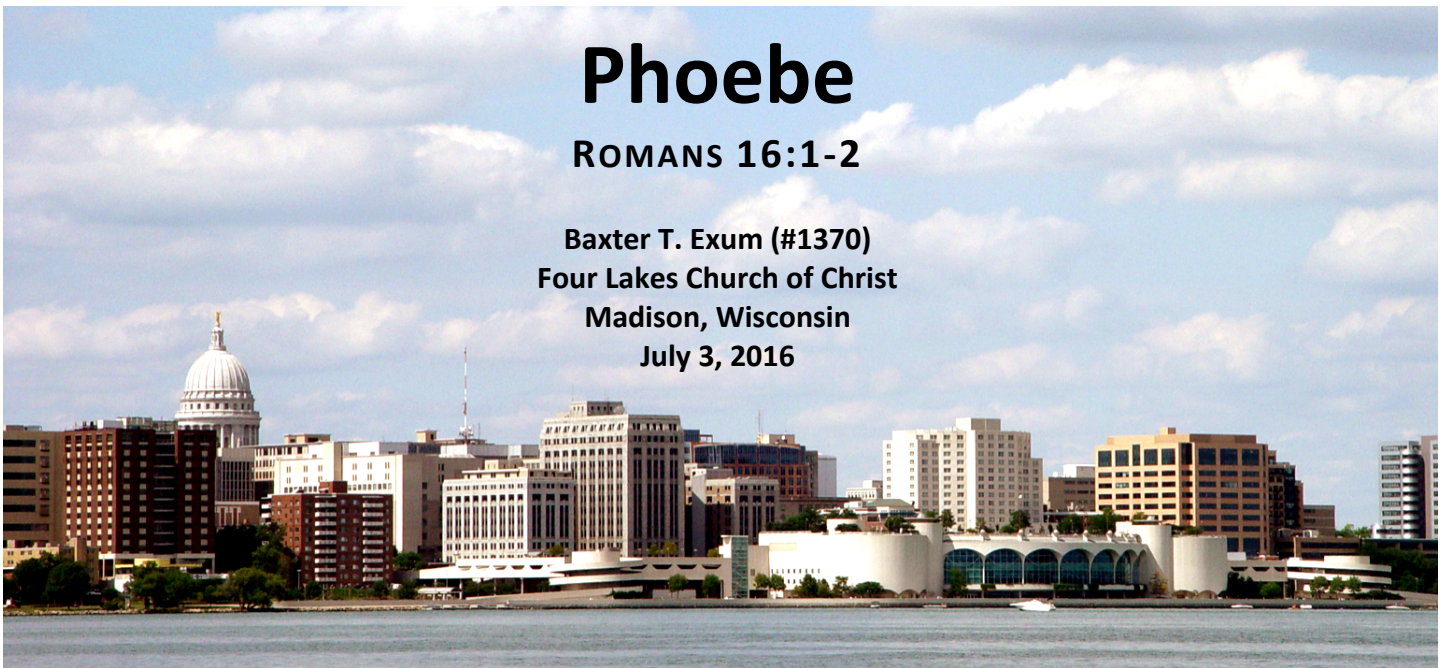


Phoebe

ROMANS 16:1-2

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If you have been here over the past few weeks, then you know that we have been looking at some of the great and not-so-great women of the Bible. Several months ago, one of the women of the congregation suggested to the elders that we study some women in the Bible, and that is what we have been doing. We started with women who are inspirational in some way, until more than half of you requested a lesson on Esther. We can't be studying Esther all summer, so we opened it up to any women, either good or bad. We know that we can learn some valuable lessons not only from the good characters in the Bible, but also from those who are not as good. So, over the past few weeks, we have looked at Lydia, Priscilla and Aquila, Hagar, and then last week we studied Herodias.

This week I'd like for us to study a request that came in via text message just a few days ago. One of the women of the congregation here has asked for a lesson on Phoebe. Phoebe is mentioned only one time in the Bible, with just a passing reference in the last chapter in Romans, in Romans 16 (p. 1790). As far as I can tell, there are 29 names mentioned in Romans 16, and Phoebe is at the top of this list.

Now, when many of us hear the name Phoebe, we think of Lisa Kudrow on the television sit-com Friends. For those who don't know, Friends was a show from back in the olden days. It ran on NBC from 1994-2004, and in that stretch, Ms. Kudrow and her co-stars became some of the highest paid actresses in television history, making around a million dollars per episode in the 9th and 10th seasons. So, when I think of Phoebe, this is often the face that comes to mind.

Several days ago, I asked my wife if we had ever known any Phoebes, and we personally don't know anybody with the name Phoebe. I am sure that some of you do, but I personally do not. I have known some people to have pets by the name Phoebe, but never a human being (at least for me personally). I think of the name Baxter. I have known many dogs named Baxter, but never another human being with Baxter as a first name. I think of the time we went to the drive-in theater over in Jefferson a few years ago, and the people next to us kept yelling at their dog during the movie, "Baxter! Don't eat that popcorn! Baxter! Stop that!" And that was a little unusual for me. In perhaps the same way, the name Phoebe is also rather unusual. It is distinctive.

The scholars tell us that Phoebe was the name of the Greek goddess of the moon, and so it appears that Phoebe was perhaps born into a pagan family. But somewhere along the line, this woman obeyed the gospel.

We know that she was a member of the Lord's church in Cenchrea, a port city just east of Corinth. Corinth, of course, is located on an isthmus, much like the city of Madison, only the isthmus of Corinth is larger and basically divides Greece into two parts. I've zoomed in quite a bit here to put some of this in perspective. Ancient Corinth is on the left – similar to where the University would be here in Madison. Corinth was a city of more than 600,000 people – the third largest city in the ancient world. Cenchrea was much smaller, about 7 miles to the east, along the coast on the other side of the isthmus. And to put it in context here in Madison, it would be very roughly where Olin Park is located – only again, on a slightly larger scale. What made Corinth so important is that the sea on the southern tip of Greece was very rough. So, as goods sailed from east to west, ships would come in to Corinth, those ships would be loaded onto giant logs (like rollers), and those ships would be transported across the isthmus and put back in on the other side. Corinth, then, was a very important city – a lot of sailors, a lot of people coming together from all around the world, many were far away from home, and the city had a reputation for being quite immoral. In modern times, you can see that they have actually dug a canal across the isthmus (similar to the Panama Canal). And the canal, of course, makes shipping so much easier. The point of all of this is simply to show that Phoebe was from Cenchrea – basically, a suburb of Corinth, and just a few miles away from where Paul spent 18 months on his second missionary journey.

Before we look at the actual text, I should point out something else, and that is: It appears that Paul has entrusted Phoebe with a very important responsibility. As we look at these two verses, it seems that Phoebe has been chosen by Paul to actually carry the book of Romans to the church in Rome. Before the days of the postal service, if you wanted to send a letter, you had to find someone who was traveling in that direction, and then you would entrust them with the message. And that seems to be what Paul does here, choosing Phoebe to carry this letter to the church in Rome. For whatever reason, this woman was headed to Rome, and Paul sends her there with the book of Romans. The passage we are looking at was written in the mid-50's AD, and I have put a red arrow where this fits in on our timeline on the side wall over here.

With all of this as background, let us please look together at the first two verses of Romans 16, the words of Paul – Romans 16:1-2,

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; ² 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 two verses and nowhere else in the entire Bible? Why is this tiny bit of information even included in scripture? As we look at this very brief passage, I would like for us to look at three very important and powerful words used by Paul to describe this faithful woman.

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

He says in verse 1, ***"I commend to you our SISTER Phoebe...."*** The word ***"commend"*** literally means that Paul is standing beside this woman, "I stand beside our sister Phoebe." In a sense, then, he is letting Phoebe borrow his reputation. He is saying, "When this woman arrives carrying this letter, I want you to treat her just as you would treat me." But the most significant part of this opening line is that Paul describes her as his ***"sister."*** As far as I know, we have no reason to believe that she was Paul's physical sister; but instead, this seems to be more of a spiritual description – Phoebe is Paul's Christian sister, his sister in the Lord.

We look around us in the religious world today, and we see all kinds of distinguished titles being worn by various religious leaders. The most common these days continues to be “reverend.” Many people fail to realize, though, that the word “reverend” is only used one time in a very old translation of the Bible, and in that one reference, the word refers only to God. In the KJV, in Psalm 111:9, the Bible refers to God and says, **“Holy and reverend is his name.”** And that’s it! That is the only use of **“reverend”** in the Bible. Most modern translations more accurately say, **“Holy and fearful is his name,”** or, **“Holy and awesome is his name.”** And yet we have all kinds of religious leaders willingly taking this description for themselves.

In the Lord’s church, however, we reject using “reverend” as a religious title. Instead, we simply refer to each other as brothers and sisters. When it comes to describing our Christian family, we are simply brothers and sisters in the Lord. When we obey the gospel, we are born into a spiritual family.

I have only one physical sister, and I love her so much, and yet apart from my natural family, any woman becomes my sister when she is born into God’s family – 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 both children of God, a part of God’s eternal family.

As Christians, we are brothers and sisters in the family of God, and this is one of the first very valuable reminders we have based on this description of Phoebe in Romans 16. As Christians, we are brothers and sisters.

II. There is a second big idea in this passage, and we see it also in verse 1 as Paul goes on to describe Phoebe as a SERVANT.

He refers to Phoebe, **“...who is a SERVANT of the church which is at Cenchrea.”** And again, Cenchrea was basically a suburb of Corinth. I didn’t mention this earlier, but Cenchrea is referred to one other time in the Bible. In Acts 18:18, the Bible explains that as Paul was leaving Corinth, **“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.”** Cenchrea, therefore, is the only city where we know that Paul got his hair cut. In fact, in looking for pictures of Cenchrea online, I discovered that it is apparently a thing for tourists to get their hair cut in Cenchrea, so they can say that like Paul, they got their hair cut in Cenchrea!

But back in our text, we find that Paul refers to Phoebe as a **“servant of the church”** in Cenchrea. And again, what a great honor! Not only is she described as Paul’s **“sister,”** but she is also described as a **“servant of the church.”** I should point out here that there has been some controversy concerning Phoebe. Some have suggested that she was officially appointed as a “deaconess” of the church in Cenchrea. In fact, we had a couple pass through our congregation for a brief time who claimed that we should appoint deaconesses because of this passage. They never came out and made a formal push for it, but they worked behind the scenes trying to convince people individually. Eventually, they left, and we did not chase them down, mainly because of this. The misunderstanding about whether Phoebe was a “deaconess” can be traced 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. But the question is: Did Phoebe hold the office of deaconess, or was she simply a servant as all of us as Christians are called to be? To come to some kind of an answer, we need to understand that this word is actually used all through the New Testament, with the vast majority of uses NOT referring to the office of deacon. I’m thinking of that passage in Mark 10:45 where Jesus referred to himself and said, **“For even the**

Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Jesus wasn’t saying that he came to this earth to be a deacon, but he was saying that he came to ***“serve.”***

We might compare it to referring to someone as “elderly.” If I say that somebody is “elderly,” that does not necessarily mean that that person serves as an “elder” in the Lord’s church. Just because a woman might be old, does not mean that she is an “elderess” in the church. In the same way, the word we have here in Romans 16:1 literally means ***“servant,”*** and whether Phoebe was a “deaconess” has to be determined by the context, and there is nothing in the context indicating that Phoebe met any kind of qualifications or that she held any kind of office. And for this reason, a vast majority of translations translate this word as ***“servant.”*** There are a few that use the word “deacon” or “deaconess,” but they are in a sense adding a commentary or making a statement by doing so.

The main idea here is that Phoebe served the church. Not only that, but in verse 2 we find that she apparently also served Paul personally – he describes her as ***“...a helper of many, and of myself as well.”*** If you are a member here, you might have noticed that there is a good article about the “deaconess” question in the cubbyholes this morning, and for those who are not members, we have some extra copies on the table in the entryway. But I would encourage all of you to read more about it if you are interested.

The big idea we get from Phoebe, though, is that she was a servant, a helper. I don’t get the impression that you had to constantly pester this woman to get her to do something; instead, she seems to be the kind to just jump in and get things done. In a time when some people might be offended if you called them a ***“helper,”*** we need this reminder from Phoebe.

Paul, then, refers to Phoebe not only as his sister, but he also refers to her as a servant, a helper.

III. **As we come near the end of our study, we find another big idea in the fact that Phoebe is also described as being a SAINT.**

In verse 2, Paul is asking 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.”*** I want us to try to put ourselves in Phoebe’s shoes (or maybe in her sandals). Assuming she starts this journey in her hometown of Cenchrea (near Corinth), and assuming she makes the journey on foot, that trip is a journey of more than 1300 miles. I typed it into Google maps this week, and they say, “Caution: This route passes through multiple countries, including a number of restricted areas and private roads.” The route goes through Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, and a number of other places where I would really rather not be walking. Google said, though, that if you insist on walking this route, it should take around 461 hours. Can we imagine making that trip on our own? How about as a single woman? And yet as I understand it, Paul most likely gave this letter to Phoebe and said, “I need you to get this to the church in Rome.” And that would explain why Paul is asking these people to ***“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.”*** And the idea is: Assuming she even makes it, do whatever it takes to honor this woman for what she has done. She is bringing you what will soon be known as the book of Romans!

The word ***“saint”*** refers to someone or something that has been set aside for some special purpose. It’s the same as the word “holy.” It’s the same as the word “sanctified.” “Saint,” “holy,” and “sanctified,” are all traced back to the same word, and the word refers to something that has been set apart, to something that is special (like fine china). And as Christians, that is what we are. As Christians, we have been set apart, we have been called out of the world, we are people who are special to God, we are unique, we are different.

And contrary to one of the world's largest denominations, becoming a saint does not require a long drawn-out process. According to them, you have to be dead to begin with, and it just gets more complicated from there. In the Bible, though, Paul uses the word "**saint**" to refer to people who are clearly living. Phoebe was definitely not dead yet! A saint is someone who has been set apart for some special purpose. A saint is 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, tells the church in Rome to receive Phoebe, "**...in a manner worthy of the saints.**" He wants them to treat her like the saint that she is.

So, the lesson we get from this is that those of us who are Christians are saints as well. We are holy. We are set apart. We are special. And Phoebe is our reminder of this.

Conclusion:

- Phoebe was a SISTER, an important part of God's family – are we? Are you personally a Christian? Do we value our Christian family?
- Phoebe was a SERVANT, a helper – not a bystander, but an active participant – are we? If Paul were to summarize my life and your life, would he say that we are servants? Like Phoebe, would each of us be described by Paul as servants of the church?
- And then finally, Phoebe was a SAINT, set apart, holy, and different from the world around her – are we? Have we been sanctified and set apart by God?

I am so thankful for the Christian sister who asked that we study Phoebe this morning. I hope all of you can join us one week from today as Clint Oppermann will be here to bring the lesson.

We want to close this morning by giving everyone here one more opportunity to get right with God. God sent his only Son to die on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. He died, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We respond to God's offer by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried with his Son Jesus in baptism. At that point, we are born into God's family. If we can help you with this, we would be glad to study the Bible with you at any time of day or night. If you are already a Christian but need to come back to God, again, let us know, and we would be glad to go to God in prayer on your behalf. If there is some way we can help you right now, we would invite you to let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com