

The Book of Romans Study Guide

Chapter 16

Having concluded his major theological and ministerial teachings, Paul now moves on to some simple greetings that contain important details regarding the nature and functioning of the early body of Messiah.

16:1-2

This is the only reference to Phoebe in the New Testament. He shows that she is part of the *ekklesia*, meaning the congregation of “called out” believers of Cenchrea. That city is located in southern Greece on the eastern side of the Isthmus of Corinth. and it served as the vital eastern seaport for the major city of Corinth.

Since Paul wrote this letter to the Roman believers while he was staying in the Corinth, and Phoebe is the first person mentioned, it most assuredly means that she was the person who delivered the letter. In the ancient world, a letter carrier did not just drop off mail; they were the author’s official representative. So, Phoebe would have read the epistle aloud to the Roman house congregations, and answered their questions regarding Paul’s theological arguments. That is a clear statement of trust and affirmation of her responsibility.

Moreover, she is identified as being a *diakonos*. The vast majority of the time, that word is translated as “servant.” Yeshua is even described as a *diakonos* in Romans 15:8. The word is always written in the masculine, even in the case of women like Phoebe. The reason is that first-century Koine Greek had masculine, feminine, and neuter genders, but the neuter only applied to inanimate objects or concepts, not people. So when there was a mixed group of people, the masculine form was used, but as a gender-inclusive or “common” gender.

In addition to a general sense of servanthood, Scripture shows that *diakonoi* (pl.) of congregations were to be appointed in an official capacity. Philippians 1:1 clearly distinguishes them from the common saints and from overseers (*episkopoi*), also known as elders (*presbuteroi*, see Titus 1:5,7). In other words, you could be a *diakonos* with a common calling as a servant or with an official capacity as what we now call a deacon. The text does not directly state what that meant in the case of Phoebe. However, in Paul’s instructions regarding *diakonoi* in 1 Timothy 3:11, he states:

“Women (*gunē*) must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

That is essentially a parallel description as for *diakonoi* who are men in verse 8. Also, when the KJV translates *gunē* as “their wives,” the word can refer to wives in a minority of cases, but the personal pronoun for “their” is not in the text.

So, what does this mean for Phoebe? Her role in delivering Paul’s letter implies that her character met that description, and along with being given responsibilities that go beyond a mere courier, the text implies that Phoebe had an official capacity. Moreover, whenever *diakonos* is grammatically bound to a single geographic congregation, as in the case of Phoebe, it denotes a title for an office rather than a general character trait of servanthood.

In verse 2, Paul calls upon the believers in Rome to receive and help Phoebe upon her arrival. He gives the reason as being a proper reflection of the help that she had given to Paul and to others. The Greek word translated as “helper” is *prostatis*, which, in Roman culture, was never used for a casual helper or a low-level servant. Instead, it consistently designated individuals of elite socio-political status, leadership, and power, and who were often benefactors. And that explains why Phoebe would be singled out as a helper for Paul.

16:3-5

Paul, then, shifts to offering greetings to the leaders and members of the believing community of Rome that was operating out of a network of homes. First and foremost, he mentions, Prisca and Aquila – a wife and husband. Prisca is the formal, dignified, and official version of her name that Paul always uses. In contrast, in the book of Acts, Luke uses Priscilla, which is an informal diminutive—essentially a nickname meaning “little Prisca.”

Their story is significant to our understanding of why Paul extends greetings to them first. According to Acts 18:2-3, they were Jews and tent-makers (just like Paul) who were expelled from Rome along with all other Jews by emperor Claudius. They settled in Corinth, where Paul met them. Luke doesn’t write about it, but here in Romans 16:3, Paul says that they risked their lives for him, most likely during this time in Corinth.

As Acts 18 continues, Paul brought Prisca and Aquila with him to Ephesus, where Paul stayed for only a short time before continuing to Jerusalem in order to meet with the leaders there. But he left Prisca and Aquila behind in order to continue the ministry. While there, they encountered a Jewish man named Apollos who was teaching others about Yeshua in a way that was not completely accurate. So, they took Apollos aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately.”¹ That means both Prisca and Aquila were both involved in teaching this man what he needed to know.

Notice, especially that Paul consistently mentions Prisca first when citing this couple, which is a very unusual practice, but that indicates that Prisca was more prominent in the ability to teach than Aquila. But they did so in tandem, and always linked to Paul’s apostolic authority. That is how Paul could call them his “fellow workers” in here in Romans 16:3. They both could do the work of ministry, especially teaching others, while remaining under his authority. And that is apparent by his description that they were hosting a congregation in their own home.

In keeping with the practice of putting what matters most first, Paul then sends his greeting to Epaenetus, the first person to believe in Yeshua in a particular region. Some translations identify that region as Asia (modern Turkey), while others use Achaia (where Corinth is located). The oldest manuscripts use *Asias* (Asia), so that interpretation is preferred. Later Greek manuscripts used Achaia, believing that they were correcting a scribal error, when, in fact, they were creating one. It just makes sense that, by mentioning Epaenetus together with Prisca and Aquila, after this man become a believer, he accompanied the couple from Ephesus in Asia to Rome.

¹ In Acts 18:26, Luke uses the Greek word *ektithemi*, which is translated as “explained” or “expounded” (KJV), but literally means “lay out.” That is the same word that Luke uses in Acts 28:23 to describe the way that Paul explained or expounded or laid out the kingdom of God and used the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) to persuade his audience about Yeshua. That same sense of teaching by expounding applies here to both Prisca and Aquila.

6:6-15

Paul now sends greetings to 27 more individuals in Rome, with the following persons of particular note:

v 7 Andronicus and Junia/Junias.

The theological debate over the second person has been extensive. Junia is feminine and Junias is masculine, which are both possible because of the structure of the Greek text.²

For the first millennium of church history, early church fathers—such as John Chrysostom, Origen, and Jerome—unanimously referred to this person as a woman. However, beginning in the 12th century, scribes and translators began altering the name to the masculine “Junias” in manuscripts and print editions. The driving assumption was simple: a woman could not possibly be called an apostle, so the person must have been a man. The problem is that Junia, the feminine form, is found hundreds of times in Greek and Roman literature, but not a single time for Junias, the masculine form. That popularity among females makes sense because Junia was derived from Juno, the Roman queen of the gods, and it is unlikely that a male would be named after a female deity.

The debate has also been great over their relationship to the Apostles. Some English versions use “among the apostles,” while others use “to the apostles.” Both are valid uses of the Greek preposition ἐν (*en*).

- “Outstanding among the apostles” treats the preposition *en* as a marker of inclusion within a plural group, and implies that Andronicus and Junia are members of the apostolic community, and they stand out as exceptionally gifted or prominent leaders within that circle.
- “Well known to the apostles” conveys the meaning that Andronicus and Junia are not apostles themselves. Instead, they were ordinary ministers who performed such excellent work that the highest level of apostolic leadership knew respected them from afar.

The last hermeneutical issue is over the translation of the Greek ἀποστόλος (*apostolos*), which can have three valid meanings:

- The “Twelve” who walked with Yeshua
- People who have been appointed to the office and given the spiritual gift of an apostle in accordance with 1 Corinthians 12:28-28
- Or in a broader sense of a person “sent” by the Holy Spirit like a missionary or planter of congregations

All of those interpretations are valid linguistically, which leaves the interpretation open.

v 10 “Those who are of *the household of Aristobulus.*”

Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great and the brother of Agrippa I. He lived in Rome as a close, elite friend of Emperor Claudius. When Aristobulus died, his vast estate of slaves and freedmen was absorbed by the Roman Emperor but kept under his name (“the household of Aristobulus”). Thus, Paul’s greeting proves that the Gospel had successfully infiltrated the inner circles of high-ranking Roman aristocracy and royalty

² Paul uses the accusative form Ἰουνίαν, which works the same for either a female or male name.

v 11 “Those who are of *the household of Narcissus*.”

Tiberius Claudius Narcissus was one of the most powerful men in the world—the wealthy, notorious chief freedman and advisor to Emperor Claudius. He was forced to commit suicide when Nero took power in AD 54, and his massive wealth and slaves were seized by the crown. Paul’s greeting demonstrated that slaves working deep inside Caesar’s private palace had become believers in Yeshua.

v 13 Rufus and his mother.

In Mark 15:21, the Gospel writer records that the man who was forced to carry the cross of Yeshua was Simon of Cyrene (in Africa), whom Mark identifies explicitly as “the father of Alexander and Rufus.” Because Mark wrote his Gospel specifically to a Roman audience, scholars confidently identify this Rufus as the very same man. This implies that the son of the man who carried the cross of Messiah became a foundational pillar of the Roman believing community, and his mother practically cared for Paul during his travels (probably in Antioch, see Acts 13:1).

16:16-19

v 16 A “holy kiss” was a physical gesture of greeting—typically a light kiss on the cheek, forehead, or hands. In ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish societies, this kind of greeting was strictly reserved for close family members or social equals. People did not kiss strangers, business associates, or those from a different social class. Masters did not touch slaves, and Jews did not touch Gentiles.

By taking this existing cultural gesture and moving it into the believing community, Paul was telling them that they were more than just a religious club; they were now a literal family. And, by making this instruction, he is flattening the entire Roman social hierarchy. That meant, for the audience hearing the reading of this letter, a wealthy Roman aristocrat would have to turn and physically kiss a common household slave on the cheek. So, this public act proved that in Messiah, all members possessed equal dignity and status.

v 17-18 Paul shifts his tone from warm greetings to issue a strong warning against false teachers who threaten the unity and purity of the believing community. He instructs them to keep a watchful eye out for individuals who cause divisions and create obstacles that go against the sound doctrine they were taught. He exposes the true motives of those false teachers as being self-serving and deceptive. As a result, he gives a direct command to turn away from them, which implies complete avoidance.

v 19 Paul then commends them, noting that their reputation for obedience to the Gospel has become known to other communities, bringing him great joy. However, to safeguard them against deceivers, he gives them a piece of wisdom that can easily be remembered:

“be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”

16:20-27

v 20 Paul begins his concluding words with a blessing that reflects on the spiritual battle that the Romans and every other congregation face between good and evil. His promise that “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” is an echo of the first messianic

prophecy in Genesis 3:15 that the Messiah will decisively defeat the spiritual forces causing the chaos brought by sin.

We know from Revelation 20:1-3 that this will not occur until Satan is bound and cast into the bottomless pit. But every victory God wins for us right now is a preview of that event. He seals that assurance by blessing them with Messiah's comforting presence, saying: "The grace of our Lord Yeshua be with you."

- v 21 Before concluding his blessings, he sends greetings from four Jewish believers currently residing with Paul in Corinth, but have been instrumental in establishing congregations in other cities. Most notably, that includes Timothy, Paul's protégé and ultimate successor.
- v 22 We learn that this epistle was written down onto papyrus scrolls by a scribe named Tertius, which means that Paul dictated his theological arguments out loud.
- v 23 We also learn that Gaius, a wealthy homeowner and host of the Corinth congregation, and Erastus, a high-ranking civic official, were also part of the team that was spreading the Gospel message and enabling believers to grow in their faith.
- v 24 Not in the oldest manuscripts.
- v 25a Rather than concluding with a simple sign-off, Paul engages in a majestic doxology—a formal hymn of praise—that dynamically weaves together the main themes of the entire book. He directs all praise to the sovereign power of God and he asserts that this spiritual stabilization does not happen through human effort, but exclusively through "my gospel" (the message was personally entrusted to him by God) and the public preaching of Yeshua.
- v 25b-26 Then he describes the blueprint of redemptive history as being a divine mystery that was kept secret in the past, but fully revealed in the present, and verified by looking back at the ancient prophetic writings, and now, under the commandment of God, this revealed message must now be taken beyond Israel to all nations.
- v 27 His final words seal the book of Romans by redirecting all eyes to the heavens, declaring that glory belongs forever to the "only wise God" through the person of Yeshua the Messiah.

Ultimately, Paul wrote Romans in order to bring healing to a bitter theological and ethnic divide within the Roman house congregations because he needed a unified, harmonious base in the capital city to back his mission of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, with the next step reaching Spain. Along the way, he provided a systematic, bulletproof defense of the nature of salvation and the assurance of God fulfilling His covenant promises to Israel.

At the conclusion of the book of Acts, the last we hear about Paul was that he reached Rome after appealing to Caesar during his legal fight for freedom, and was then held under house arrest. There is no definitive archaeological or biblical proof that the Paul ever reached Spain.

- But according to the early church historian Eusebius, Paul defended himself successfully before Nero and was released before going forth to proclaim the gospel again (*Hist. Eccl. ii. 21*).

- Clement of Rome wrote in 95 A.D. that Paul “reached the farthest limits of the West” before dying. To a first-century Roman writer, “the farthest limits of the West” was a standard geopolitical idiom explicitly meaning Spain or the Atlantic coast.
- Both Jerome and John Chrysostom in the 4th century indicate that he made it to Spain (*Chrysost. on 2 Tim. iv. so*).
- Eusebius also states that Paul was brought before Nero a second time and he was then martyred (*Hist. Eccl. ii. 21*).
- It is believed that Paul wrote his second epistle to Timothy right before his execution, for he talks about the “time of his departure” having come (1 Tim 4:6). And he talks about having people stand with him at his first defense [before Nero], but having none the second time (v. 16).

So it is believed that he was killed around the year 67 A.D., about 10 years after writing the book of Romans.