

## EXCERPT

IVP Academic

### Phoebe A Story

Available September 4, 2018 | \$22, 320 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5245-1

Around 56 AD, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. He entrusted this letter to Phoebe, whom he describes as the deacon of the church at Cenchræe and a patron of many. But who was this remarkable woman? Biblical scholar and popular author and speaker Paula Gooder imagines Phoebe's story—who she was, the life she lived, and her first-century faith—and in doing so opens up Paul's world.

## Paul's Letter to Rome, and His Messenger

Phoebe would never forget the first time she had seen Paul. He had been visiting Gaius in Corinth. With his usual generosity, Gaius had invited the many different followers of Christ to meet Paul in his house. Phoebe wasn't looking forward to it. At that point, she had never met Paul, but she had heard about him. In fact, she had heard a lot about him. His arrogance. His unreliability. The cheek of him thinking he could tell people how to behave. His disgraceful letters sent to impose his view on those he disagreed with. His rudeness. His arrogance (again). She had certainly heard about Paul. So, she went to Corinth reluctantly, as much to please the gentle Gaius as anything else.

When she had arrived at Gaius's house, there had been pandemonium. The normally smooth-running machine of hospitality had broken down. Slaves were running here and there, half completing an errand before running back in the opposite direction. Objects were scattered everywhere. Gaius's usually placid steward looked on the brink of collapse. Even the gentle, gracious Gaius could be heard at the rear of the house, his voice raised in irritation. There had been a lot riding on this visit by Paul.

So, Phoebe had slotted back into remembered ways of being. A command here; a joke there; scooping up a pile of misplaced objects in one hand, while gently nudging an item of furniture back into its proper place, she had walked through the house smoothing as she went. The years she had spent running a household invisibly but efficiently, dealing with existing crises and anticipating new ones, came back to her as though she had never left them behind. Before long the panic was over, order was restored, and Gaius was smiling at her gratefully for all she had done. She had missed Paul's arrival because she had popped out to Corinth's busy market to supplement the food that would be needed for all the extra guests, brushing aside with amusement the steward's horror that she, a grand lady, should do something so menial.

When she had returned a few hours later, she heard a voice. It was, Phoebe recalled, mesmerising. It wasn't the tone of the voice – unlike Stachys' voice the previous evening in Rome, Paul's was harsh and slightly grating. It wasn't the elegance of the rhetoric – Paul was certainly persuasive, but even in Corinth there were many better orators than him. It wasn't even what he was saying – though later she was as captivated by that as others around her. It was his passion that gripped Phoebe. She remembered standing at the entrance to the house, parcels dropping to the floor, while she acknowledged that this was someone who really knew. This was someone who had encountered the risen Lord, and whose life, like hers, would never be the same again. This was someone to be trusted. She couldn't put her finger on why she felt this way; she just knew that she did.

So it had come as something of a shock, as her feet took her from the entrance, through the atrium, and onwards into the garden at the rear of the house, when she had actually seen Paul. She had almost recoiled in horror. Corinth was a good-looking city. After all, it had a lot to prove. It was a new city, having been rebuilt by the great Julius Caesar less than a hundred years before, and many of its population – a vast mix of Romans, Greeks, and Jews – were, just like Phoebe, freed slaves. It was the place you came to reinvent yourself, to live a new life, to begin again. And so the populace, just

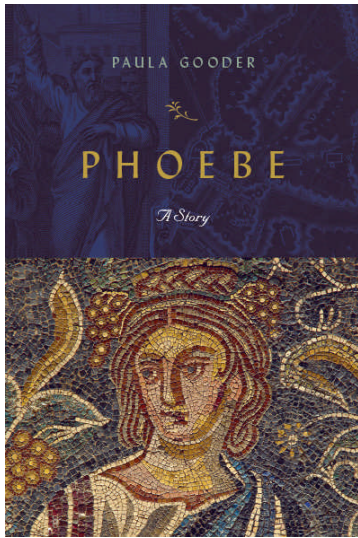


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like the city itself, went out of their way to look the part. Without an ancient family to rely on, money and beauty bought influence. It went without saying that you made the best of what you had. But Paul was different. He was small, very small. Phoebe had later realised that he barely even reached her shoulder. His head was bald, and, as he stood to address the crowd gathered in Gaius's garden, Phoebe could see that his legs were crooked. His nose was huge, topped with deep black eyebrows that met in the middle. Paul was grotesque. There was no other word for it.

But no sooner had Phoebe reached her damning judgement than she began to question it. As she stood there, jaw hanging open in surprise, her eyes met his, and, as they did, something happened. When she tried to find the words to explain it later, she had said somewhat whimsically that it was as though a window had opened into heaven and she could see angels dancing. Even she felt embarrassed at her flight of fancy, but no other words would come. Whatever that something was, it changed her view of him for ever. Then she had blinked, shaken her head slightly, and she had been back in the garden listening to an ugly, entrancing man.

His was the image that had entered Phoebe's mind as Stachys had read the night before. A man full of contradictions. Hideous, but enchanting; with a harsh but mesmerising voice; an average orator whose words struck home time and time again. Stachys had made Paul's words sound so much more polished than they ever were when Paul said them but still the words were Paul's. Phoebe found she couldn't hear them without seeing Paul: brim full of passion, waving his arms around his head, pacing to and fro, spittle flying from his mouth as he tried to articulate all that was in his mind.

Phoebe returned from her reverie with a jolt. There was something that she had been anxious about. What had it been? The memory hit her with even more force than it had done the first time. She had lost everything – her money, her clothes, the other letters of introduction. Everything was gone, and she was quite alone in a large and terrifying city. That thought was enough to propel her into her smelly, crumpled travelling clothes and down the stairs into the midst of the argument that had woken her a few moments before.

As she stumbled down the stairs, inelegant – again – in her terror, she looked up and stopped stock still. The voices she had heard had suggested just three people: Prisca, Aquila, and the unknown third. As she looked up she realised she had tumbled into the middle of a large meeting. There were people everywhere, transforming what last night had seemed a large room into a small, cramped space. People were standing and sitting all around the room. Every chair, table, and window ledge was filled with human bodies. Some were even sitting on a large pile of skins in the corner. Phoebe found herself identifying the pelts as the source of that odd smell, even as that inevitable flush of embarrassment began to work its way from her neck to her face.

'I told you that you'd disturb her,' Prisca's voice cut into the startled silence. 'We're sorry, my dear, we wanted you to sleep as long as you could, but Herodion here couldn't help himself.' Prisca pointed to a slight, dark-haired man, whose long tunic with tassels at the corners indicated that he was Jewish. He looked as though he was about to start talking again, as though the words that Phoebe's sudden arrival had brought to an abrupt halt would spill out again at any moment. Prisca clearly thought the same, as she continued speaking with barely a pause for breath. 'You've missed breakfast, and this great horde consumed every last scrap of our barley bread when they arrived shortly after dawn. I

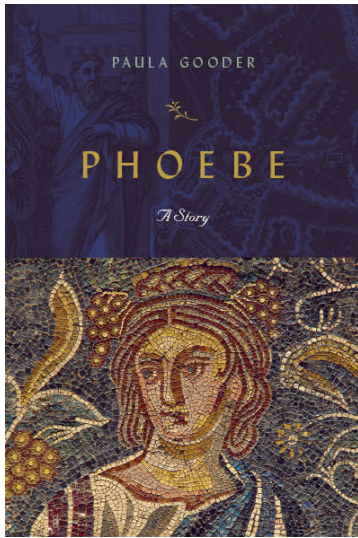


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declare it time for an early prandium.' She clapped her hands together, and various people around the room moved quickly to rummage on shelves and in bags at their feet. In almost no time at all, the table in the centre of the room was spread with bread, olives, cheese, and wine.

But Phoebe was entirely oblivious to all of this. As the people moved, they revealed the diminutive figure of the slave boy. The one who had met her at Ostia. The one who had relieved her of her possessions at Aristobulus's house. There he sat, as determinedly and forcefully as his small frame would allow, on what Phoebe recognised with a flood of relief was her travelling chest.

'You can get up now, Felix,' Aquila's soft voice sounded above the melee of food preparation. 'I think he might have been sitting on your chest all night, Phoebe. Absolutely no one could get him to leave it.'

'Felix said he would look after it, and Felix,' he indicated himself with a comically dramatic flourish, 'is always true to his word.' Felix glared at Phoebe fiercely, apparently challenging her to disagree.

Phoebe, feeling herself almost giddy with relief, rummaged among her belongings to find a coin with which to reward him. The first coin that came to hand was a denarius; it was far too much, but so great was her relief that she offered it to him with a smile. No sooner had she held it out than she realised what a great mistake she had made. Felix's face became cold, disgust flowing from every pore.

'Felix was asked to help,' he said with a flinty expression. 'Felix was glad to help. Felix does not take money for his generosity.'

Phoebe stammered her apology for affronting him so badly, and as she did she found herself looking straight into his eyes. At that moment, something changed between them, and Phoebe knew that this small person would become an important part of her life. Felix seemed to know this too since he went to Phoebe's side and stood there, as though he were her personal guard and protector, trying to look as tall as his tiny form could manage.

'I think you have made a friend for life there,' Aquila observed.

'Now we eat,' Prisca declared, and the assembled company turned to the groaning table.

—Taken from chapter 2



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