



Phebe

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Ministering sisters and brothers can learn much from Phebe's example of service.

With the Church's new inspired approach to ministering, we are not given specific instructions as ministering sisters and brothers about what to do for others but are encouraged to act on inspired promptings to meet others' needs, whether they be spiritual, temporal, physical, or social. The example of Phebe—a devoted disciple who lived during the time of the Apostle Paul—teaches us that by using our God-given abilities and unique opportunities, we will be ready to minister in personalized ways as the Spirit directs.

In closing his letter to the Romans, Paul introduced Phebe to the Saints with these words:

“I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea:

“That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also” (Romans 16:1–2).

Paul uses three titles that provide insights into Phebe's character and position: “our sister [*adelphē*],” “a servant [*diakonos*] of the church,” and “a succourer [*prostatis*] of many.” The meaning and function of each title hint that Phebe played a meaningful role in ministering to others in the early Church.

A Sister

From Phebe's title of *adelphē*, we may observe that she was an active member of her Christian community in Cenchrea, a harbor near Corinth in Greece. Paul recognized Phebe as an active participant in the Lord's work in the area where she lived. Considering that her name is Greek, Phebe was likely a Gentile convert to Christianity.¹

A Servant

Romans and Greeks regarded a *diakonos* as someone who held a subservient position. Jesus redefined the term to be a crowning virtue. He made being

a *diakonos* a foundational characteristic for any who would desire discipleship. (See Matthew 20:25–28.) For Christians, the term connotes a position of trust, such as a selfless servant, teacher, or missionary.

The King James translators typically used the words “minister” or “deacon” when they referenced a man as a *diakonos* (see 1 Timothy 3:8). In the case of a woman doing the work of a *diakonos*, they used the word “servant.” Similarly, Paul recommended Tychicus, who delivered Paul's letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, as “a beloved brother” and a “faithful minister [*diakonos*] in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:21; see also Colossians 4:7). Although the King James Version describes Phebe as a “servant” and Tychicus as a “minister,” the Greek word is the same. Paul recommended Phebe to the Romans because of significant Christian service, including his trust in her to deliver this important letter from a considerable distance.



The words Paul used to describe Phebe suggest that she gave significant service to both Paul and the Church. Paul trusted her to deliver his important letter addressed to the early Saints in Rome.

A Succourer

The term *prostatis* is the same one used in Paul’s letters to describe male Christian leaders (see 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:4; 5:17). In Greek, the word connotes a benefactor, protector, patron, or leader of a group or club.² Paul’s reference to Phebe as a patroness suggests that she was of significant benefit to Paul specifically and to the Church generally. Whether that assistance to the early Church was financial, spiritual, temporal, or some other type, Paul does not say.

Paul wrote to the Romans at the end of his third missionary journey, in about AD 58, and spoke of his plans to

take the gospel to Spain (see Romans 15:24–28). Scriptural evidence suggests he had never been to Rome before, although he knew many Christians who had relocated there (see Romans 16:3–16). His epistle introduces himself to the Church there and mentions his plans to stop in Rome on his way to Spain. How would Paul finance this extensive travel and lodging? Reference to Phebe as a benefactor or “succourer” to him may provide a hint about her role in this regard and her ability to encourage additional support for Paul from the Romans when he arrived.³

Though her appearance in scripture is minimal, we can learn from Phebe’s

example of devotion to the work of ministering in the Church. Notably, Paul chose not to identify specific ways that Phebe served the cause of Christianity in her day, only that she could be trusted and that her service was important to the Church. By being a loving servant and “succourer” to those around us, we can leave a similar legacy. ■

NOTES

1. See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1979), 2:780.
2. See James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (1999), 195.
3. See Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (2003), 155–56; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (2007), 947–48.