

### Phoebe - A Faithful Messenger

*I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, <sup>2</sup> that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.*

*Romans 16:1-2*

These are the only two verses in the Bible that tell us about Phoebe - not a lot of information given. However, we can learn much about her character from Paul's two verse commendation of her.

First we learn she was a servant and member of the church at Cenchrea, a small coastal town about five miles from Corinth. Paul was in Corinth when he wrote the letter to send to the church in Rome. In those days there was no postal service available for everyone to use. Therefore, if you wanted to send a letter you had to find someone to deliver it for you; someone you could totally entrust to complete the job.

***“I commend to you Phoebe”*** - *commend* could also mean *recommend, present, or introduce*. He is giving Phoebe a letter of introduction to those she will meet on her journey to take his letter to the Romans. They will be people she does not know or has never met and he wants to ensure she will be welcomed by the church in Rome. ( Actually, Paul himself has still never been to Rome but he does know members of the Roman church like Priscilla and Aquila.) Another reason for Paul's commendation is that Phoebe was not only the letter-carrier, she also likely explained what Paul meant in his letter and answered their questions when the letter was read.

Travel was difficult in the ancient world compared to today. It could be dangerous due to the risk of robbery, violence, shipwrecks, etc. The availability of places to stay on the road was not guaranteed and even when there were inns and taverns they were usually places of ill repute. That's why hospitality was so important - to safely stay with people you knew.

Paul knew the journey from Corinth to Rome would not be easy and would involve considerable sea travel as well as land travel. There is no record of the path she took but it seems more probable that being a woman she went overland as much as possible. She might have traveled with a caravan, thus giving her the opportunity to stop at places on the route where Christian churches had been established. It certainly took courage to embark on the journey no matter how she did it.



Paul conferred a great honor on Phoebe in choosing her to carry his epistle to Rome. Of course there was no carbon paper or copiers in those days and even the simplest writing materials were very expensive. There was no backup copy should something happen to the one Phoebe would be carrying. Paul would have made certain the person he entrusted with his letter was totally reliable. To be a Christian at Cenchrea had not been easy for Phoebe; port cities were notorious for their wickedness. Most of the people believed in many different gods and were idol worshippers. Walking through the city you would see lots of different shrines and temples and monuments dedicated to worshipping these many different gods. In a place like this, you could easily fall for anything if you didn't know what you believed. Yet, in the middle of all this religious darkness, Phoebe believed God. She lived a life of faith that flowed over into a life of service. It would be immediately evident to the Roman church that she deserved great appreciation and respect when they realized Paul entrusted her with his epistle.

The name Phoebe means “bright and radiant” and it seems these words did characterize her personality and Christian life. Paul commends her to the church at Rome in three different ways: as our sister in Christ, as a servant, and as a helper of many.

**“Our sister in Christ...”** Calling her “our sister” rather than “a sister” emphasizes that Phoebe was a devoted member of the family of God. In fact, Paul calls her his sister so she must have become quite dear to Paul. If we know one thing for sure about Paul, he was a straightforward, no-nonsense kind- of guy. He wasn't going to say things that weren't true. Paul valued the relationship he had with the churches and would never do anything to destroy their trust in him. Phoebe was of outstanding character and integrity for him to identify himself with her so closely. He was sending her to a new place and wanted her to be welcomed. He expected the Roman Christians to treat her like their sister even though they had never met her. God still calls us to treat fellow believers as part of the family.

**“A servant...”** The word used here is *diakonos* which in English is translated as servant, deacon, or minister. Some do feel she was the first deaconess. However, the Greek word here is neuter and was used in the church as a general term for a servant before the offices of deacon and deaconess were developed. During the first few centuries of the church, the role of a woman servant (*diakonos*) was to care for fellow believers who were sick, for the poor, for strangers passing through, and for the imprisoned. They were also responsible for helping baptize and

disciple new women converts and to instruct children and other women. Here Paul is focusing on her specific leadership role at the church in Cenchrea. She labored within that community and beside Paul in the work of the gospel. Phoebe the deacon is a leader and Paul wants the Romans to know that.

**“A helper of many and of myself also...”** Thirdly, Paul speaks of Phoebe as a “*prostatis*” (helper) which was commonly used to signify a patron, a wealthy person who encouraged and financially supported an organization or a cause, as in a patron of the arts. Women of means were crucial to the ministry of the early church. We know of several women, like Lydia and Priscilla, who opened their homes for church gatherings, helped spread the gospel, and provided leadership in their community of believers. In other words, Phoebe was no ordinary helper but one of high esteem and integrity. She was most likely a businesswoman of considerable wealth who used her influence and financial means, as well as her personal time and effort, to help many believers in the church and Paul as well.

### **Lessons from Phoebe**

#### **1. Firm Faith**

*If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. Isaiah 6:7*

Phoebe’s environment was far from favorable. She could not have found it easy to practice her faith in such an atmosphere where the enemy had set up a stronghold. Today is equally challenging and the pull of the world has intensified. Deception is rampant and there is only one way for us to know the truth. We must know and study God’s word in order to discern what is true. In these last days, God exhorts us to stand strong in the faith.

#### **2. Faithful Service**

*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10*

Phoebe was faithful in her service to the church in Cenchrea as well as helping out Paul in Corinth. She was known as a servant to those around her, fulfilling the works God had prepared for her. God has freed us from sin and given us a new purpose to live for. He has created a unique path for each person to do good works. God has given each of us special gifts, skills, and passions to accomplish the work that He has set before us. You don’t need to copy or compare your work to someone else’s. God has specific plans especially for you. It is our job to seek His plan and then faithfully walk in it.

### 3. Be Trustworthy to Carry the Message

*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Acts 1:8*

The book of Romans was sent to answer some pressing questions and concerns of the people in the church in Rome. Phoebe faithfully delivered the message she was charged with carrying. Two thousand years later, the truths in Romans still minister to people, setting them free from all kinds of slavery. God has given us a message to share and even blessed us with the power of the Holy Spirit to help us. The truth of the Word can reveal deception and disturb the plans of the enemy. When shared, it can change people's lives. Witnessing to others about what God has done for us is what He calls us to do. Like Phoebe we have a message to carry. Will we be as faithful to deliver it as she was?



*Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us:  
we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.  
II Corinthians 5:20*