

# Pray

## Read Isaiah 53:10-12

<sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church in keng-khreh-a'. <sup>2</sup> So you should welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and assist her in whatever matter she may require your help. For indeed she has been a benefactor of many – and of me also.

<sup>3</sup> Give my greetings to Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup> who risked their own necks for my life. Not only do I thank them, but so do all the Gentile churches. <sup>5</sup> Greet also the church that meets in their home. Greet my dear friend ep-hee-net-os, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. <sup>6</sup> Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. <sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews and fellow prisoners. They are noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles, and they were also in Christ before me. <sup>8</sup> Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. <sup>9</sup> Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend stakh'-oos. <sup>10</sup> Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup> Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those who belong to the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, who has worked very hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother – and mine. <sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. <sup>15</sup> Greet fil-ol'-og-os and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. <sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Christ send you greetings.

## Introduction

Thomas was six months old when Liezl and I received him. His birth name meant Beautiful Life in Zulu. Liezl and I gave him new names. The names of his grandfathers. Thomas and Christopher. We did this not to erase where he came from, but to declare where he belongs. We changed his name so the world would know he is ours. Not because of his blood. Because of our bond.

Now, you might think I am talking about a private family matter. I am not. I am talking about the public identity of the church. Because this is exactly what God has done for us.

Paul has finished the soaring theology of **Romans 1-11**. He has laid down the hard ethics of **Romans 12-15**. And now, in **Romans 16**, he doesn't write another essay. He writes a family roll call. Why? Because the identity of the church is not a theory. It is flesh and blood.

And the argument of this text is as simple as it is disruptive. We are brothers and sisters in Christ—so act like it.

This morning, Paul shows us how in three movements. First, the commendation of Phoebe—a sister, a servant, and a benefactor whom they must welcome as their own. Second, the cascade of commands to greet nearly two dozen people—Jew and Greek, slave and free. Third, the declaration that the entire global family of God sends their love to a church they have never met.

It is a portrait of a family bound by something thicker than water. It is bound by the blood of the Lamb. So let us look at the first frame of this portrait.

## 1) Welcome the sister Christ has given you (Romans 16:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> Paul commends to you our sister Phoebe. Don't rush past this. This is not a formality. This woman carries the most significant inspired theological document ever penned. Who is Phoebe? The text gives us three designations.

First, she is a sister. This is a statement of spiritual relationship. In the Roman world, family was identity. Your name, your station, your future, were bound to your blood. But Paul draws a new bloodline. Phoebe is a sister. She belongs to the family of God. And so, the church is not receiving a stranger. They are receiving family.

Second, she is a servant. The word is διάκονον. Deacon. I have argued from 1 Timothy 3:11 that women rightfully serve in the office of deacon. Here, the term is general. It means she is one who serves the church. She is not a spectator. She is not a consumer. She works for the sake of the saints of the church in keng-khreh-a'.

Third, she is a benefactor. The Greek term is προστάτις. In the Roman world, a προστάτις was a patroness. A woman of means. Of influence. Who used her resources for the advancement of others. Patronage was a system of honour and reciprocity. Phoebe uses her wealth for the advance of the gospel. She is a help to the weary. Even to the apostle himself.

This text teaches Biblical complementarianism. Men and women complement one another. Phoebe is a wealthy woman who gives to the promotion of the gospel and is entrusted with the sacred letter. As in other places of Scripture, holy duty is entrusted to women. Paul entrusts Phoebe with the theology of justification by faith. The courier of the gospel of grace. Strong men and strong women serve side by side, fulfilling their God-given tasks.

The command follows. You should welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints. And assist her in whatever matter she may require your help. Receive her as one who is in the Lord. The same Lord who died for you died for her. To reject her is to reject the one who sent her. Assist her in her business. The word here is πράγματι. Help Phoebe with the practical, everyday matters. Why? Because this is how the body of Christ functions.

**Welcome one another as brothers and sisters, for you are all in Christ.**

**But Phoebe is not the only sibling. Paul extends this same family affection to the entire household of faith in Rome.**

## 2) Welcome the siblings Christ's given you (Romans 16:3-16a)

Greet. Greet. Greet. The command governs this passage. Sixteen times in thirteen verses. Not a casual wave of greeting across the courtyard. The word carries weight. It means to embrace. To welcome. To draw near.

Paul writes from Corinth. He likely hasn't been to Rome. Yet he knows two dozen people in the church. How? Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome years earlier. Aquila and Priscilla came to Corinth. They met Paul. Returning when Nero eased the decree. They carried news of the church in Rome to Paul. The empire scattered the saints. But the gospel gathered them. And the bonds of church family is stronger than geography.

Let's look at the names. <sup>3</sup> Give my greetings to Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup> who risked their own necks for my life. Not only do I thank them, but so do all the Gentile churches. <sup>5</sup> Greet also the church that meets in their home. Prisca, the wife, is named before Aquila, her husband. Unusual in that culture. But the kingdom does not rank usefulness by Roman custom. Greet my dear friend eph-ee-net-os, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. Epaneetus is literally called the first fruit. By implication, the first convert, who belongs to the Lord. <sup>6</sup> Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. Note how Paul seems to be going out of his way to recognise the contribution of women in this passage.

<sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews and fellow prisoners. They are noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles, and they were also in Christ before me. Andronicus in a man's name. Junia is a woman's name. This is like a husband and wife team. They are called noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles. The idea is one of prominence. These two are believers of reputation. Some translate this as Andronicus and Junia were among the apostles. And then interpret that they had somehow been elevated to the office of the Twelve. That interpretation is impossible. The Twelve apostles were unique witnesses to the resurrection. Scripture guards the office of The Twelve fiercely. No one gets added to it. The Twelve were the foundation of the church. And the office has passed away. Andronicus and Junia may have been sent witnesses of Christ. Highly esteemed them. Recognised for their labour. That is honour enough. We mustn't press the text beyond what it bears. Junia is a woman of quality. A fellow prisoner with Paul. Who became a saint before Paul himself believed.

<sup>8</sup> Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Ampliatus is a common slave name. A single name. No family line. No social standing. Yet Paul calls him beloved. <sup>9</sup> Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend stakh'-oos. <sup>10</sup> Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Approved means tried. Tested. Proven.

<sup>10</sup> Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup> Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those who belong to the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. It is probably not the masters being greeted here. Aristobulus and Narcissus may not have believed at all. But their slaves? Their servants? The household is defined by faith, not by ownership.

<sup>12</sup> Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked hard in the Lord. Delicate names. Strong labour. Greet my dear friend Persis, who has worked very hard in the Lord.

<sup>13</sup> Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother – and mine. Do you see what Paul does here? Mark wrote that Rufus' father carried the cross of Jesus. Simon of Cyrene fathered Alexander and Rufus. That same Rufus now sits in the church at Rome. And his mother? She became a mother to Paul. Not by birth. By love. By hospitality. By the kind of care that only the family of God can give. Paul, the great apostle, the theologian of justification, the man who stood before kings, Paul needed a mother. And God gave him one. In the church.

<sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. <sup>15</sup> Greet fil-ol'-og-os and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. <sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Roman culture was a ladder. Status was everything. Free men had three names. Slaves had one. Women were often invisible. Jews were suspect. Paul ignores every rung of that ladder. He greets Jew and Greek. Slave and free. Men and women. Prisoners and patrons. The known and the unknown.

Listen to Paul. The refrain that runs under every name like a deep current. In Christ. In the Lord. In Christ Jesus. Eight times. Paul cannot stop himself.

Why? Because Paul knows something. He stood on the edge of the abyss. He deserved the wrath of God. He saw the flames. He felt the terror. And then – then – Christ rescued him. Snatched him from the pit. Set his feet on solid ground. And when Paul looked around, who was standing there with him? Not his Pharisee colleagues. Not his former friends. These people. Prisca. Aquila. Mary. Andronicus. Junia. Ampliatus the slave. Rufus the cross-bearer's son. Tryphaena and Tryphosa, delicate in name but fierce in labour.

They had all been rescued too. By the same blood. For the same glory. That is why Paul calls them in Christ. Because in Christ there is no condemnation. In Christ the wrath has passed over. In Christ we are safe. Together. The foundation of Paul's affection is not sentimentality. It is shared rescue. He can still smell the smoke of the hell they all deserved. And because he can, every face in the family is precious.

So Paul commands. Greets. Embraces. Calls them siblings. Not colleagues. Acquaintances. Not useful contacts for the mission. Brothers. Sisters. Rome defined identity by Caesar's census. Paul defines it by union with Christ.

Thomas is adopted. We received him at six months old. He was born Impilo Enhle. Which means Beautiful Life in Zulu. Liezl and I renamed him after my grandfather and Liezl's grandfather's names. Thomas Christoffel. We Anglicised the Christoffel to Christopher. Because we thought a little black kid with the name Christoffel might be a bit much. We gave him our grandfather's names so the world would know he is ours. Our family. Our heir. Our beloved. Our treasure. Not because of his blood. Because of our bond. So it is with the church. We do not belong to one another because we come from the same tribe, tongue, or nation. We belong to one another because we share a Father. The same blood that purchased him purchased you.

Welcome the siblings Christ has given you. For you are all in Christ.

And now Paul turns from the command to greet to the declaration that greets.

### 3) Remember the family Christ's given you (Romans 16:16b)

As Paul concludes, All the churches of Christ send you greetings. This is not a diplomatic courtesy. It is a statement of fact. The scattered assemblies in Corinth, Keng-khreh-a', Ephesus, and Philippi. They all extend their right hands in fellowship. They have never met these Roman faces. They do not know their stories. But they know their Father. So, they belong to one another.

All the churches of Christ. All matters. The family of God is not confined to this hall. It is not limited to the names you can recall from the tea table. The body of Christ stretches across every border, every language, and every generation. Every believer, in every place, through all of time. It is a bloodline of grace.

Think of the photographs on a framed wall. There is the stern great-grandfather who lived before you were born. The cousin twice removed whose name you forget. The baby born last spring to your sister in Australia who you've never met. They are all in the frame. Because you share a family name. So it is with the church. We do not know every face. But we share the Son.

The declaration stands. All the churches of Christ greetings. Welcome one another as brothers and sisters. For you are all in Christ.

And that brings us to the gospel itself.

## Connect to the gospel

So Paul has finished his theology. He has laid out his ethics. Now he gives us a list of names. Why? Because the identity of the church is not a theory. It is flesh and blood. Jew and Greek. Slave and free. Man and woman. Paul greets them all with the same refrain. In the Lord. In Christ Jesus.

His argument is not complicated. Welcome one another as brothers and sisters. Why? Because you are all in Christ. Not because you share a culture. Not because you agree on everything. You belong to one another because you share a Father. And you share a Father because you share a Son.

That brings us to the only ground on which this family stands. The gospel. Behold, the blood of the Lamb.

**Romans 16** is the family portrait that hangs on the other side of the empty tomb. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, this passage collapses into sentimentality. Just a nice man being nice to nice people. That is not what Paul is doing.

Paul looks at a list of people the world would never seat at the same table. And he calls them siblings. Why?

The cross broke down every barrier. The cross took Jew and Greek and nailed their hostility to the tree. The cross took slave and free and buried their status in the tomb. The cross took man and woman and raised them to new life in Christ.

Because Jesus died, your sin is atoned for. Because Jesus rose, your identity is secure. You are no longer defined by Rome's census. You are not your past. You are not your failures. You are in Christ. Union with him is the only identity that matters. And that union was purchased at a price. Not gold. Not silver. But the precious blood of the Lamb.

The gospel creates a people who share a bloodline thicker than water. The blood of the Lamb. Do you see why a list of names becomes holy ground? Because every name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

So here is where we land. Here is the argument that holds this whole sermon together. We are brothers and sisters in Christ—so act like it.

That is not a suggestion. That is the logic of the gospel worked out in flesh and blood. And that logic now presses into your week. So let me show you what this looks like.

## Application for believers

You have heard the names. You have seen the family portrait. Now act like it.

This week. Not next month. Not when you feel ready.

Learn one new name. Someone whose face you recognise but whose story you do not know. Walk across the room. Ask them their name. Remember it.

Then open your home. Invite them for a meal. Not a banquet. Tea and sandwiches will do. The table is where strangers become siblings. It always has been.

And before they leave, ask one more question. How can I pray for you?

Not because you are good at hospitality. Not because your house is tidy. But because you share a Father. The same blood purchased you both.

Do not wait to be greeted. Greet. Do not wait to be known. Know.

## Application for unbelievers

We are brothers and sisters in Christ—so act like it.

You have watched this family from the outside. You have heard the names. You have seen the affection. And perhaps you have thought to yourself, These are good people. They have their lives together.

They do not. Neither do I.

This family does not belong to us because we are good. It belongs to us because Christ is gracious. The door stands open. Not because we hold it. Because He does.

So here is the question you must ask yourself before you leave today. Not, Am I good enough? Not, Have I cleaned myself up?

Am I in Christ?

If you know the answer is no. If you do not know the answer at all. Do not let the week swallow that question up for eternity. Speak to me after the service. Send me a message. Make an appointment. Do not let another Sunday pass without knowing whose family you belong to.

## Conclusion

Thomas was six months old. His name meant Beautiful Life. We gave him new names. Not to erase. To declare. He is ours. Not by blood. By bond. So it is with you.

The argument holds. We are brothers and sisters in Christ—so act like it.

Welcome the sister Christ has given you. Welcome the siblings Christ has given you. Remember the family Christ has given you. This is Romans 16. Phoebe the courier. Prisca the teacher. Ampliatus the slave. Junia the prisoner. All greeted with the same refrain. In the Lord.

This week, learn the name of the person whose name you do not yet know. Invite them for a meal. Ask how you can pray. This family is not ours because we are good. It is ours because Christ is gracious.

Go home and ask the only question that matters: Am I in Christ?

Amen.

## Close in prayer

### Benediction

**Romans 16:25-27**, <sup>25</sup> Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation about Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept silent for long ages <sup>26</sup> but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles – <sup>27</sup> to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ – to him be the glory for ever!  
Amen.