

Who was Phoebe in the Bible?

Phoebe is mentioned only once in the Bible, in Romans 16:1-2, where Paul writes, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreæ. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.”

Letters of introduction to strangers were common in Bible times. The mention of Phoebe in this way means that she was probably either the bearer of the letter or accompanied those who took it to Rome. The name Phoebe means “bright and radiant,” and from Paul’s comments about her it seems that those words characterized her personality and her Christian life.

Paul’s reference to Phoebe as “our sister” indicates that she was a member of the Christian church and his sister in Christ. Her designation as “deacon” (or “servant” in the ESV) could mean that she held an official position within the church as a deaconess or simply that she was someone who was known to serve the church faithfully (the Greek *diakonos* means “servant”). Whether or not Phoebe had the title “deaconess,” it is clear that she was a trusted member of the body of believers in Cenchreæ, a seaport about eight or nine miles from Corinth.

Paul commends Phoebe to the Roman believers and asks that they receive her in a gracious and friendly manner into their homes and hearts with love and affection. She was to be welcome in their church fellowship. Asking for her to be received “in a way worthy of [God’s] people” means that the church should treat Phoebe with the special respect and Christian love that should characterize all believers’ interactions with one another. Even those believers we have never met before should be welcomed with love, for we share

a bond in the Lord (John 13:35). Phoebe was to be aided in whatever business she would be conducting in Rome.

Paul adds that Phoebe was a helper of many. Phoebe may have shown great kindness in various ways to other Christians, perhaps receiving them into her house in the manner of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-40). Perhaps she ministered to the sick, helped the poor, and aided widows and orphans in the manner of Tabitha (Acts 9:36). Maybe she ministered to strangers and travelers in the manner of John's "elect lady" (2 John 1). Paul himself was a beneficiary of Phoebe's kind servant's heart. Whatever Phoebe's precise role in the church, the inclusion of her name in Romans 16 is a testimony to her character and ensures that she will never be forgotten.