

## Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, save us from ourselves, we pray, for we can often be our own worst enemy. Show us by Your death and resurrection that grace is more attractive than social status, that faith is more precious than all human endeavour, and that love is more powerful than any demon of hell. Lead us on in glorious hope according to Your narrow way, we pray: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Think of a favourite Christian song or hymn and the truths it expresses. Sing it in your head throughout the day, and think carefully about what it says. Make sure that you know the scriptures on which the song is based.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the fellowship groups in your church.** Pray that God's people will maintain within fellowship a balance of Bible study and prayer, and so learn of Christ in the ways God has chosen to bless
- Give thanks to God for the many people who work hard to ensure that your streets are safe at night
- Continue to pray for the situation in Libya and North Africa, pray that there will not be any further war or violence

## Meditation

Why is everything so complicated?  
Is it because we fail to see simplicity?  
Bound, as we are, by human limitations,  
Having left the Creator out of His Creation?

Why is everything so pressured?  
Is it because we take things on ourselves?  
Afraid to let the Spirit really take control,  
Cautious about trusting Him for all, at all?

Why is everything so demanding?  
Is it because we let them take control of us?  
Instead of giving them over to our Lord  
And receiving His help to get things done?

Jesus, turn our gaze from self to God  
And let us find our rest in You!

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## Bible passage - Romans 16:1-16

<sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup> so that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you; for she has been a sponsor of many and of myself as well. <sup>3</sup> Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus <sup>4</sup> who risked their lives for me; it is not only I who give thanks for them, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. <sup>5</sup> Additionally, greet the church in their house.

Greet my dear friend Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. <sup>6</sup> Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. <sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow countrymen who have been in prison with me; they are outstanding apostles, and became Christians before me. <sup>8</sup> Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. <sup>9</sup> Greet Urbanus, our fellow-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. <sup>10</sup> Greet Apelles, who is a proven servant in Christ. Greet those who

belong to the family of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup> Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.

<sup>12</sup> Greet those women who work hard for the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet my dear friend Persis, also a hard worker for the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. <sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and those who are with them. <sup>15</sup> Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints with them. <sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

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## Bible Study

### Review

This is a long list of names to read, and most readers know few of them! Understandably, people tend to read on, knowing that the end of the letter is in sight, and keeping an eye out for any spiritual advice or hints that Paul may offer. Yet the whole passage was probably very important to Paul.

In the early days when Christian churches were beginning to spring up all over the Roman Empire, fellowships were connected by two things; firstly the Gospel itself, and secondly, the personalities and friendships of the people used by God for evangelism and mission. Many of the letters of Paul contain fascinating references to individuals who were part of this work. We cannot know as much as we would like about these people, but by reading all the New Testament letters and Acts, it is possible to put together a good picture of some of them.

Why should Paul send greetings to such a large number of people in a church to which he had never been? Most churches of those days were small groups of people meeting in each other's homes, so the twenty six people mentioned here is a large number especially for a church not set up by a known evangelist! Did these individuals have a special place in the life of the church?

Some scholars think that the list of names was created in order to give prominence to certain people, and then added to the letter of Romans at a later date. It certainly looks as if the letter stops at the end of chapter 15 with the word 'Amen' (15:33). Another theory is that the letter to the Romans (chs.1-15) was forwarded to the churches at Ephesus with this list of greetings attached (ch.16), because the names referred to people at Ephesus where Paul had spent a considerable amount of time during his ministry (Acts 19,20). Then after this, the letter was to have been sent on to Rome with the last section about these individuals subsequently cut off!

People have speculated for centuries, but the explanation of this list is probably quite simple. You may remember that when we began to study Paul's letter to the Romans, we found that the letter was written against the backdrop of the expulsion of Jews from Rome in AD49 by Claudius; an order that would have lapsed on his death in AD54. Now if Paul's letter was written just after Claudius' death, then a considerable number of both Jews and Christians would have been in the process of returning to Rome at the time. These Christians would have therefore spent the previous six years in fellowship with other churches, perhaps at Corinth, Philippi, or Ephesus, where they had met Paul in the course of his missionary journeys. This passage, then, is his personal greeting to friends who were now returning to their homes in Rome! Some think that the idea is fanciful, but it certainly fits the historical facts, and it offers an intriguing picture of what was happening at that time.

There are a number of other interesting features of this passage. For example, the deaconess Phoebe came to Rome from the sea-port of Cenchraea (as described in Acts 18:18) which was near to Corinth. Paul was concerned that her role as an anointed deaconess would be accepted in Rome as well as Corinth (16:1), because he wanted the churches to accept each other's ministry. Secondly, Paul mentions 'Prisca and Aquila', who '*risked their lives*' for Paul and the Gospel (16:4); they are also mentioned in Acts 18:2-18, 1 Cor 16:19, 2 Tim 4:19. Paul met these two friends first in Corinth, and as a couple, they were clearly important leaders of the early church. Altogether, Paul's mention of Phoebe, Prisca and Aquila, indicates a rich diversity within the leadership of the early church.

Most of the other names in this passage can be connected either with scripture or with other documents of the early Christian church. Together, they make up an impressive list of men and women with whom Paul had worked in the establishing of Gentile churches in south-east Asia, and they all ended up in Rome. So were these the people Paul hoped would establish the Roman church as the foremost church of the Roman Empire?

## **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Phoebe, Prisca and Aquila
- Other dear friends
- The holy kiss

## Going Deeper

Some of the work in establishing who these people were can only ever be intelligent guesswork. However, it is fascinating to feel that as we study this text, we are making connections with the real people who did the work of proclaiming the Gospel which enabled the church to grow in the earliest of days. They were certainly the founding members of the church as we know it.

### ***Phoebe, Prisca and Aquila***

The position of Phoebe at the head of the list of names, and the extensive comments about her by Paul indicates that in all likelihood, Phoebe was the bearer of the letter to the Romans. She was clearly a woman of means, and as such would have been able to travel with protection and with servants. Paul mentions that she was a 'sponsor' or 'patron' (16:2) of the church around Cenchreae and Corinth, and also a 'deacon' (and clearly a woman, hence in our terms, a 'deaconess'). It is generally reckoned that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans whilst living at Cenchreae near Corinth and asked this senior figure in the life of the church to bear this important letter, so that it would be well received. People in Rome, the head of the Empire, responded well to citizens of influence! Nevertheless, Paul thought it necessary to address the church with a strong commendation of the woman to whom he had entrusted the letter.

It is worth noting that despite Paul's comments elsewhere about the separation of men from women in church (1 Cor 14:35), and his other brief comments about the place of women in God's order (1 Tim 2:13), Paul appears to have had no difficulty with women in practical leadership roles within the church. In this case, he used a woman's authority above that of any suitable man. For this reason, we should look carefully at the good arguments which indicate that Paul was not as 'anti-female' in his letters as he is often made out to be.

Another example of this is Paul's mention of Prisca and Aquila (16:3f.) This couple is mentioned in a number of places in Scripture, always with the woman's name, Prisca (sometimes 'Priscilla') before her husband's. Some suggest that Paul wrote in this way about them because Prisca became a Christian before her husband or that she was the more active of the two in Christian affairs; but all this is speculative. According to Acts 18, they were two Jews who lived in Cenchreae. They became Christians there and they moved to Ephesus with Paul (from where they sent greetings back to Corinth – see 1 Cor 16:19). Certainly, if they were now in Rome as Jewish Christians, they would be amongst Paul's staunchest supporters. It is also interesting that Paul speaks of a 'church in their house' in Rome (16:5). It appears that the church in Rome was getting too big for one household to support, and was branching out, with Prisca and Aquila being at the forefront of this expansion.

### ***Other dear friends***

There is not enough time to go through all the names in the rest of the list, but from halfway through verse 5, Paul begins to list rapidly but carefully, some of the men and women he knew to be at Rome who had been his 'fellow-workers', or those who had worked hard for the sake of the Gospel (Mary, Urbanus, Apelles, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis). Others mentioned were 'fellow countrymen' (Andronicus and Junia) or friends and relatives (Epaenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys, Herodion), some family groups (the family of Aristobulus, the family of Narcissus, Rufus and his mother, Nereus and his sister), and others (Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia and Olympas).

Amongst this list Paul remembers Epaenetus, who was 'the first convert in Asia'. We know nothing more about him, but assume that he was one of the first Gentile converts of Paul's work after he had split with Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41) and established a specifically Gentile mission for the church of God. In addition, there were some who had endured the hardship of prison with Paul (Andronicus and Junia); but more than that, Paul recognised these two as having the gift of 'apostleship' (16:8), sent out themselves on the task of establishing churches. We do not hear about these people in any other part of Scripture, but it is reasonable to assume that they had been commissioned to go to Rome to help establish the church growing there. It had probably started amongst the slaves and servants of the citizens who moved about the Empire and who unwittingly 'brought' Christianity to Rome through their households, and needed teaching and guidance.

Also in this list is the family of someone named 'Narcissus' (16:11). It is interesting that John Calvin together with other more ancient sources suggest that this is a reference to the family of Tiberius Claudius Narcissus,

a man who was a wealthy freedman in the time of Emperor Tiberius, and a man who exercised great influence in the reign of Claudius. He was executed soon after Nero came to power in AD54 because of his influence, and his goods and slaves would have been assumed into the Emperor's household under the general name 'Narcissiani' which is the name used here in Romans. If this was the case, then Paul was addressing the Christians amongst this 'family' grouping who were subject to the Emperor, but were probably under significant persecution. In a similar way, Paul mentions 'the family of Aristobulus' (16:10). Whilst it is very uncertain who this man was, it is suggested by some that he was a brother of Herod Agrippa 1 who lived in Rome as a private citizen. In order to obtain this privilege, it was likely that Aristobulus had to turn over his own private wealth to the Emperor, and as with Narcissus, his extended family, now within the Imperial service, would have been known as 'Aristobuliani'.

### **The Holy Kiss**

This phrase appears in the last verse of our passage (16:16) as part of Paul's final greetings to the church in Rome. It also appears in 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12, 1 Thess. 5:26, and 1 Peter 5:14. This is mentioned as a feature of the liturgical life of the early church, as recorded by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian writer Justin Martyr, and so it should not be taken lightly. In the early Christian acts of worship it was a form of what we today call 'the peace', and the 'kiss' was probably something like the formal 'cheek to cheek' greeting still generally used in many countries today.

Paul referred to this act of Christian fellowship to make it clear that his intentions were loving and peaceful, and whatever people thought of his letters, his intention was always to promote peace through an understanding the Gospel of Christ. It is sad that in my lifetime, I have come across many Christians who find it hard even to read such words in Scripture. The 'kiss of peace' is a powerful statement of love and unity in Christ Jesus, and the whole world would be blessed if God's people could greet each other with such affection and compassion

## Application

The list of names which we have read today is extensive, and covers far more intrigue than I have mentioned. It gives us a glimpse into the lives of people who were at the very forefront of the growth of the Gospel under the influence of the Holy Spirit. These were people who established the church so successfully that the Spirit of Jesus remained with them through centuries of oppression and even martyrdom before Christianity emerged in the fourth century as the faith that changed the world.

Would that all God's people today had the faith and zeal of these saints. There are many people throughout the world today who are doing great things for Christ, but too much of the church is pre-occupied with things other than the Gospel, and the message of Paul is surely that it is the Gospel alone which counts in the final reckoning. In addition, too many people are trying to make a name for themselves in ministry, as if there is a ladder of influence by which leaders are judged and booked for events and meetings, and by which they obtain appointments. This is far removed from the organic and Spirit led church of the New Testament we have glimpsed today. Perhaps all of us should read these supposedly 'boring' bits of the letters of Paul with more care, perhaps God could then teach us what we really need to learn from the life of the early church!

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## **Discipleship**

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Why do you think that Paul appears to accept women as leaders in the church at this point in Scripture, and yet this remains a difficult issue for some?
2. Where does the church of God grow most today? Does this growth have anything in common with what the New Testament tells us about the early church?
3. What would be the advantages of re-organising churches in people's homes today?

### **Personal comments by author**

*The mention of women leaders is fascinating, but if this is an issue for you, then I invite you to read some of my comments on the various New Testament passages that speak about this issue. After much careful study, I am convinced that many of the arguments that have been used to withhold the leadership of church ministry to women are unfortunately based on misunderstandings of Biblical text. I know this is controversial, but please read why I say this, for example, about what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 and 11, for example.*

## ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Read through this passage of Romans again, and consider whether the Lord is leading you to pay attention to any particular character or group of people. In what ways do they inspire you, and what do they say to you about your own ministry and service as a Christian?*
  - *Imagine yourself back in the early days of the church, as you are able, and ask the Lord to shed new light on your own life and work in the church today.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Great and mighty Lord. You are the most amazing, the most thrilling, the most enthralling, the most inspiring and the most empowering person we know. Move our stubborn hearts to be free agents of the Gospel and of the grace of the Living God, so that we are liberated in our service of You, to Your glory; AMEN

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