

Romans – An In-Depth Study

[Chapters 9-16]

[Part 10]

Romans 16:1-2 [NIV] *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchræa. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.”*

Phoebe came from Cenchræa which was the port of Corinth, some six miles from the centre of the city. She may have delivered the letter from Paul who was in Corinth, to the church at Rome.

Women had many important roles in the early church, in the visitation of the sick, distribution of food to the poor, etc.

Phoebe is called a servant which is the correct translation of the Greek word “*diakonon*” from which we derive the word “*deacon*.”

Whether Phoebe held a formal office in the church is a matter of controversy, what is certain she offered ministry of sorts in the church at Cenchræa.

Paul’s command is that Phoebe should be welcomed in the church at Rome, as God’s dedicated people should be welcomed.

There should be **no** need of formal introductions between Christian people, for we are all children of one Father and therefore brothers and sisters of each other.

Yet some Christian fellowships are **not** always the welcoming institutions that they ought to be.

Church organisations too often become closed societies which are **not** really interested in welcoming the stranger, sad to say!

Romans 16:3-4 [NIV] *“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.”*

Priscilla and Aquila appear in New Testament scripture often as faithful servants in the church.

Acts 18:1-3 [NIV] *“After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.”*

This is the first contact that Paul has with this couple.

They had moved from Rome when Claudius issued an edict banishing the Jews from Rome.

Priscilla and Aquila settled in Corinth, where they continued in their trade of tentmakers.

Paul, also a tentmaker, found a home with them in Corinth.

Acts 18:18-19 [NIV] *“Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchræa because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.”*

When Paul left Corinth and went to Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila went with Paul and settled there.

Acts 18:24-26 [NIV] *“Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When **Priscilla and Aquila** heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”*

Apollos was a brilliant scholar, but at that time did **not** have the full appreciation of the Christian faith. So Aquila and Priscilla took him into their home and gave him friendship and instruction in the Christian faith.

From the very beginning we see that Priscilla and Aquila were people who kept an open heart and an open door, as all Christians should.

1 Corinthians 16:19 [NIV] *“The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. **Aquila and Priscilla** greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does **the church that meets at their house.**”*

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church from Ephesus and adds a greeting from Priscilla and Aquila and the church that met at their house.

In the early Christian church there was no such thing as a church building.

People, like Priscilla and Aquila, opened their home to serve as a meeting place for a group of Christians.

2 Timothy 4:19 [NIV] *“Greet **Priscilla and Aquila** and the household of Onesiphorus.”*

Priscilla and Aquila lived a curiously nomadic and unsettled life, but wherever we find them living, we find their home is the centre of Christian fellowship and service.

Every Christian home should be a Christian church, for the church is the place where the spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, dwells.

God does **not** dwell in buildings, but in the hearts, minds and human spirit of people who have surrendered their lives to their Saviour Jesus Christ.

Priscilla and Aquila are a wonderful example of Christians with their open hands, open doors and open heart to any stranger to the Christian characteristics.

John 13:34-35 [NIV] *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**”*

Priscilla and Aquila proved they were disciples of Jesus Christ by the way they showed love towards all other human beings, in and out of the Christian fellowship.

When we are confronted with a long list of names in scripture, we are tempted to quickly read over them and get on with studying what follows the list.

What has been recorded is more than a list of names, but personalities with a history of what happened when God touched their lives.

My goal is use this list of names to make the early Christian church come alive, and these scriptures convert what may seem a dull record of events, names and problems into exciting insights of the lives of early Christians.

Romans 16:5-16 [NIV] *“Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Greet **Mary**, who worked very*

hard for you. Greet **Andronicus and Junias**, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet **Ampliatius**, whom I love in the Lord. Greet **Urbanus**, our fellow-worker in Christ, and my dear friend **Stachys**. Greet **Apelles**, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the **household of Aristobulus**. Greet **Herodion**, my relative. Greet those in the household of **Narcissus** who are in the Lord. Greet **Tryphena and Tryphosa**, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend **Persis**, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet **Rufus**, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet **Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas** and the brothers with them. Greet **Philologus, Julia, Nereus** and his sister, and **Olympas** and all the saints with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.”

Paul’s personal greetings range from Romans and Greeks, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, prisoners and prominent citizens.

What this tells us is that the Christian community was mobile.

Though Paul had not yet been to Rome, he had met these people in other places on his journeys.

In this chapter there are twenty-four individual names. Of the twenty-four, six are women, which shows the appreciation of the work they were doing in the church.

Four women, **Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa** and **Persis**.

Paul uses the Greek word “*kōpiaō*” which means to toil to the point of exhaustion.

No doubt behind every one of these names there is a story of dedication and faith, we cannot know this story fully but we can guess and speculate.

What follows is based on what can be found in the works of Flavius Josephus and other ancient historical writings.

For example, thirteen of the twenty-four names occur on official inscriptions or documents which have to do with the imperial household and emperor’s palace in Rome.

These are common names but Paul does speak of some saints that were of Caesar’s household. [**Philippians 4:23**]

Andronicus and Junias, most likely Junias, is a female name and Paul calls them as listed among the apostles.

Apostles in this sense were people who were sent out by the church to preach the gospel message in the community.

Paul also tells us that they were Christians before he was, this means that they must go back to the time of Stephen’s [**Acts 7:54-60**].

A direct link to the earliest church at Jerusalem.

Ampliatius is a quite common slave name.

In the cemetery of Domatilla, which is the earliest of the Christian catacombs, there is a decorated tomb with the single name Ampliatius carved on it in bold letters.

The fact that only Ampliatius was carved on the tomb indicates he was a slave because Roman citizens would have had three names.

But this elaborate tomb and bold letters would indicate Ampliatius the slave was a man of high rank in the church.

Social distinctions did **not** exist in the early Christian church, as they do too often today.

We have no means of knowing if Paul's Ampliatius is the Ampliatius on the tomb, but it is not an impossibility.

The household of Aristobulus means not only the man's family and relations, but includes servants and slaves.

The grandson of Herod the Great was Aristobulus.

He lived in Rome for a long period of time.

When Aristobulus died his servants and slaves would have become the property of the Emperor but would still be known as the household of Aristobulus.

This is more possible by the name that is mentioned on each side of the phrase.

Apelles, a Greek name that a Jew called Abel would take.

Also Herodion is a name that could be linked to the family of Herod.

The household of Narcissus. A common name but the most famous Narcissus was a freedman who had been secretary to the Emperor Claudius.

Narcissus had exercised a notorious influence over the Emperor, amassing a private fortune by taking bribes to make sure petitions and requests reached the Emperor.

When Claudius was murdered and Nero came to the throne, Narcissus was compelled to commit suicide, and all his fortune and household slaves passed to Nero.

It may well be that the slave mentioned here was part of Narcissus' household.

If the above assumptions are correct, this would mean that many of the slaves at the imperial court were already Christians before Paul was taken to Rome.

Rufus is another interesting name, Paul felt that he owed a debt of gratitude to the mother of Rufus, but who was Rufus?

Mark 15:21 [NIV] *"A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross."*

If a man is identified by the names of his sons, it means that, although he himself may **not** be personally known to the community to whom the story is being told, the sons are.

To what church did Mark write his gospel?

Almost certainly Mark wrote it to the church at Rome, and he knew that the church at Rome would know who Alexander and Rufus were.

Almost certainly we find Rufus is the son of Simon who carried the cross for Jesus.

Simon was a Jew from far off Cyrene in North Africa.

Most likely he had scraped and saved for a long time to celebrate one Passover in Jerusalem.

As Simon entered the city that day, suddenly the flat of a Roman sword touched his shoulder, and he was impressed into the Roman service to carry a criminal's cross.

How resentment, anger and bitterness must have welled up in his mind at such terrible indignity.

All the way from Cyrene to this.

No doubt Simon meant, as soon as he reached Calvary, to fling down the cross with a loathing in his heart and stride away.

But the chance encounter on the road to Calvary changed Simon's life forever.

On coming home Simon must have expressed his experience to his wife and sons.

We can weave all kinds of speculations about these names, but certain scriptures seem to be links from the past.

Acts 11:19-21 [NIV] *“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”*

Was Simon one of these men from Cyrene?

Was Rufus with him?

Was it they who took the first tremendous step to make Christianity the faith of a whole world, not just a Jewish sect?

Acts 19:33 [NIV] *“The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defence before the people.”*

Was this Alexander the other son of Simon?

What about the mother of Rufus, did she bring comfort and love to Paul which his own family refused when he became a Christian?

I know all the above is only based on suppositions, but I long to meet these people in the first resurrection and listen intensely to the true stories behind the list of names.

These accounts will, I'm sure, put my personal Christian life to shame, compared to their dedication, courage and faith.

Romans 16:17-19 [NIV] *“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”*

Paul has sent his greeting to those he knows in Rome but then out of his love for them and all others in the Roman church he gives a warning against those who oppose the true gospel message.

Galatians 1:8-9 [NIV] *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”*

Paul came up against this hostility in all of the Gentile churches.

Devout Jews wanted the Christians to be compelled to add Jewish rituals to their faith in Jesus Christ's sacrifice.

2 Thessalonians 3:6 [NIV] *"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."*

The same problem in the church in Thessalonica.

2 John 10 [NIV] *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him."*

John recognised the same threat to those who were young in their Christian faith.

One thing is to be noted in these final verses of the letter to the Roman church.

As yet, this trouble has **not** flared out in the church in Rome, but Paul, as a wise pastor, believed that prevention was better than trying to deal with a situation that was fully developed, as it had in other churches.

Romans 16:20-23 [NIV] *"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. Timothy, my fellow-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings."*

It is tempting to try to identify this group of friends who send their greetings with the greeting of Paul.

Philippians 2:19-22 [NIV] *"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no-one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel."*

Timothy was Paul's right-hand man, the man Paul saw as his successor.

Acts 13:1 [NIV] *"In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul."*

Lucius may be Lucius of Cyrene, one of the teachers in Antioch who sent Paul and Barnabas out on their missionary journeys.

Acts 17:5-9 [NIV] *"But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the market-place, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they put Jason and the others on bail and let them go."*

Jason may be the Jason who gave Paul hospitality at Thessalonica and who suffered for it at the hands of the mob.

Acts 20:4 [NIV] *"He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia."*

Sopater may be the Sopater of Berea who took his church's share of the collection to Jerusalem with Paul.

1 Corinthians 1:14 [NIV] *"I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius,"*

Gaius may be the Gaius who was one of the two people whom Paul himself baptised at Corinth.

For the first and only time we know the name of the secretary who actually penned this letter to Paul's dictation, for **Tertius** slipped in his own greeting.

No great man such as Paul can do his work without the assistance that humble helpers give him.

Paul's other scribes and secretaries are anonymous, so **Tertius** is the representative of those humble unknowns who were penmen for Paul.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 [NIV] *"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

The reason that Paul had to employ scribes could be this *"thorn in the flesh,"* which God did not heal to assist Paul to remain humble in spite of the great revelations given to him by Jesus Christ.

Galatians 6:11 [NIV] *"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"*

Could this indicate poor eyesight?

The ongoing result of the blindness Paul suffered on the road to Damascus [**Acts 9:1-8**].

One of the most interesting things in this chapter is the way Paul characterises people in one single sentence.

Gaius – hospitality.

Quartus – brother.

Some day people will sum up our lives in one sentence.

What will that sentence be?

Romans 16:25-27 [NIV] *"Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him, to the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen."*

The letter to the Roman church ends with a doxology in praise of God which is also a summary of the gospel message.

It is a gospel that enables people to live an established life.

It is a gospel brought by Jesus Christ and then transmitted by His disciples.

It is a gospel that is the consummation of human history.

It is a gospel meant for all human beings.

It is a gospel that brings into being an obedient world founded on love towards the Creator God and our fellow human beings.

May this wonderful world tomorrow soon come to this evil, pain-filled, Satan-influenced society.