

## **THE FORMER DAY SAINTS** **Romans 16:1-16**

**by Dr. Jack L. Arnold**

All sports fans have heard of the various “Halls of Fame.” Fans know about Jim Thorp, Ty Cobb, Lou Gerrig, Babe Ruth, and others of equal fame. These men became famous because they excelled in their sport and became great in the eyes of many because of it. But those who aren’t sports fans really don’t care.

In Romans 16:1-16, we have another Hall of Fame. The names mentioned here are those of people who meant little to the world, but a great deal to God. Who ever heard of Phebe, Urbane or Rufus? God knows of them and their faithful labors and decided to record their names in Holy Scripture that will last for time and for eternity.

Man’s glory is so fleeting; when a man dies all he can leave behind is his reputation. These dear saints have a greater reputation than any athlete in the world and many, many people have read their names with admiration.

The Coliseum and the Parthenon are world-known edifices built by two great emperors, but who knows the emperors names? If I tell you that one of them was built by Hadrian and the other by Vespasian, probably only a few history teachers would know which built which. Yet, every one of the dear saints mentioned in Romans has been recorded because of his or her faithful labors in the gospel and love for the saints. What an epitaph, “Died in the Service of the Lord”!

This section of Scripture also tells us something about the heartbeat of the Apostle Paul for the ministry. Paul loved people and never forgot any favor done for him. He never used people for his own selfish purposes but genuinely loved them. He remembered their participation with him in the gospel and that his own ministry was bound up with theirs.

Paul never looked upon his ministry as a profession. He was uninterested in the spiritual clichés of his day and indifferent to ecclesiastical pomp or position. To him, things were not important — people were!

## **THE COMMENDATION — Romans 16:1, 2**

“I commend unto you Phebe our sister” — The first person mentioned was not a man. Phebe was a businesswoman who dealt with legal matters, for the Greek text uses many legal terms in these verses. She was traveling to Rome on business and Paul seized the opportunity to send his letter by her. (There were no post offices and individuals carried mail in those days.) Phebe was probably not married and may have been wealthy because she could travel.

Never was there a more priceless document carried through the mail. The Reformation was in Phebe’s baggage, but she did not know it. She had no idea about the multitudes who would be blessed by those parchments.

“A servant of the church which is at Cenchræa:” — Phebe was connected with a local church and not just doing her own thing as an independent Christian. The word “servant” should be translated “deaconess”. She was a deaconess at the local church in Cenchræa. This may or may not have been an office in the local church yet. If it were, it likely carried no ruling capacity, as deacons and deaconesses in the Bible are godly servants who took up the necessary physical tasks of the ministry so the elders and apostles could get on with the work of spreading the gospel.

“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” — Phebe had the gift of helps and had assisted many Christians, including the Apostle Paul. He told the Christians in Rome to help her as much as possible in her legal business. Christians should always be ready to offer a helping hand to other saints because all Christians are one in Christ.

## **THE GREETINGS — Romans 16:3-16**

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus” — Paul had met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth because they had a common trade — tent-making. He led them to Christ and instructed them in the Word. Later these two faithful servants helped Apollos understand Christ and Apollos became a great preacher.

Notice that Paul put Priscilla’s name first. These two are mentioned six times in the New Testament and in four of them Priscilla’s name is first. She may have been of a higher social class, highly educated, or spiritually mature. My personal opinion is this may have been because she was a sharp, outstanding, dynamic woman and when people thought of this couple they thought of her first. However, in the home Aquila was the head of the house. “And found a certain

Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla;“ (Acts 18:2).

“Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles” — This couple had such a great love for Paul and were so involved in the ministry that apparently their lives had been endangered at times. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

“Likewise greet the church that is in their house” — Wherever Priscilla and Aquila went they started a local church by opening up their home.

The churches, or “called-out ones”, never had buildings until the third century. After that the custom grew like wildfire. It was when believers no longer had their church meetings in their homes that organized religion began to take over. Leaving the informal setting of the home and meeting in another building changes the whole atmosphere and it becomes stuffy and formal.

Meeting in homes is what helped spread the gospel throughout the whole of the early world. Christians were not interested in trying to get people to come out to church but instead invited them into their homes. There they talked to them about Christ, and there they won their friends and neighbors to the Lord. There were probably half a dozen churches meeting in the city of Rome. No doubt they all got together on occasion in meetings such as we have today, but the rest of the time the church was carried on in the home.

“Salute my well-beloved Epaenetus, who is the first fruits of Achaia unto Christ” — Epaenetus was the first convert to Christ in Asia, and Paul’s heart was tied very closely to his spiritual child. Of course, this man was really the Lord’s convert and Paul was simply the instrument used by God.

There is a story about a man who came to D. L. Moody under heavy influence of alcohol and said, “Why, Mr. Moody, you know me. You converted me!”

Moody replied, “You look like an example of what I could do in converting someone. It is evident that Christ has had nothing to do with it.” There is a difference between being a convert of Christ and a convert of some evangelist. When converted by Christ, one’s life is forever changed.

“Greet Mary, who bestowed much labor on us.” — Mary may have been “just plain Mary” but she exhaustingly labored in the Lord’s work and she, no doubt, will have much reward in heaven.

There are at least eight women named in this list of twenty-seven. Women were essential to the ministry and labored for the Lord. Women can and must be

active in the ministry. The Bible only states that women should not rule over or teach men in the local church (I Tim. 2:9-15). They are not to be preachers, elders or deacons and are not to be put into positions of authority. Their labor in the church is not just getting chicken dinners or making flower arrangements or planning parties; they are to have spiritual activity — praying, witnessing, Bible studies, missionary groups, etc.

Consider that for every one man who offers himself to the mission field, approximately twenty women have offered themselves! What a remarkable place women have in the spreading of the Christian faith.

“Salute Andronicus and Junia (Junias) my kinsmen, and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me” — Andronicus and Junias were two relatives of Paul’s who came to Christ before he did. The prayers and testimonies of these two men may have had a big impact on Paul for conversion and for this Paul was thankful. Before he became a believer Paul may have hated these two for their love for Christ.

“Greet Amplias my beloved in the Lord. Salute Urbane, our helper in Christ, and Stachys my beloved” — Paul, the theologian, the student, the disciplinarian, had a heart. He spoke of his genuine and sincere love for his friends.

“Salute Apelles approved in Christ” — Apelles must have suffered terribly but came through the testing, proving his faithfulness to Jesus Christ. How many have suffered for Christ who are not recorded in Scripture! God will reward each one for his or her faithfulness.

“Salute them which are of Aristobulus’ household” — Some scholars think that Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great. The gospel reached both the important folk and the unimportant, but all were important in God’s plan. Paul made little distinction between slaves and aristocrats, at least when they were believers.

“Salute Herodion my kinsman” — Herodion may have been an unsaved relative of Paul’s. Even some of Paul’s loved ones may have been outside Christ, but I am sure he never gave up praying or witnessing to them, for He did not know the hour that God might choose to save them.

“Greet them that be of the household of Narcissus, which are in the Lord’ — Here was a whole family that was committed to Jesus Christ. A family committed to Christ is a powerful testimony to the world.

“Salute Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labour in the Lord” — The translation of their names indicates that these were likely twin sisters, “luxurious and “voluptuous.” They must have been beautiful women who could have had

husbands, fine homes and children, but instead they gave themselves to the Lord's work.

I recall the testimony of Kathleen Morris who was on her way to Mexico to get her jungle training in preparation for missionary work with *Wycliffe Bible Translators*. She was young, attractive, intelligent, sweet and obviously Spirit-filled. Yet she left all to follow Christ. She could have had a man but she chose Christ. Her attitude was that if the Lord brought her a man, fine, but she had dedicated herself to his work. How many young ladies there are today who put the Lord second and getting married first! This will only lead to frustration!

“Salute the beloved Persis, which laboured much in the Lord” — This was another faithful woman in the service of the Lord (cf. Luke 8:2, 3).

“Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord” — Most scholars feel that Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21), who carried the cross for Jesus on the way to Golgotha to be crucified. That was a day of transformation for Simon because he met the Saviour and his life was changed. Simon never forgot that day and raised a family that honored the Lord Jesus Christ.

“And his mother and mine” — Rufus' mother was also a godly woman who cared for the Apostle Paul as one of her own children. It seems she had the gift of hospitality and used it faithfully for the Lord Jesus.

“Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them” — This sounds like a list of Greek businessmen or perhaps these people were from another house church in Rome. At any rate, they were faithful to Christ.

“Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nerius, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them” — This may have been another small church in a home and could have been headed by Philologus. I wonder if this was his true name; perhaps it was a nickname because it means “lover of the word.” Here is a man who loved the Word of God.

“Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you” —The holy kiss was a cultural thing and it was a way of greeting people. In the U.S. we shake hands and hug. In Latin America people give an “embrace.” Men also kissed men and women kissed women on a turned cheek.

## **CONCLUSION**

Paul saluted his friends in Rome as Christians. If he were alive today, could he greet you as a true Christian, a saint, one chosen in the Lord? If your answer is yes, then do as those in Rome did — labor for the Lord.

If your answer is no, then do you need to be converted, saved, born again? If you are to be a Christian, you must trust and commit yourself to Jesus Christ as your King and Savior.

What must you do to become a Christian? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved!