

Paul always had a way with words and women. Well, with words anyway. Here is the name he gave me. Factory. He called me a factory!

Actually, that's only part of it. He actually called me a "blessing factory." I blushed for an hour when he called me that. There could not be a more complimentary name.<sup>1</sup>

My name is Phoebe, and I'm from the small port city of Cenchreae. This is the port on the eastern side of the Isthmus of Corinth. My little town was tied to the city of Corinth, just as our church was tied closely to the church at Corinth. I was good friends with Priscilla and Aquila, and the other Christians there.

Paul came through my town on his Second Missionary Journey, and cut his hair because of a vow he had taken.<sup>2</sup> The church he established there flourished.

Paul wrote that I was a *diakonon* and *prostatis*.<sup>3</sup> Translated into English, those words mean deacon, and helper or benefactor. Benefactor can be loosely translated as "blessing factory."

Although the Bible isn't specific, many scholars believe that Paul entrusted me to carry the letter of *Romans* to the church at Rome.<sup>4</sup> He certainly instructed them to treat me well.

The second half of *Romans* begins with a description of God's sovereignty. That's a term that isn't really familiar to you guys, but it derives from the ways that ancient kings and queens behaved. Just because they were kings and queens, they had complete ability to enforce their desires and commands. They had supreme authority and power. Fair? Not to modern minds probably.

God made the universe and everything in it. He is the supreme Creator. He is sovereign over all. Paul maintains that God has the right to be how he wants to be. As Paul writes, God will have mercy on whoever he wants, and he hardens whoever he wants.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 16:1-2. Mitch Wilburn points out that the way the word "benefactor" is used indicates a blessing factory.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 18:18

<sup>3</sup> Romans 16:1-2

<sup>4</sup> Based on the wording off Romans 16:1-2

<sup>5</sup> Romans 9:18

Knowing there are many Jewish Christians in Rome, Paul returns to the subject of the Jews. He has such a tender heart for his people that he never can quit thinking about them and desiring that they come to salvation. He reminds them that everyone, everyone, who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.<sup>6</sup> But the flip side of that encouragement is the self-condemnation of those who choose not to call on the name of the Lord.

Paul wants so badly to convince his people that the Law of Moses cannot save them, only Jesus can. While he is giving that message to the Jews, he wants the non-Jews to hear the same message.

As he often does, Paul returns to the subject of faith. In one of his most famous lines, Paul says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Christians throughout the centuries will take these as marching orders to make sure everyone in the world hears the Gospel.

To make sure that the Romans didn’t think that faith means some kind of shallow, mental assent, Paul launches into my own favorite chapter of any of his writings, *Romans* Chapter 12. In this chapter, Paul is very clear and detailed about what it means to live a life of humble service, a life of sacrifice, a life showing love in action.

Every verse in this chapter is a nugget of priceless treasure. “In view of God’s mercy, I urge you to offer you bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true worship.” How amazing. How different than the goals of other religions or personal passions. This chapter is a barrage of holiness, from that first verse in the chapter to the last, “Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Paul moves toward the end of his letter with three important messages. The first is especially important to those living in a dangerous, conniving world – be submissive to the governing authorities. He says that people in authority are placed there by God. So, pay taxes to whom you owe taxes, okay, and give respect to whom you owe respect. This attitude will keep the Romans out of a lot of trouble, and remains good advice for the modern world.

The second message is the importance of the supreme power of love. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This simple command is different from the thoughts of ancient peoples who normally phrased it, “don’t harm your neighbors.” To Paul, it is not enough to stay neutral with the people around you. It is important to contribute positively to their lives. It’s just so great.

The third message has to do with keeping perspective in a troubled world. Jesus is coming back in the near future. With that end in mind, fix your priorities. As Paul tells the Corinthians, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God to give an account of what we have done.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 10:13

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:10

The closing of Paul's instructions is like the original WWJD bracelet, remember those? What Would Jesus Do – be like Jesus, live in accord with how Jesus would live. And how did Jesus live? Like a servant.

Paul reminds us the importance of being a positive influence on others. Even if you don't think something is wrong for you to do, you shouldn't do it if it causes someone else to sin. If this seems like a little thing to you, Paul is probably remembering what Jesus said, "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone that causes them to stumble. It would be better for them to drown with a millstone around their neck."<sup>8</sup> I mean think about it.

Scattered throughout the book of Romans are nuggets that would have been precious to us, but you probably skim right over. Example.

The lives of those living in Rome were hopeless. Millions of slaves were destined for lives of danger or forced service. Their biggest hope was to be freed from slavery, in which case they might be facing a life of starvation. Children and most wives were under the domination of the oldest male in the family. Their biggest hope was to exist with few problems. Free males were probably either soldiers or merchants, and were likely beholden to a patron.

Virtually everyone was destined for a short, brutal life. The Roman and Greek gods were, at best, indifferent to the lives of people. Life was hopeless.

How amazing it is to have Paul tell the Christians, "May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Hope. Hope. Hope.

Paul moves toward the end of his letter by reminding the Romans how he is a minister to all non-Jews, and how he makes it his ambition to preach the Gospel. Paul tells the Romans that he could not come to them at the present time because he has to take the contribution to the Jerusalem church, but says he will come to them when he is on his way to Spain. Spain!... Well, Paul did come to Rome a few years later, but he was to come as a prisoner.

Many people breeze through the last chapter of *Romans* because it is Paul's greetings to people in the church at Rome, but there are many nuggets to gather from that chapter. I've already mentioned myself as being mentioned there as a blessing factory, but here are some of the other things you can find. Paul knows a lot of people in the Roman church, so the church is not small. Priscilla and Aquila are there, and the church meets in their house. Epenetus was Paul's first convert in the province of Asia. Rufus, whose father carried the cross of Jesus, is in Rome. On and on and on. The world-wide Christian movement is thriving, and you can see it in the church in Rome.

All of Paul's hard work is paying off. Christianity is on the verge of a huge growth spurt. Maybe I better enlarge my blessing factory!

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 17:1-2