

PHOEBE

"I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who 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 herself HATH BEEN A SUCCOURER OF MANY, AND OF MYSELF ALSO," Romans 16:1, 2.

This is an outline picture of a totally unknown person. She, like most of the other names mentioned in the salutations of this chapter, had had a singular fate. Every name, shadowy and unreal as it is to us, belonged to a human life filled with hopes and fears, plunged sometimes in the depths of sorrows, struggling with anxieties and difficulties, and all the agitations have sunk into forgetfulness and calm. There is left to the world an immortal remembrance, and scarcely a single fact associated with the undying names. Note this lady in my life herein described:

A little rent is made in the dark curtain through which we can see as with an incandescent light concentrated for a moment upon her, one of the many gracious women who helped Paul, as their sisters had helped Paul's Lord, and who thereby have won, little as either Paul or she thought it, an eternal commemoration.

Her name is purely an idolatrous one, and stamps her as a Greek, and by birth probably a worshipper of Apollo. Her Christian associations were with the Church of Cenchrea, the port of Corinth, with a little Christian community, of which nothing further is known. But if we take into account the hideous immoralities of Corinth, we shall deem it probable that the port, with its shifting maritime population, was, like most seaports, a soil in which goodness was hard to put to it to grow, and a Church had much against which to struggle.

To be a Christian at Cenchrea can have been no light task. Travellers in Egypt are

told that "port said" is the wickedest place on the face of the Earth, and in Phoebe's home there would be a like drift of disreputables of both sexes and of all nationalities. **It was fitting that one good woman should be recorded as redeeming womanhood there.**

We hear of her that she was a "servant," or, as the margin probably reads, "A deaconess of the Church which is at Cenchrea," and in that capacity, by gentle ministrations and the exhibition of purity and patient love, as well as by the gracious administration of material help, had been a "succourer of many."

There is a whole world of unmentioned kindness and a life of self-devotion hidden away under these few words. "A succourer of many," possibly the succour which she administered was her own spiritual gift. She may have been rich and influential, or perhaps she but distributed the Church's bounty. But in any case the gift was sweetened by the giver's hand, and the succour was the impartation of a woman's compassion more than the bestowment of a donor's gift.

Sometime or other, and somehow or other, she had had the honor and joy of helping Paul, and no doubt that opportunity would be to her a crown of service. She was now on the point of taking the long journey to Rome on her own business, and the apostle bespeaks for her help from the Roman Church, "In whatsoever matter she may have need of you," as if she had some difficult affair on hand, and had no other friends in the city.

Possibly she was a widow and perhaps had had some lawsuit or business with government authorities, with whom a word from some of her brethren in Rome might stand her in good stead. Apparently she was the bearer of this epistle, which would give her a standing at once in the Roman Church, and she came among them with a halo round her from the whole-hearted commendation of the apostle. See if you can learn the lessons

from this woman that I have and see if the lessons she teaches doesn't enhance your life as it did mine.

We note first the remarkable illustration here given of the power of the new bond of a common faith. The world was then broken up into sections, which were sometimes bitterly antagonistic and at other merely rigidly exclusive. The only bond of union was the iron fetter of Rome, which crushed the people, but did not knit them together.

But here are Paul, the Jew, Phoebe, the Greek, and the Roman readers of this epistle, all fused together by the power of the Divine love that melted their hearts, and the common faith that unified their lives. The list of names in this chapter, comprising as it does men and women of many nationalities, and some slaves as well as freemen, is itself a wonderful testimony of the truth of Paul's triumphant exclamation in another epistle, that in Christ there is "Neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female. We are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord," **the ONLY true equality in the whole world.**

The cleft had been closed, and the very line of demarcation is obliterated, and these clefts were deeper than any of which we moderns have had experience. It remains something like a miracle that the members of Paul's churches could ever be brought together, and that their consciousness of oneness could ever overpower the tremendous divisive forces. We sometimes wonder at their bickerings. **We ought rather to wonder at their unity, and be shamed of the importance which we attach to our infinitely slighter mutual disagreements.** The bond that was sufficient to make the early Christians all one in Christ Jesus seems to have lost its binding power, especially in our day, and, like an used-up elastic band, to have no clasping grip left in it.

Another thing I learned from Phoebe is the characteristic place of women in Christianity. The place of women among the Jews was indeed free and honorable as compared with her position either in Greece or Rome,

but to none of them was she placed on the level of man, nor regarded mainly in the aspect of an equal possessor of the same life of the Spirit. **But a relationship like Christianity which admits her to precisely the same position of a supernatural life as is granted to man necessarily relegates to a subordinate position a difference of sex as it does all other natural distinctions.**

The women who ministered to Jesus Christ of their substance, the two sisters of Bethany, the mourners at Calvary, the three who went through the morning twilight to the tomb, were but the foremost conspicuous figures in a great company through all the ages who have owed to Jesus Christ their redemption, not only from the slavery of sin, but from the stigma of inferiority as man's drudge or toy. **To the world in which Paul lived, it was a strange new thought that women could share with man in his loftiest emotions.**

Historically the emancipation of one-half of the human race is the direct result of the Christian principle that all are one in Christ Jesus. In modern life the emancipation has been too often divorced from its one sure basis, and **we have become familiar with the sight of the "advanced" women who have advanced so far as to have lost sight of Christ, to whom they owe their freedom.**

The picture of Phoebe in our text might well be commended to all such as setting forth the most woman-like ideal. She was a "succourer of many." Her ministry was a ministry of helps, and surely such gentle ministry is that which most benefits the woman's heart and comes most graciously to the woman's fingers.

Phoebe then may well represent to us the ministry of succour in this world of woe and need. **There is ever a cry, even in apparently successful lives, for help and a helper, even a help-meet.** Man's clumsy hand is but too apt to hurt were it strives to soothe, and nature itself seems to devolve on the swifter sympathies and more delicate perceptions of woman the joy of binding up wounded spirits.

In the verses immediately following our text we read of another woman to whom was entrusted a more conspicuous and direct form of service, Priscilla, as the characteristic type of woman's special ministry. We must remember our Lord's teaching, that the giver of "the cup of cold water in the name of a prophet" **in some measure shares in the prophet's work, and will surely share in the prophet's reward.**

She who helped Paul must have entered into the spirit of Paul's labors. And Christ, to whom all service that is done from the same motive, is one in essence makes no difference between him whose thirsty lips drink and her whose loving hand presents the cup of cold water. "Small service is true service while it lasts." Paul and Phoebe were one in ministry and one in its recompense. We may further see in her a foreshadowing of the reward of lowly service, though it be only the service of help.

Little did Phoebe dream that her name would have an eternal commendation of her

unnoticed deeds of GRACE, kindness and aid, standing forth to later generations and people of whom she knew nothing, as worthy of eternal remembrance.

For those of us who have to serve unnoticed and unknown, here is an instance and a prophesy which may stimulate and encourage. "Surely I will never forget any of their works," is a gracious promise which the most obscure and humble of us may take to heart, and sustained by which, we may patiently pursue a way on which there are "none to praise and very few to love."

It matters little whether our work be noticed or recorded by men, so long as we know that it is written in the "Lamb's book of life," and that He will one day proclaim it "before the Father in Heaven and His angels."

Have you met this *"Woman in My Life?"*
Let me introduce her to you.

Phoebe a helper. A gift of helps.