

Phoebe: Sister, Servant, Saint

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[0 : 01] And let's read again the first two verses that you find there on page 950 of your church Bibles, Romans 16, verse 1 and 2.

I'll read these verses again. I commend to you, as Paul writes to the church, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the Lord at Kincrea, 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.

And those of you who were here last Lord's Day evening remember, as we mentioned just a moment ago, we were reading the whole of this section last week.

We read there of the church that existed in Rome, what, nearly 2,000 years ago, a church that exhibited, as we said last Lord's Day evening, a church that exhibited unity and diversity in its composition that we see reflected even in the names before us, the unity that certainly is there and was there in the Lord, and yet the diversity of backgrounds within the church.

For example, we saw Christian Jew with Christian non-Jew, Christian Gentile, Christian men with Christian women, Christian servants or even Christian slaves with Christian free men and free women, all fellow workers in the Lord and fellow workers for the Lord.

[1 : 35] What about the individuals who are actually mentioned? Because there is a large number of men and women whom Paul specifically mentions, and with a number of them having particular descriptors added to their names.

What about these individuals? Well, we're going to look at some of them, God willing, over the next few Lord's Day evenings. Now, we can't look at every single name, though.

Every name has been given there under God's inspiration, of course. But we will, I pray, take time to examine some of these individuals.

What even the very mention of the name tells us about the church, tells us about the character of the church, tells us about who these people are and they're following the Lord Jesus, who they were in maintaining a witness there in Rome, particularly as Rome was obviously very much a paganised city.

And, you know, as we look through these names, that you'll be encouraged. We'll be encouraged. We live in very much a paganised society, paganised land, pagan country.

[2 : 45] And I pray that the words that we see here in Scripture will actually encourage you in your witness for the Lord. So, we're going to take some time with these individuals.

They're not there by accident. They're not just slotted in, you know, haphazardly in Scripture. One of our early church fathers said this about these individuals. He said, it's possible even from bare names to find a great treasure.

I pray that we will find great treasure as we look at these names and beginning with this very intriguing individual, this Lady Phoebe. She's only mentioned once in Scripture.

And yet, as we examine who this person was, I pray that we'll see much that tells us about the dignity and the work that this woman did for the Lord as a follower of the Lord Jesus.

So, what about this woman, Phoebe? Well, in all likelihood, in all likelihood, she had been entrusted with this letter that Paul had written where he was to send that letter to the church in Rome.

[3 : 55] So, this lady, in all likelihood, and we can work it out as we'll do so in a moment, she's been entrusted to take this letter that Paul has been writing and has written to the believers in Rome.

And that certainly would explain why her name is mentioned first, why Paul commends her, why, you know, why she's first in this long list of names.

Evidently, she's a trustworthy person. I mean, Paul has full confidence in her to bear this letter. This is the longest of the letters that Paul writes, certainly the letters that we find in the pages of Scripture.

And so, obviously, this lady, this woman, this Christian believer, somebody who's trustworthy. She's followed the Lord and she's been a believer, we don't know for how long, but certainly she's someone who follows the Lord Jesus in whom she has placed her trust.

And, you know, you who trust the Saviour, you who seek to be like Him, then it's for you, it's for me to be trustworthy, to be worthy of the trust of others.

[5 : 07] Trustworthy in your actions. Trustworthy in the words that you say, the words that you give. Trustworthy in the very work of the kingdom. So that, you know, so that you'll be seen as someone who truly is following the Lord Jesus in whom you place your trust.

And so that trustworthiness extends to every aspect of your life. Whether, for those of you who are married, trustworthy in your marriage, or trustworthy in your family, trustworthy at work.

Trustworthy as a witness to the Lord in whom your trust is fully and completely for salvation. Now, Phoebe, then, as it would appear, was one such believer.

Someone who trusted in her Saviour. Someone who followed her Saviour. Someone who was, and again, this magnificent trait. Someone who's entrusted with the very word that God had inspired Paul to write.

And so she's been commended to the believers there in Rome. And notice, commended as a sister. Commended as a servant. And I think we'll work out too from the passage.

[6 : 15] Commended as a fellow saint of the other saints there that Paul mentions. So let's look at these three aspects that we want to explore. First of all, I commend to your sister, Phoebe.

In fact, I commend to you our sister, Phoebe. I think the answer is to be our sister. I mean, here's, you know, just a wonderful revealing of, if you put it like this, the pure, intimate love that believers should have one for another.

You know, the very fact that we should and must, as we see expressed in Scripture, refer to a fellow believer as a brother or a sister in Christ. Because it's mutual affection that goes beyond mere affection.

This pure brotherly love. Pure sisterly love. And, you know, that reveals a closeness of heart, a closeness of spirit. So that we've got no hesitation in calling a fellow Christian a brother in Christ, a sister in Christ.

Now, if you've got brothers, if you've got sisters in your own family, you'll know that there's a closeness that exists or can exist between siblings that you don't see anywhere else.

[7 : 30] You know, you might share with a brother or share with a sister things that you might not normally share with other people. And I know the opposite can happen.

Siblings can be very, very distant. Brother not speaking to brother or sister not speaking to sister and so on. It does happen. I know it happens. But surely in the body of Christ, where believers are fellow believers, where Christians are in the family of God because they've been adopted into that family by the saving grace of the Lord Jesus.

Surely, as we follow our Lord and Savior, our elder brother, then there has to be that closeness of heart one with another so that we're not ashamed to call a Christian a fellow believer a brother in Christ or a sister in Christ.

And Phoebe here was, well, she was one such believer that Paul had no hesitation in referring to her sister. And not just sister, but our sister.

Because obviously Phoebe was, we might say, a sister in the Lord to Paul as she was to these fellow believers in Rome and no doubt elsewhere. But, you know, there's something even more wonderful, something even more greater, we might say, in this designation of brother or sister in the Lord.

[9 : 00] You know, something greater than you and I not being ashamed to call one another brother or sister. And that's Jesus. Jesus isn't ashamed to call you who are in him a brother or a sister.

Listen to the words of Jesus in Mark 3 verse 35. Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother. And if Jesus isn't ashamed to call you brother or sister, it's not for any believer to withhold that calling of each other, one another, a brother or a sister in the Lord.

Well, Phoebe was that sister there to these believers in Rome as she was a sister in Christ to Paul. And there she's been commended by Paul as that sister in Christ.

But, of course, we can go beyond even Paul and the church there in Rome. Think of the worldwide church of Christ. This individual, Phoebe, us with every other believer.

Every other, we might even see female believer as a sister to one another in Christ. I never met Phoebe. I've met her in the Word, in God's Word. You've met her in the Word of God.

[10:13] But she's still your sister in Christ, my sister in Christ. You'll meet her in glory. Even, yes, in this world of space and time, she's still sister in the Lord.

And we give praise and thanks for the family of God that God has placed us in. And, yes, be encouraged, yes, in our fellowship one with another.

And, yes, not just in our immediate fellowship, but with fellowship with fellow believers, even in our own land and across the world. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And that has practical consequences. Many practical consequences. One, of course, being that we pray for brothers and sisters in the Lord, especially those who are suffering for the one true faith.

We may never have met them. But that bond of fellowship in the Lord is there in Christ. And so that we can call upon God to have mercy on a sister in Christ or a brother in Christ who's suffering for the sake of the Gospel because we share in the Lord Jesus, our elder brother.

[11:20] And I pray that truly we will, you know, even delight to call one another brother or sister in the Lord. We are to be those who dwell together in unity, as Phoebe certainly was a sister in Christ to Paul and to others.

But what about the second designation, a servant of the church at Kenchia? She's not just a sister. She's a servant. A servant in this particular church and a place that, sure, most of us have never heard of before.

Kenchia. But actually, Kenchia was an important seaport town in southern Greece. It's still there under a slightly different name.

But anyway, this seaport, actually the port that inland Corinth used in trade, as trade would leave Corinth and go through the seaport town, small town.

In fact, we're told it was actually a very bustling port. It was small, but it contained a very prosperous community. But what else do we find elsewhere in our history books?

[12:33] Well, we're told that various Greek cults were present in that seaport town. I suppose that stands to reason. There's so much trade backwards and forwards. There was so much, if you like, false gods that were worshipped in that place.

So, that would certainly suggest that Phoebe herself had been a convert from having had a pagan background. And there she is, living and serving in a small church.

A small church that would have gathered in that port. And then, you know, just piecing together clues in the passage here. So, if Phoebe is from this little port of Cancria, that would suggest that she's prosperous.

That she's a well-to-do Christian. You know, rather like Lydia, the seller of purple who came from Thyatira. And with Phoebe being described then as a servant of the church at Cancria, then it's obvious that she played some kind of prominent role in service in the church there.

Some, you know, particular function in the church that, you know, that she was seen to be a particular servant for the Lord there. But again, you know, we're not just making this up.

[13:50] The clues are in the passage. The clue about the kind of service that she performed is in the passage. And you see that at the end of verse 2. Because Paul writes, She has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

What's a patron? A patron is somebody, generally speaking anyway, a patron is somebody who gives maybe financial support or maybe some other kind of support to help others.

Now, today, you know, when we think of a patron, it's usually a rich person, maybe who gives some significant sum of money to an institution or an organisation. You go to Edinburgh, for example.

You visit the National Museum of Scotland or you go to the National Portrait Gallery. Certainly, I know in the Portrait Gallery, you see the names of patrons that are on one of the walls. All those who have contributed significant sums of money for that gallery.

The names are clearly seen there. Well, the meaning really, I don't think, has changed that much over two millennia. Phoebe, she's been called a patron.

[14 : 57] And that would certainly indicate that she has been a person of wealth who's used her wealth to help support the church there in Kenkrian and elsewhere.

And Paul himself says that he's benefited from her patronage. You go to Acts 18 and we read there that a few years before, a few years before Paul wrote Romans, he was in Kenkria on his second missionary journey.

And it would be apparent then that Paul had had contact with Phoebe and Phoebe had helped him in her patronage of Paul. So, you know, Phoebe in her servant role, she's used the resources that God has blessed her with for the sake of the Gospel.

And, you know, doing so in a very practical way to bring help to fellow believers. Now, obviously, if she's a patron, if she's been helping others with the gifts that God has given her, she may well have used her home in hospitality.

You know, just exhibiting that servant spirit and following her Saviour. She's following the one who came to serve and give his life, that ransom for many.

[16 : 11] And, you know, there's Phoebe in her servant nature. She's following the Lord in her work of service. Well, let's just stop and pause and think. And, you know, surely, you know, for you, for each one of us, for me to seek to use the gifts that God has given us in his service.

Now, we might not be wealthy patrons, but God's blessed you, has blessed me with sufficient resources to help in the work of ministry. He's given us sufficient to contribute to the work of the Gospel.

We are rich Christians in this world, relatively speaking, of course. And so it's for each one of us to be a patron in the work of the Gospel and being a patron to use what God has blessed you with in order to be a blessing to others.

And remember this. You know, yes, we're to be patrons of the church, but not for self. Not for self-glory. I mean, patrons in the museums in Edinburgh might have their names on the wall, but in your service for the Lord, you do so, not for self, but for Him and in humility.

Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, when you give to the needy. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret. And, you know, there are times when we do really have to examine, if you like, our patronage of the church in our giving, in our giving cheerfully, in our giving sacrificially, giving us as God has enabled you so to do.

[17 : 55] And yes, to have that Phoebe-like character that gives for the sake of the Lord's people whether it's to individuals like Paul or whether it's to the church at large.

Because, as Phoebe did, so we must follow the great patron, the great giver, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus who gave Himself for your sake.

Jesus who gave from the riches of His grace to save sinners. And put it like this, in His patron service, He gave in love so that you might know the saving love of God in Christ.

So, Phoebe, the servant, she followed the Lord in her service and did so for the sake of the Gospel. And it's for you, for me, for each one of us to examine our hearts, to test our hearts, to see the extent to which we truly are being servants of the Lord, serving Him, giving Him of her all in her service.

Well, Phoebe there, Phoebe, she's been commended for her fellowship and love as a sister in Christ. She's been commended for her service in the Lord.

[19 : 11] But, what about Phoebe, a saint? Because it's not directly given in the passage, I know, not directly. We were told, verse 2, welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints.

Well, the way worthy of the saints, of course, is referring to the church in Rome. But the church there has been commended to help her in whatever she may need from you, for she's been a patron of many and of myself as well.

So, here's Paul writing to the church in Rome, to these Roman Christians. He's telling them to behave as saints, to welcome Phoebe, who's obviously bearing this letter, commending the saints in Rome to show kindness to this woman who's been entrusted with this epistle.

And, that these believers in Rome show their character as saints. What do we mean, saints? Well, of course, those who are in Christ, who are devoted to God, who are separate from the world, who don't follow the world's values.

And, therefore, Paul's urging these believers in Rome, act as saints. Act to show that you are in Christ, separate from the world, devoted to God. Show your faith as Christians.

[20 : 26] Treat this believer in Christ as a fellow saint. And so, here's this call of Paul, that the believers act in kindness to Phoebe. And, of course, the inference is there, if that's the case, and Phoebe herself, is to be counted as a fellow saint.

Fellow believer, fellow sister in Christ, separate from the world, one who is a saint in Christ. Now, let's just be clear here.

When we see the word saint in Scripture, it's got nothing to do with some kind of, you know, special conferment on an individual for some sort of miracle that that person is supposed to have performed, you know, somehow to separate them from so-called ordinary Christians.

Not at all. This is, that use of the word saint is a gross misuse of the word. Saints are all of God's people. Saints are God's holy people.

Saints are the people of God who are set apart by the Holy Spirit. And yes, yes, there's a distinction, but not between Christians, but between Christians and the world.

[21 : 37] So, when Paul's referring here to the believers, here as saints, he's saying, you know, to welcome Phoebe as saints, there's this recognition that, you know, fellow believers, they are saints, to show Christ's love to this fellow saint, this fellow believer.

I mean, you know, Phoebe's shown by her, by her service. She's shown by her patronage to the church. She's shown herself to be a saint. She's shown that she's a person who's separate from the world.

She's separate from all the pagan idolatry in which she's grown up in. And by her service, her service to the church and her service to Paul, she's shown that she's someone who the saints there in Rome can recognize as a saint, as someone who's worthy of their fellowship in the Lord.

And as a fellow saint, she's to be shown the same love that she showed in her saintly care of others. That's why Paul commands her, welcome her, help her in whatever needs she may have from you.

I mean, this saint of God, if you see the geography, and of course, you know, obviously at that time, going from Cancra in southern Greece to Rome would be a considerable journey. She's going to need hospitality.

[22 : 57] She who had given hospitality to the saints in Cancra, she'd helped many of the saints in her work by her patronage. She's going to need help there when she goes to Rome. She's going to need friendship and fellowship.

She's going to need protected. She's going to need the love of fellow believers in Rome. She, as saint of God and Cancra, she'd practiced the love of Christ there in her small corner.

So it's only fitting that she be accorded the same kindness and blessing that she'd shown to fellow believers where God had placed her. And, you know, that's surely an encouragement to anyone who professes the name of the Lord Jesus.

Because if you're to be a saint, if you are a saint in Christ, if you're one of God's holy people, separate for God, then yes, even the very practical needs of others to show that same kindness to fellow believers that, well, that you've been shown by others.

And above all, to show kindness in the name of the Lord Jesus. Phoebe was welcomed, she was welcomed, or to be welcomed in the Lord by fellow believers, to be welcomed by fellow saints of God.

[24 : 19] And, you know, it all comes together, doesn't it? For each one who's in Christ to welcome fellow believers with a true sincerity of heart, to treat one another as a brother or sister in Christ, to treat one another as a fellow servant of the Lord, to recognize one another as a fellow saint who seeks to do the will of God, yes, in a world that will despise the saints of God.

It's interesting, you know, on another occasion when Paul wrote to another church in the church in Philippi, they, the church in Philippi, were actually commended, to welcome another saint, to welcome a man called Epaphroditus.

He was a messenger from the church to go to Paul, to bring Paul a gift, and you read Epaphroditus, that this was happening when Paul was in prison actually in Rome.

Epaphroditus is taken ill, he had to return to Philippi, and he brought the letter that Paul had written to the church in Philippi, and so the saints in Philippi were being commended, asked to welcome Epaphroditus back, and to honour him for the work that he'd done, the service he'd done, in encouraging Paul, the fact that he'd almost died in service for the Lord in doing that.

And the supposition is that the church there in Philippi, they may have been disappointed in seeing Epaphroditus when they maybe expected Paul's protégé Timothy to come with the news from Paul. [26 : 02] But Paul is writing to the church in Philippi to welcome Epaphroditus, to welcome him as a fellow believer, as a saint in the Lord. And surely then for the saints of God that you honour those in the Lord who have worked in our working for the Saviour.

And to welcome fellow believers in all the so many different practical needs that a fellow believer has. I mean, you know, the very fact that Paul had asked the saints there to help her, Phoebe, in whatever she may need, well, that principle extends even to ourselves, even to ourselves. Let's take one example. Let's take missionaries. Missionaries who leave the security of their homes and who leave their comfort zones to sow the seed of the Gospel, to sow that seed in different parts of the world.

These saints of God who have particular needs, well, we welcome them, we help them, we are to help and encourage, yes, in the very many practical ways that are necessary to treat one another, treat them as fellow saints, fellow believers in the Lord.

Earlier in this same letter, Romans chapter 12, Paul had urged the church to contribute to the needs of the saints and to show hospitality.

[27 : 37] And that's the kind of help, that's the kind of welcome that's worthy of the saints. That's the kind of welcome that the church in Rome was to give to this particular saint and God to give Phoebe. And that's the kind of help and welcome that we need to be so alert to in our need to express our Christianity, our faith in the Lord.

Yes, we're to give help to those who are in need. That's what Paul reminds us in Galatians 6, verse 10 and 11. As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith, especially those, in other words, who are Christians.

If you're to act in a way that's worthy of the saints, then you who are in Christ are, yes, particularly to show a fellow believer the love of Christ, even the very practical way to show that.

I mean, you've been welcomed into the family of God. You've been given that welcome by the Saviour. You've been given help, that help to know Him as Lord.

the Saviour. You're unworthy, I'm unworthy of that help. But the one who's altogether worthy has welcomed you, has blessed you, has given to you what your deepest need is.

[29 : 00] And so, if you are a saint in the Lord, if you're to be seen to be worthy of that name, then show it. Show your faith in action.

Oh, Phoebe showed her faith in action. She showed love for her fellow believers, these fellow saints. She, being the sister and servant and saint, she's given this, well, very brief commendation in Scripture, but given this commendation so that, you know, we're encouraging the Lord.

we will say that she's one of the unsung heroes of the faith. When was the last time you really thought about this individual Phoebe? This morning we were thinking of Abraham, one of the great heroes of the faith.

Well, yes, he's a hero of the faith and of course Phoebe as well. But of course, Phoebe, one of the many in Scripture who appears just for a short moment, but quietly doing the work of the Lord, not seeking glory for herself, but doing what she did all for the Lord.

And she did what she did as a sister, as a servant, as a saint. And she did it for the one who called her from darkness into light. And she used the gifts that God gave her for the sake of the kingdom.

[30 : 19] And she is an inspiration to the saints of God now. But of course, we look ultimately, beyond the saint of God.

We look to the one whom she served. We look to the one who has enabled you to be a brother, a sister in Christ, a servant of the Lord, a saint of God.

So, we do give praise to the one who blesses his people with that fellowship of saints on earth, who blesses you with the opportunities to serve him, who blesses you so that you can call one another a brother or sister in Christ and love one another as saints from the Lord.

But if you don't know the Saviour, if you don't know Jesus, where do you stand? Where are you standing? Well, you're standing outside the fellowship of saints.

You're standing outside the family of God. You're standing outside that service that truly fulfills. And you know, being outside is the loneliest place.

[31 : 29] The loneliest place without God. The lonely place without the Lord Jesus. Without that fellowship in him. And yes, without fellowship one with another.

It is such an isolated place. But you come to the Lord Jesus. You come to him. Give your life to him. And you'll know that blessing of being, not outside, but inside the family of God. And you'll know that blessing of true service in the Lord. The service that truly fulfills. And you'll know that blessing of being a saint. A saint of God. And in being that saint, you'll recognize and humbly recognize that you owe all to him. You owe your very life to him. Well, Phoebe, the sister, the saint, the servant, she knew that blessing. Will you not know that same blessing and privilege in Christ?
[32 : 31] Amen. Let us pray. Lord, we give you praise for...