

## Romans

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Romans 16:1-5



Romans 16:1-5a

Vss. 1-2

- The Romans brought a great deal of what we would call “modern things” to the ancient world, but a working post office was not one of them. If you wanted to send a letter you had to have someone you could entrust it to deliver it for you. For Paul’s letter to the Roman church the mail carrier was a woman named Phoebe.
- Paul tells us that Phoebe was “a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea”, Cenchrea being the port of Corinth. Those who advocate for women as deacons point to this, as the word translated here as “servant” is “diakonon” from the same root word we translate as “deacon”. Did she hold a high office at the church in Corinth or do our modern Bibles have it right, that she was highly regarded due to her magnificent service to the Lord and His church? Add that to your list of things to ask when you get to Heaven.
- Whether by the holding of a high office or by her status as a great servant, Paul asks that the church in Rome welcome Phoebe in a worthy manner and that they help her in whatever matter she may need help. “Show her great hospitality”, Paul is saying, “for she has earned it. She has shown hospitality and given help to so many and has been a great help to me too!” It is a sin on the church when we show great hospitality to celebrities and VIP’s, but do little for visiting missionaries and other great servants of God.

Vss. 3-5a

- Paul is often wrongly accused of being anti-woman, yet here at the beginning of Ch. 16 his first reference is to the woman he entrusted this magnificent letter to and next he offers greetings to a couple, not just the husband, and he mentions the wife first!
- Prisca (which is short for Priscilla) and Aquila appear first in Acts 18:2. From that passage we learn that they had previously lived in Rome. It is believed that the conflict between the early church and the Jewish leaders in Rome forced Emperor Claudius to issue an edict in A.D. 52 banishing the Jews from Rome, seeing the conflict as only a Jewish quarrel. Expelled from Rome, Prisca and Aquila settled in Corinth. They were tentmakers (Acts 18:3) which was Paul's own trade and he found a home with them. When he left Corinth and went to Ephesus, Prisca and Aquila went with him and settled there (Acts 18:18). But after Claudius died in 54 A.D., the law was no longer in effect. When a Roman emperor made a decree, the law was enforced only as long as he lived. The next time we hear of the couple they are still in Ephesus. Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus and in it he sends greetings from Prisca and Aquila and from the church that is in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19). During that time a brilliant Jewish preacher named Apollos came to Ephesus. He was eloquent, but his understanding was still lacking, so the couple “took him aside and explained The Way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26).

- As to how the couple “risked their own necks” we cannot know with certainty, but we do know from Acts 18 that Paul’s escape from the Jews in Corinth was very perilous. Now it seems here that after the death of Claudius, Prisca and Aquila had returned home to Rome. The last time they are mentioned in the New Testament is in 2 Timothy 4:19 where Paul is sending final greetings. Here the couple is back in Ephesus and asks Timothy to tell them hello.
- So often we point to Peter, Paul, and John, but in truth the first century church was built as much by regular people like Prisca and Aquila and the nameless people who founded the churches in Antioch and Rome. Paul gives thanks for the couple, but not only him. Indeed all the churches of the Gentiles should give thanks to God for the work these two have done in building the Kingdom.
- How the Kingdom is built is sort of like the bumper sticker that says “Think globally. Act locally.”. Prisca and Aquila are recorded as moving back and forth all across the NE Mediterranean, but yet host a congregation in their home in Rome. They saw the big picture of the Kingdom, but saw the value of investing in people on a small group, even one to one basis.
- Finally, William Barclay has some extended thoughts on the couple. Says Barclay, “So much is certain about Prisca and Aquila, but it may be that there is even greater romance in their story. To this day in Rome there is a Church of St Prisca on the Aventine. There is also the Cemetery of Priscilla. This cemetery is the burying place of the ancient Roman Acilian family. In it lies buried Acilius Glabrio. He was consul of Rome in A.D. 91 which was the highest office Rome could offer him and it seems extremely likely that he died a martyr's death as a Christian. He must have been one of the first of the great Romans to become a Christian and to suffer for his faith. Now when slaves received their freedom in the Roman Empire they were enrolled in one of the great families and took one of the family names as theirs. One of the commonest female names in the Acilian family was Prisca; and Acilius is sometimes written Aquilius, which is very close to Aquila. Here we are faced with two fascinating possibilities. Perhaps Prisca and Aquila received their freedom from some member of the Acilian family, in which it may be that once they were slaves. Can it be that these two people sowed the seeds of Christianity into that family so that one day a member of it--Acilius Glabrio, no less a person than a Roman consul--became a Christian? There is an even more romantic possibility. It is an odd thing that in four out of the six mentions of this pair in the New Testament Prisca is named before her husband, although normally the husband's name would come first, as we say "Mr. and Mrs." There is just the possibility that this is because Prisca was not a freedwoman at all but a great lady, a member by birth of the Acilian family. It may be that at some meeting of the Christians this great Roman lady met Aquila, the humble Jewish tentmaker, that the two fell in love, that Christianity destroyed the barriers of race and rank and wealth and birth, and that these two, the Roman aristocrat and the Jewish artisan, were joined for- ever in Christian love and Christian service. Of these speculations we can never be sure, but we can be sure that there were many in Corinth, in Ephesus and in Rome, who owed their souls to Prisca and Aquila and to that home of theirs which was also a church”.