a long chain of believers, who over a period of thousands of

years, pass on the torch, with the end result having that torch light the world. We don't have to look for greatness. We don't have to fight to position ourselves in some incredibly influential position. We just have to keep our eyes and our ears open. We have to never tuck our faith away as something secondary, unimportant, insignificant. We have to let God use us as God wants to.

See yourself as a Phoebe. She didn't talk to that many people. There's a chance that it was only a small handful. But she did the job. It was just a silly letter. But there was no Internet, no postal system, no trains or planes or cars. She walked, and she probably took a ship or two, and she passed through multiple nations, and certainly among unfriendly people. She carried a scroll with her. When she got to where she was, she either left it there or copied it, or had other people copy it. They say that things that we put on the Internet will never die, because they're going to be automatically copied onto many different storage devices on many computers. It might be that it won't be our voices that end up serving God. It could be our fingers that do the job. You might write something that, like the letter to the Romans, never dies, never goes away, and ends up changing the world.

Let's all be Phoebe's. Let's use our skills to pass on the Word, to perform it, to carry the message, to pass on the faith. Let God be in charge of seeing to it that

it all means something, that our actions are not insignificant. Tell people, show people how to live with forgiveness, empathy, generosity, kindness, and with the belief that there is a God, a creator who placed us here and who wants us to model our lives after that of his son. Let's pray.

*God, let us be your Phoebe. Hand us the letter. Let us take it where it belongs.*

*Let us perform it for a few people who will then perform it for a few others. Let your Word move outward in all directions. Let us serve in a simple way that impacts future generations in a way that we cannot even begin to envision right now.*

*God, we thank you for the comforts and freedoms and technology that Phoebe didn't have. We have no idea what eventually happened to her. But one day, we will meet Phoebe – and we will thank her for the legacy that she has left for us.*

*Until then, God, guide us to be the very best Phoebes we can be.*

*Amen.*