

Make Room for My Sister!

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder – Part I

Romans 16:1-2

Introduction

A few months ago I received an e-mail from a radio listener who lives in Louisiana. He wrote, “You’ve got to read this story, entitled ‘Pecans in the Cemetery’.”

On the outskirts of a small town, there was a cemetery on a low hill. A wrought iron fence surrounded the cemetery and thick bushes skirted the fence all around the graveyard. The land rose gently from the fence up the hill and a big, old pecan tree sat right in the middle of the cemetery.

One day, two young men filled up a bucketful of nuts and sat down by the tree and began dividing them up between them. “One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me,” said one of the young men. As they counted them out, several of the nuts rolled down toward the fence.

A boy was riding along the road on his bicycle and just as he passed the cemetery, he thought he heard voices from inside. He slowed down and then got off his bike to investigate. Sure enough, he clearly heard, “One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me.”

He knew exactly what was happening, and the terrified boy jumped on his bike and rode off toward town. Just around the corner he nearly ran into an elderly man hobbling along with his cane. The boy yelled, “Come quick, you won’t believe what I just heard! The devil and the Lord are down at the cemetery dividing up all the souls.”

The old man said, “Beat it, kid, you’re hearing things.” But the young lad insisted until the old man

agreed to go with him, if for no other reason than to get the kid to leave him alone.

When they arrived at the fence they both heard, “One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me.”

The old man whispered, “Boy, you’ve been tellin’ me the truth. Let’s see if we can get a look at ‘em.”

Shaking with fear, they peered through the bushes, but were unable to see clearly enough to get a glimpse of either the devil or the Lord.

But just then, they heard up by the tree, “One for you and one for me. That’s all. Now let’s go get those nuts by the fence and we’ll be done.”

They say the old man made it back to town a full five minutes ahead of the kid on the bike.

Fortunately, the Lord does not make deals with the devil. He does not do any dividing up of souls in cemeteries either.

However, there is something disconcerting about the idea of the devil trying to make a deal with the Lord. In fact, the thought that the devil would know our name is a little discomfoting, is it not? We would rather remain anonymous with him.

On the other hand, for the Lord to know our name is encouraging. And it is true – according to Revelation 20:15, all those who have been redeemed by faith in Christ alone have had their names written in the Lamb’s book of life.

It is also intriguing, of course, that not only will our names be known, but every service for Christ. Every deed done in His honor will be rewarded by God, who knew every detail.

The writer of Hebrews encouraged the saints by reminding,

For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. (Hebrews 6:10)

God knows who you are, He knows your name, and He will remember every good work in His name. Nothing, no matter how small or unimpressive, slips through unnoticed by God. No one gets lost in the shuffle.

Some of this truth spills over into the final chapter of Romans. As the great leader of the gospel of grace comes to the close of what is undoubtedly the chief document of our faith, he begins to pour out his heart in gratitude and love toward the saints.

Paul refers to the names of some thirty-five people in all! It is as if he opens his address book and shows us the names of people he knows and loves and prays for in Rome; which is all the more remarkable, given the fact that he has never been to Rome.

These are people Paul has met on his journeys – people he has led to faith in other areas who now live in Rome. He has evidently kept track of them and is aware of their standing and service. And this is before telephones and e-mail!

One author said that Paul must have been energetic in gleaning whatever he could about these people . . . he had a deep love and concern for the saints of God.

You can imagine him down at the port on some ship, in conversation with travelers, “So you’ve just come from Ephesus? You were in Troas? Do you know of the believers in Jerusalem? You’re a sailor . . . tell me, do you know a sail maker named Aquila?”ⁱ

Paul knew so many people by name . . . perhaps they were on a prayer list he kept with his parchments and books . . . perhaps he drew it out and referred to it as he closed out his letter.ⁱⁱ

Paul will greet seventeen men by name and nine women. He will greet two couples and five converted slaves. He will greet five groups at large, along with two specific households.

If we survey the entire group of people, we quickly discover that Paul did not play favorites. He greets men, women, freedmen, Jews, the well-to-do and the well thought of, as well as Gentiles and slaves.

Paul makes personal comments that include praise and gratitude. He speaks of four women and commends them all specifically for working hard for the cause.

He commends one couple for risking their lives for him, and applauds several house churches. Paul specifically remembers and greets by name, the first person he led to Christ.

He refers to them people as brothers and sisters, beloved, fellow workers, and outstanding Christians. Then, Paul encourages them all to give each other a round of hugs and kisses on his behalf.

This is not some stodgy theologian who is best left alone. This is not some bookworm who cares more about principle than he does about people.

Romans chapter 16 is the declaration of God through the dynamic personality of Paul that He knew who they were and where they were – and that He knows who and where we are too!

Romans 16 is God’s way of saying, “People matter – including you! I know your name. I see what you’re doing for My cause. You are My fellow-laborers and My beloved. I’ve got you in My divine name and address book. No matter how often you’ve moved, I know exactly where you are.”

No one slips through the cracks with God.

James Black was calling the roll in his Sunday school class one Sunday morning in 1880. The students answered the roll call by quoting the verse for the day.

One of his fourteen year old students did not respond when her name was called. She had fallen ill and, as things would turn out, she would die from pneumonia ten days later.

He made the comment in class that it was one thing to miss the roll call of Sunday school, but he hoped and prayed that all of his students would answer the roll call when it came from heaven.

That afternoon, with this thought in mind, he sat down and wrote these lyrics:

*On that bright and cloudless morning,
When the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of His resurrection share;
When His chosen ones shall gather
To their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be
there.
When the roll is called up yonder,*

When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be
there.ⁱⁱⁱ

Romans 16 is a microcosm of the roll; a sermon in itself that the names of the beloved sisters and brothers in Christ will never be lost. God knows . . . God sees . . . God cares.

Phoebe – Special Commendation

Now that is enough of an introduction! With the opening words of Romans 16:1-2, notice that Paul begins with a very special commendation.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; 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.

The name Phoebe tells us several things about her.

Her name is the feminine form of Phoebus, one of the names given to the god Apollo. It would have been a mark of honor for pagan parents to name their daughter after one of the chief gods of the Greek pantheon.

Apollo was supposedly one of the twin sons of Zeus and was regarded as the god of music and poetry. He was also a god of light, known as “Phoebus,” which meant, “radiant”. The feminine form of Phoebus, translated in this name, was Phoebe.

The parents of Phoebe were evidently thrilled with the birth of their daughter and considered her birth to be the giver of music and mirth and light. As a result, they named her in honor of their pagan god.

Since loyal Jews normally avoided the names of pagan deities, we can also assume that her parents were Gentiles.

We have no record of Phoebe’s conversion to Christ, but we can assume it occurred, given the fact that she was connected to the church in Cenchrea, at the eastern port of Corinth. The church at Cenchrea would have been a daughter church of the believing assembly in Corinth. It is very likely that she heard the gospel from Paul himself, as he served in Corinth during a year and a half of ministry.

Paul certainly knows a lot about her, so it seems likely that they knew one another and had worked

together. He mentions at the end of Romans 16:2 that she had personally helped him in some way.

It is especially interesting that Paul introduces her with a special commendation in Romans 16:1a,

I commend to you our sister Phoebe . . .

Because of the way verses 1 and 2 stand out, separating Phoebe from those who are to be greeted and those from Corinth who are greeting the Roman believers, it is almost certain, without ever having to say it, that Phoebe was the one who actually delivered this letter from Paul to the Roman believers.

Phoebe is traveling to Rome and is to be received by them. She would have to have been a woman of wealth to travel from place to place, as only the wealthy could afford to do so. She more than likely had attendants traveling with her, since a female traveling alone in this century would have been unheard of. It is quite possible that Phoebe was either widowed or single.

If we put the clues together, Paul is finished with his letter and Phoebe has business in Rome, so Paul sends the letter along with her. Embedded in his letter is this special commendation for the church to help her, show hospitality to her, and warmly welcome her.

This converted Gentile, raised in the luxury of a pagan Greek culture by devoted idolaters is now Paul’s emissary to Rome.

One author wrote, “She [carried] – the future of Christian theology.”^{iv}

Donald Grey Barnhouse adds to this thought by writing, “Never was there a greater burden carried by such tender hands. The theological history of the church through the centuries was in the manuscript which she brought with her. The Reformation was in her luggage.”^v

Three descriptive words for Phoebe

You might note that Paul refers to Phoebe with three different descriptive words.

1. The first word is “sister”.

Paul is reminding the church in Rome that while we might come from many fathers in the flesh, we have one Father in the faith. There should be no strangers in the family of Christ. Since we are sons and daughters of God the Father, we are brothers and sisters of each other.

Paul told Timothy to,

Respond to older men as fathers; treat younger men as brothers; treat the older women as mothers and act in purity toward the younger women as your own sisters. (1 Timothy 5:1 paraphrased)

Has it ever occurred to you that your biological family is temporary, but your spiritual family is eternal? This should have an impact on the way we treat each other in the meantime.

The trouble is that the church can become a little closed society where people who come in from the outside get the definite impression that they are not wanted; they are not welcome.^{vi}

Do not dare to park in my spot or take my seat!

A pastor called me a few weeks ago, telling me that his church was finally beginning to grow. He had been there a couple of years and had been teaching the Bible and making plans to accommodate people. People were beginning to come – strangers were sitting in the pews with the long standing members, babies were in the nursery, children were running in the hallways. This pastor went on a brief vacation with his family, and when he returned, he found that the deacons had voted him out because he was bringing too much upheaval to the church with so many new people.

What are these deacons going to do in heaven? It makes you wonder what kind of orientation class there will be for the remedial saint who never quite picked any of it up on earth.

Paul is effectively saying, “Make room in your assembly and in your hearts for one more!”

You cannot imagine how proud I was of one mom after reading an e-mail that one of our teaching staff copied me on. What an incredible spirit this mother has of welcome to others, even when other people crowd her child out at times.

The mother wrote, “I am one of the parents who gets to church earlier and earlier each Sunday to stand in line at the Butterflies class and I just wanted to thank you for making it worth the wait.”

I would expect her to write, “I can’t believe you are making us wait!” But instead, “. . . thank you for making it worth the wait.”

She goes on to write, “Two weeks ago, we were unable to get our son into the class and I realized how much our son loved being there. As I told him that his class was full, he began to cry; I was kicking myself for not arriving earlier. My son is 2 ½ years old and this week, as we pulled into the parking lot,

he said, “Hurry, Mommy, hurry, I don’t want my class to be full!”

She wrote, “I just wanted to encourage you all and thank you and praise our Lord for all the wonderful things that you are doing in tiny hearts.”

Isn’t that great?! She has the perspective that this body is family. May her tribe increase!

I personally think Paul is a little concerned that Phoebe will not get the hospitality she needs. Paul does not know first-hand the intangible temperature and personality of the church in Rome. He does know, however, that they are having some trouble with Jews and Gentiles getting along.

Now this woman is going to show up, carrying a letter from Paul, wearing the clothing of wealth and bearing the name of a pagan god. All heads are going to turn and everyone is going to check her out. The tongues might start to wag and the heads to nod.

So Paul says, “Let me introduce to you my little sister and yours too! She’s part of the family.”

Notice his strong words in Romans 16:2 again, . . . ***you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and . . . help her in whatever matter she may have need of you...***

Words such as these would be written due to uncertainty that it will automatically happen.

So Paul says, in effect, “I want you to make room for my sister Phoebe. She’s your sister in the faith too!”

2. The second word that Paul uses to describe Phoebe is “servant”.

Paul writes in Romans 16:1,

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;

The word “servant” comes from the Greek word, “diakonos”. The word is neuter in this verse, as a general term for servant. The word is also used:

- of the household servants who drew the water that Jesus turned into wine (John 2:5-9);
- earlier in Romans 13 for secular government officials who serve as “ministers of God to you for good,” or literally, who serve as deacons (obviously they are not deacons in the ecclesiastical sense of the word; in fact, they are not even saved in the context of Romans 13);

- of Jesus Christ who came as a “diakonos,” or a servant to the Jews (Romans 15:8).

During the first few centuries of the church, the role of deaconess developed out of a practical need more than a biblical mandate. Women were appointed as deaconesses to specifically care for the sick and the poor, to provide hospitality to strangers passing through, and to even provide care for the imprisoned. They were also responsible to help with the baptism of women and with the discipling of new women converts to Christianity.^{vii}

The question as to an ongoing officially elected position of deaconess is difficult to define, since “diakonos” has no feminine form and the word is used in a variety of ways. However, a biblical church that has men serving as elders – as pastors and overseers – and men serving as deacons in the role of serving the body, may add the role of deaconess, to serve alongside, and use the term for women serving the body in a variety of ways, and not violate scripture, which entrusts authority to the office of elder and service to the office of deacon.

I am aware of a number of good churches that have chosen to establish the office of deaconess, even though scripture does not mandate or even define the office. But whether any good church officially mandates the office of deaconess or not, every effective, progressing, advancing church understands that without women serving Christ in the church, the church would not last a weekend as we know it.

Is it any wonder that the majority role in every assembly is serving?

The apostle Peter, in fact, told the entire assembly of men and women to serve, or “diakonountes,” which is the same word in verb form, when he said,

be servants toward one another with the gifts you have all received. (I Peter 4:10 paraphrased)

The church works and advances and progresses when everyone is a servant – no matter what their title. The church is not advanced by a few mighty pushes of great people; but by many little pushes of ordinary servants of God.

Phoebe was a remarkable servant in her home-church. We do not even know what she did. But we do know she served the body at Cenchrea; humbly meeting the needs of her spiritual family.

On one occasion, Hudson Taylor, the world renowned missionary to China, was being introduced

to speak at a large church in Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation of all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as “our illustrious guest.” Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then said, “Dear Friends, I am the servant of an illustrious Master.”^{viii}

There is one more word Paul uses to describe his sister in the faith.

3. The third word Paul uses to describe Phoebe is “supporter”. Phoebe is a sister, servant, and supporter.

Notice Romans 16:2b again,

for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.

The word used by Paul that is translated “helper,” is the word “prostates,” which corresponds to the Latin word “patronus,” or patron. This word, in both Greek and Latin, refers to someone who was a patroness – a financial supporter of another.

Paul effectively says that Phoebe has given financial support to many, and to himself as well.

Imagine – Phoebe used her wealth to help the church and to support this traveling missionary named Paul. She slipped an envelope with money to him after church or perhaps, she mailed a card to him and included a check to help him along.

Without fanfare and without expecting anything in return, Phoebe served and supported the cause of Jesus Christ. And to her surprise, I am sure, Paul mentioned her by name!

Conclusion

This commendation is as if to pull back the curtain of time and give us a little breath of the day when every sister and every servant and every supporter of Christ and His cause will be called by name and recognized by none other than Jesus Christ Himself. Our greatest encouragement might be at times, to remember that God will not forget.

The poet asked,

Father, where shall I work today?

And my love flowed warm and free.

Then He pointed out a tiny spot

And said, “Tend that for me.”

I answered quickly, “Oh no; not that!

Why, no one would ever see,

*No matter how well my work was done;
Not that little place for me.”
And the word He spoke, it was not stern;
He answered me tenderly:
“Ah, little one, search that heart of thine.
Art thou working for them or me?
Nazareth was a little place,
And so was Galilee.”^{ix}*

Ladies and gentlemen, Romans 16 will reveal the truth that your support, beloved, your deeds, servants of God, your patronage, dear friends, will never be erased or fade from divine recognition, whether in a big place or a small place – like Galilee, or Cenchrea, or Cary. One day, when the roll is called up yonder, the Savior will say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

As James Black finished writing the lyrics to this hymn, which is now sung by millions, he wrote a final stanza. I could not help but think of Phoebe and Paul’s challenge to all of us, when I read these words:

*Let us labor for the Master from the dawn till
setting sun,
Let us talk of all His wondrous love and care;
Then when all of life is over, and our work on
earth is done,*

*And the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be
there.^x*

We would think this hymn was written by a southerner because the roll is called up “yonder”!

Where is yonder?

James Black was born in New York and raised in Pennsylvania.

I went on the internet to find the history of the word “yonder” and never did find it, although I ended up on a web site that gave definitions for words like “younguns” and “tarnation” and “tuckered out”. I guess “yonder” stands for some place that is so far away that we cannot imagine exactly how far, but know we want to get there.

When the roll is called up yonder – that is exactly where we will want to be.

*When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/17/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 261.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth W. Osbeck, 101 More Hymn Stories (Kregel Publications, 1985), p. 310.

^{iv} D. Edmond Hiebert, Personalities Around Paul (Moody Press, 1973), p. 196.

^v Donald Barnhouse, Romans: Volume 4 (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 124.

^{vi} William Barclay, Romans (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 208.

^{vii} John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 360.

^{viii} Robert Morgan, Nelson’s Complete Book of Illustrations (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 458.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 459.

^x Osbeck, p. 309.