

*Romans 16:1-16 (CEB)*

I'm introducing our sister Phoebe to you, who is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. <sup>2</sup>Welcome her in the Lord in a way that is worthy of God's people, and give her whatever she needs from you, because she herself has been a sponsor of many people, myself included.

<sup>3</sup>Say hello to Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>who risked their own necks for my life. I'm not the only one who thanks God for them, but all the churches of the Gentiles do the same. <sup>5</sup>Also say hello to the church that meets in their house. Say hello to Epaphroditus, my dear friend, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. <sup>6</sup>Say hello to Mary, who has worked very hard for you. <sup>7</sup>Say hello to Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners. They are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. <sup>8</sup>Say hello to Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. <sup>9</sup>Say hello to Urbanus, our coworker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. <sup>10</sup>Say hello to Apelles, who is tried and true in Christ. Say hello to the members of the household of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup>Say hello to my relative Herodion. Say hello to the members of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Say hello to Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who are workers for the Lord. Say hello to my dear friend Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Say hello to Rufus, who is an outstanding believer, along with his mother and mine. <sup>14</sup>Say hello to Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. <sup>15</sup>Say hello to Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. <sup>16</sup>Say hello to each other with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ say hello to you.

*So many supporting actors . . .*

This week, we turn to “supporting actors” in the apostle Paul’s ministry. Given that he worked tirelessly for many years to proclaim the Good News and founded numerous colonies of a newly reborn human race, there were countless people who assisted, supported, and, in turn, led this work. Paul’s letter to the Roman concludes with a long list of believers, largely in Rome, that give us a glimpse into the ministries.

*Names*

The list of names in Romans 16 is, by far, the longest list in any of Paul’s letters. An informed guess is that since Paul is seeking to unify the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, he is anxious and careful to touch all the bases, to be sure that all the house churches in Rome are noted. He refers to five of them, probably all. If the size ranged from 10-30, then there would be in 50-150 believers in Rome. Surely no more than that. Paul refers to twenty-four people by name, another two by relation, and an unspecified number of others generally. Paul refers to ten women, eight by name and two by relation. Nine of the twenty-four names were usually used by slaves.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Paul has called out a broad cross-section of the early church: male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile.

And now Paul has written a massive letter, the longest of all those we have in the New Testament. And it is not an “easy” letter, often dense and hard to follow. Try sitting down and reading through it.

So . . . imagine that someone has arrived from Paul with this letter in hand. First, the believers would gather, probably house church by house church, and the letter would be read to them, for most could not read such a letter for themselves. Then, once read, I picture the believers sitting there in the dim light, wondering about the meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> The name information is from N. T. Wright’s commentary on Romans in the *New Interpreters Bible*, a copy of which is in the St. Andrew library.

what they had just heard . . . and after a few minutes, questions would start to pop up. “What did Paul mean when he talked about Abraham?” “Did he actually mean that some Gentiles keep the Law they’ve never even heard better than the Jews?”

Who do you think would be there to help the believers understand Paul’s meaning? To whom would Paul entrust such a challenging letter written to believers living under Caesar’s very nose? Obviously, it would be the person to whom Paul had entrusted the letter in the first place. . . And who was that? . . . a woman . . . Phoebe.

### *Phoebe*

All we know about Phoebe comes from the first two verses in Romans 16. Most important, she is a “*diakonos/*deacon” of the church in a place called Cenchreae, a port just a few miles northeast of Corinth. Given her means, Phoebe was probably involved in the business of the port.

Last week, we looked at the story of Stephen, a *diakonos/*deacon in the church in Jerusalem. Whether used of Phoebe or of Stephen, *diakonos* is a masculine noun. Phoebe is no more and no less a deacon/minister than Stephen or the other six deacons of Acts 6.

She is also a patron (*prostatis*) of Paul and others. In their culture, this is more than a mere helper. Patrons provided housing, money, and represented their clients before local authorities.<sup>2</sup> By referring to her in this way, Paul is letting the believers in Rome know just how important Phoebe has been to Paul’s work.

These two verses in Romans 16 are a letter of recommendation for Phoebe. Such letters were a vital part of society in the ancient world. Such recommendations provided a stamp of approval on the letter carrier, in this case, Phoebe. The house churches in Rome can trust her, she carries Paul’s instruction and teaching. She can speak for Paul.

So the next time someone tells you that women shouldn’t preach or teach men because of what they mistakenly think Paul means in a few scattered sentences in his letters, refer them to Phoebe (or Priscilla or Junia) in Romans 16, so they can actually see for themselves that the apostle Paul and Phoebe worked side-by-side in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all who would listen.

There are two other women of note in Romans 16: Priscilla and Junia. Both are more of Paul’s supporting actors. We don’t know much about Junia, but Luke tells us a lot about Priscilla (nicknamed Prisca) in the book of Acts. Here’s a bit on both.

### *Priscilla’s story*

In the days of Jesus and Paul, Jews lived throughout the Roman Empire, from Syria in the east to Spain in the west. Even Rome itself had a substantial Jewish population of perhaps 40,000 or so. The Romans generally left such Jews alone. To the average Roman, the Jews seemed more peculiar than threatening. And . . . so long as the peace was kept, the Romans left the Jews in peace.

But in 49AD the peace in Rome came crashing down. Suetonius<sup>3</sup>, a Roman biographer of the times, wrote “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius, the Caesar] expelled them from Rome.” His reference to “Chrestus” is probably a reference to Christ. Evidently, followers of Jesus had come to Rome preaching Christ in the Jewish synagogues, triggering a violent response from many Jews. After all, something much like this happened nearly everywhere Paul traveled in the eastern end of the empire.

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<sup>2</sup> If you want to understand patronage in the Greco-Roman world, you could do worse than to watch *The Godfather*. Caesar was the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family . . . and you don’t go against the family.

<sup>3</sup> Suetonius lived and wrote about 100 years after Jesus. This quote is from his *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

So, the Jews left Rome, forbidden to return. This would have included Jews who had become followers of Jesus, such as the married couple, Priscilla<sup>4</sup> and Aquila. They were better off than many. They had a portable business; they were tentmakers. They owned property. Priscilla even had had some family money. So they headed toward the large, bustling Greek metropolis of Corinth, Greece. Corinth was a busy, commercial port on a narrow isthmus. There, Priscilla and her husband set up shop in a storefront and began to rebuild their lives.

Not long after their arrival in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila met a fellow Jew who had come to Corinth to proclaim the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. The three of them quickly formed a close bond, for Paul was a tentmaker too. Priscilla and her husband invited Paul to join them in their storefront business and for the next eighteen months the three of them grew their business and grew the young Christian house churches in Corinth.

#### *Moving on . . . and going home*

Priscilla and her husband committed themselves fully to Paul's work and the building of God's kingdom in Corinth. When Paul decided that it was time for him to leave Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they quickly became leaders in the Christian community in Ephesus.

Priscilla and Aquila stayed in Ephesus for several years. Paul would mention them when he wrote a letter back to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:9). But they never lost their desire to return to Rome. After all, it was their home, where they had been raised, where they had met and married. In 54AD, Claudius died and his edict expelling the Jews from Rome died with him.<sup>5</sup> So, Priscilla and her husband returned to Rome where they would carry on their kingdom building work. Later, when Paul was in Corinth a second time, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome urging them to find unity as the Jewish-Christians returned. In this letter, Paul sent a poignant hello to Priscilla and Aquila, noting that they had "risked their necks" for Paul and his work (Romans 16:3-4). But even though they were back in Rome, their work was not done. There were many house churches in Rome that needed help and encouragement. Later, it seems that they again headed for Asia Minor to work for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 4:19).

#### *The Apostle Junia*

In Romans 16:7 Paul drops a bombshell, at least you'd think so given how much effort has been spent trying to change what Paul wrote, especially in the last two hundred years. Paul commends Andronicus (male) and Junia (female), his relatives and fellow prisoners. Referring to them Paul says, "they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me" (Romans 16:7). Thus, it seems clear that Andronicus and Junia have been Christians from the very first days, even before Paul, and that they were witnesses to the resurrection.

Despite the witness of the early church and the manuscript evidence, many attempts have been made to change Junia into a man by adding an "s" to her name.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some translators said Paul must have referred to a man because the person was an apostle. But, no, Junia was a woman, an apostle, and a prominent one. The early church fathers all referred to her as such. In his definitive treatment of the topic, Eldon Epps writes:

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<sup>4</sup>She is referred to as Priscilla in the book of Acts, though Paul refers to her as Prisca in his letters. Think of this as "Kate" and "Katherine," as Prisca is the formal name.

<sup>5</sup>When a Caesar died, many of his edicts would automatically expire unless renewed by his successor.

<sup>6</sup>For example, the 1984 edition of the NIV still had "Junias" (male) in Romans 16. Thankfully, the translators now correctly use "Junia" in the 2011 edition.

By far the most influential of these, and among the earliest, was Chrysostom<sup>7</sup>, whose statement is pointed and unambiguous:

"Greet Andronicus and Junia ... who are outstanding among the apostles": To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle." (*In ep. ad Romanos 31.2; PG 60.669-670*)<sup>8</sup>

## Daily Bible Readings

*This week: Phoebe . . . and the women*

**Monday, Judges 4** The story of Deborah, a judge in ancient Israel.

**Tuesday, 2 Kings 22** King Josiah turns to the prophetess, Huldah, to authenticate a scroll of the Law.

**Wednesday, Acts 16:11-15** Lydia leads a house church in Philippi.

**Thursday, Acts 18:1-23** Priscilla meets Paul joins his ministry.

**Friday, Acts 18:24-28** Priscilla and her husband teach Apollos about the baptism in Jesus.

**Saturday, 1 Corinthians 16:14-24** In the closing of the letter, Paul sends greetings from Prisca (Priscilla) and her husband.

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet August 7 and 14

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet August 8

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning August 20, a new series: *Jesus Behaving Badly*

## Coming in October 2018: A cruise to Israel with Scott & Patti

For more information go to [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

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<sup>7</sup> John Chrysostom was the archbishop of Constantinople and was famous for his eloquent preaching and speaking. His name is from the Greek *chrysostomos* meaning "golden-mouthed." His accumulated writings are vast.

<sup>8</sup> Eldon Jay Epp. *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Kindle Locations 448-451). Kindle Edition.