

All Roads Lead Here: Meet and Greet
By Jason Huff
February 4, 2018
Exodus 18:5-10; Matthew 28:1-9; Romans 16:1-16

Friends, our final Scripture reading is Romans 16:1-16. May God add His richest blessings on the reading of His precious, holy, and inspired Word. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.”

What’s in a name? Names aren’t as important to us as they used to be. Most of us found names we thought sounded good out of a baby book or chose something based on the name of a friend or relative. People don’t know what their names mean, and most of the stuff on the Internet that tells you what your name is supposed to mean is wrong. We need our names, we get frustrated when someone forgets our name, but modern society doesn’t think about it much.

But names tell us so much. Often, they tell us something about where you come from – Japanese names are not like Korean names, Korean names are not like Chinese names, and none of them are like typical American names. Names can give away the time period in which you were born – for example, the name Jason was extremely popular when I was born in 1974, due to the popularity of a TV show called *The Waltons* featuring a character named, you guessed it, Jason. My mother’s name Suellen was made popular by the 1939 film *Gone With The Wind*. Just the spelling of a name can give away a region or ethnic group. Names typically give away your gender. And still around the world, the meaning of names is important. There’s a reason that Jesus was given that name – it means, “God saves.”

All of this ties into today’s passage, which I’ve got to tell you is probably the most unique passage of Scripture I’ve ever had the privilege to study. We think when we go to church, “Oh, we’re going to some bit of theology, or some story of Jesus or something He did, or learn something God wants us to do.” Well, that’s still true, and it’s because a lot can be said about a list of meetings and greetings that we might not expect. God still speaks through it.

Because the passage is different than most we tackle, I'm going to approach it differently too and simply teach each thing I see that's worth mentioning. We don't need an overview of the whole thing because it's greetings and commendations; it's simple to understand that part of it. So we're going to drill right down into the good stuff we might not see at a quick glance.

First thing: *the early church was serious about including people of all walks of life, including women, minorities, and the least in society.* Over a third of the names in this list belong to women. In fact, the commendation at the beginning of this section is for a woman named Phoebe. The word "servant" here is the Greek word "diakonon," which is where we get the word "deacon." Phoebe has a specific role in the church in Cenchrea, and that's taking care of the physical needs of the congregation. Paul says "she has been a great help to many, including me" and tells the Roman church to provide whatever she needs. It is almost certain from how Paul writes that Phoebe was the one entrusted with getting this letter to the Roman church. Junias is greeted as one considered "outstanding among the apostles," meaning that she and her husband were well-known among the leadership of the global early church. Many of the other women greeted by Paul are "hard workers for the Lord" and for the saints in Rome.

The list includes Jewish names and Gentile names in equal enough numbers that we can see that there were no divisions among racial lines, even though their racial issues in the first century were as tense as ours are today. Preacher and teacher John Stott comments that at least five of the names – Ampliatus, Urbanus, Hermes, Philologus, and Julia – were commonly given to slaves. Yet at the same time, Paul addresses members of the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great, a friend of the Emperor Claudius, and Narcissus was a former slave who became a deeply influential member of Claudius' court.¹ Their families would have been extremely wealthy and well-connected, and while those two men weren't Christians as far as we know, many of their family members became believers.

What does all this mean for us? It means there is a place for you in the church, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, poor or rich, connected or disconnected, male, female. Not only that, but as you grow in grace, as God calls and leads you, there is a place for you to serve. Throughout the history of the church, there have been controversies about who can be called to serve and what roles they can serve in. Because Paul stated that women weren't to have spiritual authority over men, some people have thought he was a misogynist chauvinist. Yet the same Paul who didn't allow women to teach men in a worship service praised them as deacons, as missionaries, and fellow workers in Christ. There is a place for your service to God within the church.

It's also clear that we should welcome everyone here regardless of their social status or their ethnic background. It's been said that Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America, and it's true. Church growth experts tell us that churches grow fastest when everyone's from the same economic, social, and ethnic background. But according to Scripture, that's a defective church! Every believer is my brother or sister in Christ. We might come from different cultures, different backgrounds, different ways of thinking about some things, and yet the church is made up of every language, every culture, every people group. You may be treated less for all sorts of things, but not in the church. To God, you matter as His precious child.

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 1994, pg. 395.

Next thing this list can give us hope about: *ordinary believers are the heartbeat of Christianity that God uses to make Himself known*. It is very easy for me to get discouraged about ministry when I think about the heroes of the faith. Let's take Jesus out of the equation since He's the Son of God and no one can be like Him perfectly in this life. But Peter and Paul, the apostles, Moses, David, Elijah and Elisha, the prophets...we often look at these spiritual giants, and we realize that our lives are not like theirs. We are not going to be used by God to part Lake Michigan or to fight mighty battles or to raise the dead or to proclaim the start of God's church to thousands upon thousands.

But the truth is, the heroes of the faith are an infinitesimally small number in comparison to the billions of Christians who have lived on this earth. The vast majority of pastors work in churches with under 100 people, and it's been that way throughout the church's history. Many churches throughout history had no property or building, just like us.

The vast majority of Christians are not sent as missionaries or given extraordinary, earth-shaking jobs to do by God. We are almost all second and third and fourth stringers...somehow we've made it onto the team, but we rarely get playing time in the big game (as we see it). In the world where the only thing that matters is getting to the SuperBowl, sometimes it feels like we're playing for a peewee league.

But this list shows us that the second stringers really do matter, enough that their names became part of sacred Scripture. These people were not "important" folks – other than Pricilla and Aquila, none of these people are ever mentioned for anything they did anywhere else in the Bible. Some of them weren't noteworthy in that Paul doesn't even compliment them. And yet, the little people, the ordinary people, the people who just spent their lives as faithful servants of Jesus, who most readers ignore even to this day in Scripture – they are the ones who set an example for us.

You don't have to be a Peter or a Paul. You don't have to be a Moses. When we get our minds set on emulating someone great, often we wind up doing nothing at all because we see what they did and we know we can't measure up. While I want to live a life of faith like they did, I'm not worried about being extraordinary. God consistently works through ordinary people to accomplish His purposes. Even the extraordinary people of Scripture, the Bible tells us were pretty ordinary to start with.

The author of Hebrews tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a list of countless numbers of God-fearing people who lived and died, many of them unnamed and unnoticed, whose stories encourage us. These are some of those people. Maybe you think, "I've got an ordinary house, an ordinary job, an ordinary family, an ordinary life." Maybe you think because of those things that God isn't interested or isn't paying attention. That's far from the truth. God works through people just like you and me. In fact, He usually takes those at the bottom of the barrel and uses them so that He might glorify Himself through them. So don't count yourself out of being able to do something that matters for God's Kingdom. He's the one who determines that. He made great things out of this Roman church; He can make great things out of you.

The first two thoughts today are really interconnected; God knows you, God can use you no matter who you are, and God loves ordinary people. The last two are challenges, something for us to think about in the coming week. And the first is this: *what would your compliment be?* When the end comes and you finally stand before God and Jesus is your advocate so that you stand forgiven and not condemned, what word of blessing might God have for you?

Let's hear again some of these accolades Paul gave: Phoebe "has been a great help to many people, including me." Priscilla and Aquila are "fellow workers in Christ" who literally in the Greek "risked their own necks for me." Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, all are "hard workers." Epenetus and Stachys are "my dear friends." Andronicus and Junias went to prison with Paul and are "outstanding among the apostles." Apelles is "tested and approved in Christ." Rufus is "chosen in the Lord." Ampliatus, Paul "loves in the Lord." Urbanus is a "fellow worker." Several of them he calls relatives, mother, brothers – all in Christ, since they weren't his close kin.

Now our salvation is a complete and total gift. We don't earn it, we can't earn it, we don't even have to try to earn it. If there is one thing totally unique about Christianity against all other religions, it's unearned, unmerited grace where God forgives us without us doing anything to earn it. We simply receive it as a gift. When we are talking about compliments in the Lord, we aren't talking about earning anything or meriting salvation through our own efforts.

What we are describing is how our gratitude to God for this impossible, immeasurable gift moves us to serve Him and help others as we say "thank you" to Him. You can tell how much somebody loves something by how they appreciate it. I mean, I like my car, I do take it to be washed occasionally, but I trash it out, I use it as a tool. I've seen people who love their cars – you know the ones. They always park it in the garage; every Saturday they're out cleaning it, giving it three coats of wax. They keep the local car wash in business with detailing jobs. We all think, "Boy, that guy sure loves his car."

What would it be if we were to value the salvation God has given us as much as some people value their cars? Maybe our lives would look differently, and maybe we would find it easier to share Christ's love with people. Maybe we would think more about what we might do so that when we reach heaven, we would hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Now when you think about this, you can remember what we learned before – we are ordinary people in ordinary situations. We are not called to impress people; we are called to serve humbly. Unless you are called to it, unless God puts it on your heart undeniably, you shouldn't expect that you will be a missionary to the Middle East or a famous preacher or an evangelist who wins hundreds of souls to Christ.

Instead, what would it be to pursue these compliments: "She trusted in Jesus despite a difficult illness." "He stood for Christ even though living his faith out meant scorn from his colleagues at work." "She worked with the children at church faithfully." "He trusted God more than his bank account and gave so that no one in the congregation went hungry." "She was a faithful prayer warrior who spent more time on her knees than watching TV." "He found ways to serve the poor and to invite them to know Jesus." Those are compliments worth hearing.

While we don't have to struggle with how much we do for God – our salvation is secure – it would be awesome to leave behind a legacy of faith. There is nothing that says more to those around us, to our children and grandchildren, to our friends, than a faithful witness to God's goodness in our lives. Because if we've left a legacy, it will help others even after we're gone. It would be awesome for our grandchildren to say, "I know Grandma and Grandpa prayed for me even before I was born." It would be awesome for our friends going through a terrible trial to say, "I saw my friends at the church weather the same kind of storm years ago, and God sustained them." And it would be awesome if someone could say, "I came to believe in Jesus because my friend lived out God's love in front of me."

Alright...moving on to our final thought and final challenge: *will you trust God to speak to you through His Word?* Prepping for today's sermon was tricky. This is the kind of passage far smarter people than I skip over when preaching. One major commentary skipped over it almost entirely. This is the kind of passage that you worry about when you believe that the best way to preach over the long haul is straight through books of Scripture. It tests not only whether you're committed to it or not, but also whether or not you trust God to speak through His Word in places where you don't see much there.

In our own devotional time with God, I know I struggle there, and it's my guess you do too. There are passages that seem to be perfectly clear, even inspiring and encouraging. And then sometimes you get bogged down in the laws past Exodus 20 pretty much through Deuteronomy. You find the poetic prophecies of the prophets hard to get much out of when they speak about countries and nations and peoples long gone. You read about a lot of wars, and it's a challenge to find something that speaks to you.

And that's when we must trust God to speak to us through His Word. His messages for us are there each time if we are willing to dig deeper, to get our feet wet or our hands dirty or whatever metaphor you like. Jesus spoke in parables, He said, to keep people from immediately understanding His message. Only those given the ability by the Holy Spirit to go further, to plumb the depths, would comprehend what Jesus was saying. And yet that power is there. Through prayer, through study, through wrestling with the meaning, God will speak.

So don't ever let a long genealogy discourage you or a mind-boggling series of laws stop your quest to read the whole Bible or to find meaning in every passage. Hebrews 4 says that the Scripture is living and active; it reads us as much as we read it. That means that it speaks to us, convicts us, challenges us. It guides us into the presence of God because these are His words to us. We don't read it to judge it, like we do with other books; it judges us, and we live our lives according to it. And every part of it can speak to us if we're willing to work at it. It doesn't mean that every passage will mean as much to us, but an open heart to God's work can see His hand on every part of the Bible.

Friends, we are welcomed into God's family, every last one of us. We are ordinary people, but we're in the hands of an extraordinary Savior. When we trust and follow Him, we can be confident that at the end of time, we will receive the blessed greetings of Jesus, our Savior, God, and Friend.