

## Romans 16

The last chapter of Romans is a fitting conclusion to its material and has some interesting things to say. It contains a number of verses that tend to be overlooked and yet speak volumes to our lives. We need to hear what this chapter has to tell us!

However, before we begin we need to take a step back and understand what Romans actually is. We tend to call it the “book of Romans” but in a way that's misleading. This is actually a letter that Paul wrote and sent to the church that was in Rome. This is a *letter*, and this letter is actually personal. Paul had specific people in mind when he wrote it. This isn't a generic treatise on theology which was sent to a bunch of strangers! There are personal elements here. In a very real way, what we've been doing as we read through the book of Romans is reading someone else's mail. (It's true that Paul intended for this letter to be read by others, but it doesn't change the fact he wrote it to specific people.)

Romans 16 is where Paul starts to get personal. Since he knew it was time to close the letter and put it in the mail, he wrapped things up by taking some time to greet people. We tend to do the same thing. When we're on the phone talking to someone and the conversation is nearly over, we'll say things like “Oh by the way, say hello to Bob for me.” We want to greet people and tell them we appreciate them. That's what Paul is doing in Romans 16.

Paul does say a few other things as well. For example, in verses 17 and 18 he warned the church against false teachers – and preachers could give a whole sermon on that topic. The Bible has much to say about false teachers! But since I don't think you need me to tell you that false teachers are bad and we should avoid them, we're not going to discuss that today. The primary focus of Romans 16 is on personal greetings, so that's what we're going to focus on.

The tricky part about studying chapters like this is that

they don't get very much attention. This is the sort of chapter that people tend to skip over. After all, take a look at some of these verses:

**Romans 16:14-15:** "Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them. Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them."

What we have is a list of names. However, many of us have never heard of any of these people! Do you know what people tend to do when they come across lists of names in the Bible? They ignore them. After all, what is there to gain from verses like this? The book of Romans is rich in theology, but these are just names. What good is that?

Well, it's important to realize that the whole Bible is the Word of God. Every single verse in the Scriptures is there for a reason, and all of its verses matter! The Bible is very clear about this:

**2 Timothy 3:16-17:** "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Which portions of Scripture were given by God? *All of it.* Which portions are profitable to us? *All of them.* There are no passages that we're allowed to skip or ignore. Every single verse has a point and a purpose!

That being said, if you were lying in the hospital and were gravely ill, and you needed a word of hope and encouragement, I don't think you'd ask someone to read you Romans 16. After all, Romans 16 is just a list of names. How could that possibly

encourage anyone? How could that lift up a person in their darkest hour? For that matter, how could this chapter make a difference to anyone?

Believe it or not, Romans 16 actually *is* an incredibly uplifting chapter! It has a message of tremendous hope and encouragement, if only we have the eyes to see it. That's the reason I wrote this lesson – so I could show you what this chapter is *really* all about. This material isn't boring or dull. Instead it's full of hope! You just need to know how to look at it.

One interesting thing you may not realize is that although *you* might not have heard of these people, that doesn't mean their identities have been lost in time. This letter is only about 2000 years old. Although that is pretty old, it's not so old that all knowledge of that period has been lost. History has a lot to say about the Roman era – and Paul's letter to the Romans isn't the only letter which has survived from the early church. We have mail from other people as well, and that mail tells us some very interesting things.

Let's take a look at those names again:

**Romans 16:14-15:** “Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them. Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them.”

The first person Paul salutes is Asyncritus. It turns out that history knows the identity of that person. He wasn't a random nobody; instead he was the bishop of Hyrcania. On top of that he was one of the 70 disciples who Jesus hand-picked and sent throughout Israel to prepare for His arrival (Luke 10:1). This person wasn't one of the 12 but he was one of the 70. That means he knew Jesus personally he worked with Him during His earthly ministry! Asyncritus was a significant leader in the early church.

The next person who's mentioned, Phlegon, was also one of the 70. Hermas was the bishop of Philippi. Oh – and the last

person mentioned in verse 15, Olympas? Not only was he one of the 70, but he was a martyr as well.

If you do a little digging you can actually find out who many of these people were. To us they might appear to be random names, but in reality they were key people in the early church. Some of these people knew Christ before His crucifixion and resurrection, and served Him during His earthly ministry. Others gave their lives for the faith. These are remarkable people with remarkable stories! Some of them wrote letters and other material which survives to this day. As I said earlier, Paul's letter to the Romans isn't the only letter from the early church that's still around! There's other mail you can read too, if you're interested in learning more about the people who God used to lay the foundation of His church.

Even if all we had to go on was the material in Romans 16, there's still enough here to indicate that this is a remarkable group of people. Look at what Paul said about Phebe:

**Romans 16:1-2:** "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: 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."

Paul highly praised Phebe – a woman. At this point in history women were rarely held in high esteem, and yet the first person Paul mentioned was a woman! On top of that, look at what he praises her for: Phebe had gone out of her way to help Paul and the other apostles.

This may seem like a small act of kindness to us but it's far more significant than that. Remember, the apostles were considered to be criminals. In fact, the only one of Christ's disciples who wasn't executed for preaching the gospel was John, and he was sent into exile at Patmos. As far as the authorities

were concerned Phebe was harboring dangerous fugitives, and that could have easily gotten her put in prison or executed. She had every reason to *not* help the apostles, but that didn't deter this remarkable woman! She faithfully served the Lord by trying to meet the needs of the apostles. That's why Paul praised her.

Would you have done what she did if you were in her position? Would you have harbored the apostles if you knew it might get both you and your family killed? Would you have taken that risk for the gospel? Phebe did. She helped others at great personal risk – and so Paul urged the church at Rome to do whatever they could to help her.

Phebe isn't the only person who risked a great deal to help the apostles:

**Romans 16:3-5:** “Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: 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. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. . .”

Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for the sake of Paul! There's a fascinating story behind these two people. As it turns out, this isn't the only time this couple is mentioned in the Scriptures. The book of Acts tells us this:

**Acts 18:2:** “And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.”

This couple originally lived in Rome but were driven out of the city by Claudius Caesar. They then went to Corinth where they met the apostle Paul. The apostle lived with them for a while because they were fellow tentmakers. The book of Acts tells us

that the couple followed Paul to Ephesus where they met a man named Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos the gospel, and Apollos became a mighty preacher of the Word.

There's no telling how many times this couple risked their lives to help Paul. They lived together for a time and they traveled with him on some of his missionary journeys. I'm sure they did a lot for Paul that isn't recorded. What we do know is that they helped Paul when he needed them, and they were willing to lay down their lives to save him. They were active in the early church and were instrumental in the conversion of one of its most prominent leaders, Apollos. If all that wasn't enough, they also had a church in their home. They were remarkable people!

But that's not all. There are more people Paul wanted to greet:

**Romans 16:5b:** “Salute my well-beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ.”

Who was Epaphroditus? He wasn't just the first convert in Achaia. He was also one of the 70 and became the bishop of Carthage.

By this point it should be clear that the people in this chapter aren't “nobodys”. Hebrews 11 contains the “heroes of faith” – the noteworthy people God worked through in mighty ways. Romans 16 has a list of prominent people in the early church who lived amazing lives and sacrificed a great deal for the gospel.

This chapter contains leaders. It contains people who knew the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry. It contains bishops. It contains martyrs. It also contains prisoners:

**Romans 16:7:** “Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”

Being a Christian was a dangerous thing at this time in history (and in many parts of the world it remains dangerous today). These two people had been Christians for a long time – in fact, they knew the Lord longer than Paul had. Apparently they had done remarkable work because not only were the apostles familiar with them, but they had also been imprisoned for their labors in the gospel.

History records that these people weren't apostles themselves, but messengers. They had the dangerous job of going from city to city and relaying messages from one church to another. In those days if you wanted a copy of Romans you couldn't go down to the local bookstore and buy one. Someone had to copy it by hand, and then someone else had to make the long and perilous journey to bring it to you. People had to risk their lives to bring the words of God to the churches, and those people were held in high esteem! It was dangerous work – but it was work that Andronicus and Junia willingly did, and it enriched the lives of many.

The list goes on:

**Romans 16:8-9:** “Greet Amplias my beloved in the Lord. Salute Urbane, our helper in Christ, and Stachys my beloved.”

Who was Amplias? He was the bishop of Odysus. Urbane was the bishop of Macedonia and is also thought to be one of the 70. Stachys was the bishop of Byzantium and was also one of the 70. Note that Paul was very close to these people! They were dear friends of his.

This isn't a list of random strangers. Instead these are key people in the early church! These people risked everything for the sake of the gospel, and some of them sacrificed their lives. They are heroes of the faith and their stories are still with us today.

There's something else I'd like to point out. In verse 9 Paul calls Urbane “our helper in Christ”. I don't know about you but I'd

be *thrilled* if one of the apostles called me a “helper in Christ”! Wouldn't you? How amazing would it be if one of the leaders of the early church took the time to call you out *by name* and thank you for your service to the Lord?

Imagine how uplifting that would be. It's rare to be thanked for the work that we do, but to be thanked by someone like Paul would be an incredible experience. If that thanks was then recorded in the *Bible itself* then that would really be life-changing. I think if I had the choice between receiving a Nobel prize and having one of the apostles thank me in the Word of God, I'd go for the second option.

Consider this: that is *precisely* what God did for these people! God took the time thank these amazing and devout people for the service they did for His kingdom. On top of that, He did it in the Word of God itself and thus gave an everlasting testimony to their faithfulness and devotion. You see, the Word of God will abide forever:

**Matthew 24:35:** “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

The Word of God is *everlasting*. Nations may fall and cities may collapse into ruin, but the Scriptures will endure forever! When the Day of Judgment is over and the Lord has put a final end to sin and death, the Word of God will still endure. It will be there for all the ages of time – which means that God's praise of these people will also last forever.

Paul took the time to thank these men and women for what they did. But what about us – do we thank those who are around us? There are so many people who have done so much for the Lord. Have we ever thanked them for it? Do we show our gratitude? The Bible itself takes the time to thank people and recognize their service. Shouldn't we do the same?

While it *is* nice to have the praise of men, it's much better to have the praise of God. There are many times when we serve the Lord, make sacrifices, and do the right thing, but it seems that

our actions go unnoticed. No one thanks us for it or even acknowledges what we did. We work hard in the service of God and aren't recognized. It seems like no one cares, and that can make it hard to keep going. We know that we shouldn't do our good works in the sight of others and we shouldn't be working for praise, but encouragement really *does* make a difference. It can be hard to keep going when we're not appreciated.

Wouldn't it be nice if our names were listed in Romans 16? Wouldn't be amazing if we made that list of remarkable people? How happy would you be to see *your* name there, recorded forever in recognition of the things you had done for God? We know that's never going to happen – but it turns out that the works Christians do for the Lord is recorded in *another* list.

One of the most famous books mentioned in the Bible is the Book of Life. All those whose names are written in that Book will live forever with the Lord. They won't be cast into Hell and suffer the wrath of God. Instead they'll inherit eternal life and everlasting joy! That's one list all Christians are on, and that's a *very* important list to make. You want your name to be on that list!

But what some Christians don't realize is that there's *another* Heavenly book. Malachi 3 tells us that the people of God had a complaint. They were faithfully serving the Lord and doing what was right in the midst of an evil time and a wicked people, and yet their service was being ignored. The wicked were prosperous and happy while the righteous were suffering and oppressed, and it seemed unfair. Was God even aware of their righteous acts? Did He care about their sacrifice and service?

In response to their complaints the Lord did something. He created the Book of Remembrance:

**Malachi 3:16:** “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his

name.”

What was God remembering? Not the *names* of the righteous, because those are recorded in the Book of Life. No, this is a different book and has a different purpose. The reason the righteous were complaining was because they thought their deeds were being forgotten. So God commissioned a book *to record them!*

Romans 16 contains a list of prominent members of the early church. That list is a small subset of a much greater list that's recorded in Heaven. You may not have made Romans 16, but if you're a Christian and have served the Lord then your deeds are recorded in the Book of Remembrance as an everlasting testimony to your service to God! The Lord is never going to forget what you've done for Him. Your righteous acts and sacrifices have been recorded, and they will be there for all of eternity as a testimony to what you've done. Your service to God will *not* be forgotten.

Interestingly, it appears that the Lord is also recording something else about your life. The book of Psalms makes a passing mention of another book that God is keeping:

**Psalm 56:8:** “Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?”

We know that there's the Book of Life, which records the names of the saints of God. There's also the Book of Remembrance, which records the righteous acts of the saints. This verse hints that there may also be a Book of Tears, which records the trials, pains, and sufferings of the saints.

All of this means is that *God hasn't forgotten about you!* You may think that you've been overlooked and no one cares about you. It may seem that your deeds are unappreciated and your sacrifices have gone unnoticed, and all of your work is in vain. But that's an illusion. Your sacrifices, your good deeds, and

even your tears are being recorded and will *never* be forgotten! They will remain as a testimony to your life for the rest of time.

These books will be opened on the final Day of Judgment. On that day the Lord will be seated on His Great White Throne and will perform the final judgment of mankind. During that judgment we're told that this event will take place:

**Revelation 20:12:** “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.”

One thing that some people miss is that although the Book of Life is mentioned, there are other books mentioned as well – books that are *not* the Book of Life. This verse tells us that those other books record *your works* – the things you did in life.

The Book of Life is the one that will be used to determine whether you inherit eternal life or eternal damnation. The works that you've done will *not* play any role in that! You're not saved by your works; instead you're saved solely by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But your works *are* recorded. For the wicked that's a very bad thing because God is going to condemn them for every sin they've ever committed, and will punish them for every evil deed they've ever done. The Bible even says that they'll be condemned for every idle word they've spoken (Matthew 12:36).

For the saints of God, though, it's a different story. What was recorded for them was their righteous acts, and they were recorded so God could reward them for what they've done and praise them! For the saints the judgment won't be about pain and suffering. Instead it will be about an eternal glory that will never fade away.

Romans 16 is a glorious chapter. Is it a list of names? Yes,

it most certainly is – the names of amazing people who God worked through in astonishing ways. It's a place where God has taken the time to thank these people and recognize their service. What's so encouraging about this chapter is the knowledge that these aren't the only people who God is going to recognize, nor are these the only people whose deeds were recorded as a memorial for them! God is also recording our righteous acts and sacrifices as well. Those are also being written in a book that will last forever.

When we serve the Lord and sacrifice for Him, we can know our work isn't in vain and won't be forgotten. All of it is being written down. God is paying close attention to what we're doing, and one day we will stand before Him and receive our reward. In fact, Jesus even went so far as to say this:

**Luke 12:35-38:** “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.”

Jesus said that when He returns, if He finds His saints watching for Him and serving Him then He will bless them richly. In fact, Jesus even said that He would *serve them*! That's truly amazing. This means that when Jesus returns you *really* want Him to catch you serving Him. You want Jesus to catch you watching for His return and advancing His kingdom. That's the sort of life you want to be leading, for that carries great reward and blessing.

But there's another side to this. If Jesus returns and catches

you in sin then there are consequences for that too:

**Luke 12:45-46:** “But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken; The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.”

It works both ways, doesn't it? If the Lord returns and finds you faithfully serving Him then He will reward you in astonishing ways. However, if Jesus returns and catches you leading a wicked life, oppressing others and doing great evil, then you will face His wrath. The return of Christ will be a great day for the saints of God but a terrible day for the wicked.

It's encouraging to know that God is recording our righteous acts and our sacrifices, and that our deeds will be recorded as a memorial for all the ages to come. But that brings up a question: just what *have* you done? Have you done anything worthy of recording? It doesn't take much, you know. Jesus said that even giving a cup of water in His name was sufficient to earn a Heavenly reward:

**Mark 9:41:** “For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Not everyone can be an apostle, or one of the 12 disciples, or one of the 70. We can't all be the bishop of Smyrna. But we *can* serve Christ wherever we are, in whatever position He's given to us. Even small acts of service are held in great esteem by God and won't be forgotten! But I have to ask: what acts of service have you done? How have you worked to advance the gospel and

build the kingdom of God? When people turn to your section of the Book of Remembrance to see how you spent your life, what will they find?

It's something to think about, isn't it?

The next time you read Romans 16, don't see it as a list of random names. See it as a list of heroes that God took the time recognize for what they had done – and don't forget that *your* deeds are being record as well. One day *you* will be the one who is recognized for your service, and that's an encouraging thought. Let Romans 16 forever remind you that *God really does care about what you've done for Him.*