

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## Advocating For A Servant In Need Of Assistance

By Dan Trygg

“I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while --”

Romans 15:24

“Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; <sup>6</sup> and they bear witness to your love before the church; and you will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. <sup>7</sup> For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. <sup>8</sup> Therefore we ought to support such people, that we may be fellow workers with the truth.”

3 John 1:5-8

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon of the church which is at Cenchrea; <sup>2</sup> 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 leader-helper-protector of many, and of myself as well.”

Romans 16:1-2

Paul is “taking care of business” as he brings his letter to a close. He had mentioned his own hope of being “helped along the way” by the Roman church, as he passed through on the way to Spain. He hoped to finally make a visit there, after traveling to Jerusalem with a delegation of representatives from churches in Macedonia and Achaia. They were bringing an offering from their churches to assist the poor at Jerusalem. Paul was concerned about this “mission”, because he knew that Jerusalem was a dangerous place for people like him.

### He asked them to pray for three issues:

**(1.) that his mission would be successful.** He was concerned that the service he had organized for the poor would be well-received. He knew he had his detractors among both certain groups within the church there, and among the Jewish religious community. The purpose for bringing this help was to address the very real needs, but also as a good will gesture toward the Jerusalem church. It was a way of showing solidarity on the part of the Gentile churches Paul had started with their “Jerusalem roots”. Paul had clearly established this historical priority throughout the letter. There was no way to understand who Jesus was, and what He did, without understanding God’s calling of Abraham, the covenant promises made to him, the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the giving of the Law, and the prophetic promises that laid the foundation for both Jesus’ coming, but also for the applicability of these promises to non-Jews. In the end, he succinctly states the relationship of the Gentiles followers of Christ to the larger plan and purpose of God in Romans 11:18, “it is not *you* (Gentiles) who support the root, but *the root* supports *you*”. Because of this, Paul felt that the Gentile churches had an “obligation” or “debt” to repay toward the Jerusalem church, ...because they (the Gentiles) had benefitted from their “spiritual things”, therefore they were “indebted” to minister to the “mother church” in Jerusalem in “material things” (15:27).

**(2.) that he would be delivered from the disobedient in Judea.** This was in reference to his concern about those among the Jews who were his enemies. He had been forced to flee Jerusalem years before, because of those who wanted to kill him. He had been back to visit, briefly, since then but it was always dangerous to come there.

**(3.) that he would come to them in joy by the will of God.** He *did* want to come to Rome, and enjoy fellowship with them for a time before going on to Spain.

It is interesting how all three of these issues came up, and were addressed, in the ensuing months and years. When he arrived in Judea, the elders of the Jerusalem church were concerned about some Jews who were especially zealous for the Law. They had heard misconstrued reports about Paul, saying that he did not value or keep the Law. They suggested that Paul take a vow of dedication, and sponsor several others who were wanting to take a vow. This amounted to paying for a haircut for each person, and for the sacrifices at the conclusion of the time of their vow. This would show any doubters that Paul still valued the practices of Judaism and the temple. When the time of his vow was concluded, he went to the temple to observe his ritual cleansing. While there, some Jews who were actually from Asia (modern Turkey) saw him in the temple, and assumed that he had brought a Gentile into the temple. They grabbed him, and started yelling out accusations against him. He ended up in the Roman prison, was transferred to the governor’s residence, for safety, and spent the next two years there, under house arrest. Because of a plot against him by his enemies, he appealed to Caesar, and was transferred to Rome. Instead of coming in joy, as he had asked the Romans to pray, he came under armed guard, and spent two more years under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial.

Along the way, it looked like all three of these concerns became problems. In the end, however, Paul overcame all three potential problems. He spent four years under incarceration, but during that time he was able to testify before governors, important officials, a king, and even the Emperor. He also wrote a number of our NT books: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. God answered the prayers, but not in the way people had hoped or

expected. In the end, however, it produced a much greater good, and a much wider opportunity for the gospel. While he did not exactly come to Rome with joy, as he had envisioned, but, in God's will, he *did* come. He was released, and tradition says that he did travel to Spain. God *did* answer Paul's prayers, but it was NOT a short-term fix!

**The other concern which Paul wanted to address in this letter had to do with commending someone else to the Roman church, a woman named Phoebe.** All we know of her is contained in these first two verses of Romans 16.

**Phoebe was called a "deacon", or "minister"** (Gk.- *diakonos*). This word, while generally meaning "servant", was used by Paul in reference to himself or others as "ministers", indicating some kind of teaching/preaching ministry (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Col. 1:7,23,25; 4:7; 1 Tim. 4:6). It is also the word translated as "deacon" (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8,12). The interesting thing is that the title given to her is in the masculine form, not a feminine form. It IS a title, not just a reference to a female "servant". Note, too, that she is "our sister *being* also a deacon of the church of Cenchræa". Clearly, she is not someone's house-servant. She is a deacon or "minister" of the church. Cenchræa was the eastern harbor of Corinth, some 9 miles east of the city.

We now have evidence of other women of those early centuries being called "ministers" or "deacons". The historian, Pliny, records that during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (98-117 A.D.), two Christian women slaves were tortured for being called "ministers". The Latin word, *ministra*, used here is a synonym for the Greek *diakonos*. Also from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, an inscription has been found, saying, "Sophia, the *diakonos*, the second Phoebe." Again, a clearly feminine name, Sophia, is linked with the masculine title, *diakonos*, ...but even more importantly is the comparison to Phoebe. Obviously, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, they still knew of Phoebe being a minister.

**Phoebe was called a "prostatis" or "leader"**. This is the only time that this word occurs in the NT as a noun, but the verbal form of this word (*proistēmi*) occurs 8 times. It literally means "to stand before" someone. In Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, and 1 Timothy 5:17 the word is translated as "leads" or even "rules" in most translations, and clearly is referring to leadership in the church. 1 Timothy 3:4,5,12 are clearly referring to leadership in the home. On the remaining two incidences (Tit. 3:8,14), the verb refers to careful oversight (readiness to engage) of good deeds. All the major English translations translate *proistēmi* as referring to some manner of leadership in most in cases. **To be consistent, Phoebe should be described as a "leader" or "one standing before", "standing at the head of", or even "one set before" others. It is quite evident that the translation choice to refer to her as a "helper" has been colored more by gender bias than by good translational practice.** The origin of this inaccurate reading seems to have originated in the Latin Vulgate. The Latin translator chose a word that means "to stand nearby" or "stand at one's side" rejecting a word that would reflect the leadership flavor of the Greek, and choosing a weaker word that would only imply a supportive, serving role. A further example of such bias is evident in even Greek translational reference materials. Eminent German Greek scholar, Walter Bauer, did NOT include "helper" as one of the options for *prostatis* in his lexicon, but words meaning "leader, defender, protectress, or patroness". However, when his lexicon was translated into English by Arndt and Gingrich, the word "helper" suddenly appeared in *their* list of options instead of these stronger, leadership words. Was there any evidence for this change? No! It reflects the bias of these scholars, not any textual evidence. The significance of this is that the standard one-volume lexicon that most pastors in the English-speaking world have had in their personal libraries is Arndt and Gingrich's, thus spreading the error.

**Why would Paul have specifically commended a "servant" and "helper" to the church in Rome, and encourage them to "receive her in a manner worthy of the saints, and ...help her in whatever matter she may have need of you".** Did every servant girl get a letter of recommendation from Paul? Furthermore, if she were just a "servant and helper", what would she be doing traveling from Cenchræa to Rome, and why would Paul think it important enough to recommend to the church that they "help her in whatever she needs"? **BUT, if she was a "minister" and "leader" of the church at Cenchræa, a representative of that church, and was a woman of social standing, even a "patron" and "protectress", that would explain her freedom to travel in her own right, and would explain Paul's interest in commending her to them.** It would also explain his appeal to "receive her in a worthy manner" and to "assist her in whatever she may need".

As we had discussed last week, **it was part of the Christian church-culture of that time to welcome, host and help those in ministry, ...to help them on their way through, and to send gifts of support to help them in their work.** We see how the apostle John succinctly expressed this practice in 3 John, "...you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; ...and you will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God." **Paul was commending Phoebe as worthy of such support and help.** They were to "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." Paul had originally started this letter to the Romans to be a letter of introduction for himself, but it became a letter of introduction and commendation for Phoebe, long before Paul would ever arrive there. **Why should they help her? Because she is a leader, and has been a prostatis, ...a leader-patron-protector for many, including Paul himself.**