

Text: Philippians 2:25-30

Title: Epaphroditus: A First-Rate Servant

Truth: God gives us a model of service to follow in our lives.

Date/Location: February 27, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

In the title of our message is the name of a man who was a faithful minister and helper to the apostle Paul. His name comes up in these verses and in Philippians 4:18.

This text may seem to be too focused on Paul's present situation to be helpful today. But I think we will find some good gems if we look carefully at what we find in our study. For one, think of this: Paul cared for Epaphroditus, Epaphroditus for his church family, the church family for Paul and Epaphroditus. This is a model of mutual care for one another.

The end of verse 30 and 4:18 describe the situation surrounding this part of Paul's letter. The Philippian church sent Epaphroditus to Rome to find Paul and deliver aid to him. He delayed in returning, and the Philippians wondered what had happened. Maybe he had been injured, died, or had stolen the money? Then they heard that he was sick, and somehow the fact that they knew got all the way back to Paul and Epaphroditus in Rome. Paul then writes the letter in part to confirm that Epaphroditus was indeed sick, to explain how sick he had been, and to send a "receipt" that he had received their financial assistance. All would be well in the Philippian church after this was accomplished.

I. Description of Epaphroditus, v. 25

The apostle Paul obviously cared deeply about Epaphroditus. He called him a:

- A. **Brother.** Paul and his dear friend share the same faith, the same Lord, and the same Father. They are kin.
- B. **Fellow worker.** They labored together in the gospel. Labor it was! But notice that Paul does not elevate himself. He sees what his friends are doing as just as needful as what he is doing.

- C. **Fellow soldier.** Paul and Epaphroditus experienced together the rigors and dangers of service to their Master.
- D. **Your messenger.** Epaphroditus was a *servant* of the church, and they sent (apostolos, from which we get the word *apostle*) him to carry financial help to Paul in prison.¹ He may have been an elder there, or a deacon. In fact, his role in this letter is as a deacon to Paul—to pass financial support and to help with the mundane needs of an apostle who was confined to imprisonment.
- E. **One who ministered** to my need. Perhaps Paul needed food delivered, or medicine, or other physical needs. To **minister** is from a special word in Greek that refers to priestly service. See 2:17 for the same word, as well as 2:30 (regarding the entire church). The sacrifices that believers make are in fact like the priestly sacrifices of old times. See your work for God in that way, as worship.

II. Sickness of Epaphroditus, v. 26-27

- A. Paul did not heal everyone he knew who was sick. He left Trophimus sick in a town called Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Was he not able to heal Epaphroditus? Obviously, God wanted him to go through this illness, and for Paul and the church to bear the burden of concern for him—"here he is, laying in a bed of sickness because of me. I'm the reason he is almost dead." How terrible. Paul only healed when it was God's will for him to use the signs of an apostle, not when it was merely Paul's will to do so.
- B. Notice that Epaphroditus was not distressed that **he himself** was sick. That would be natural. Rather, he was distressed that his **church family** heard he was sick. Some have postulated that there was something more going on, perhaps that the church was dissatisfied with his ministry somehow; but the text gives the reason for the distress: it says he "was distressed **because** you had heard that he was sick." They seemed to be deeply concerned for Epaphroditus, and he had a Christian concern for his church family. Given that he was deathly ill, it is remarkable that he was

¹ Note that an apostle of a specific local church is different from an apostle of Jesus Christ. The "senders" are different. The latter is a "technical apostle," and the former is just someone "sent."

concerned about this kind of thing. He was not one guilty of only “seeking his own things” (2:21).

It would not make sense for a man of this character to be concerned out of pride or privacy that, “Other people know I am sick...that shows I am weak...that makes me look bad.” The distress came from his good relationship with them and his concern that they were troubled. They had sent him, and now he was so sick as to die; it could be heavy on their consciences that they sent him.

- C. The situation was that Epaphroditus became ill while he was with Paul. The rigors of the journey, the weather and temperature, some virus or bacteria, some allergy, or something else set in and ended up nearly costing him his life. Let that sink in: because he went out of his way to help a minister of the gospel, he nearly died due to natural causes. All else being equal, this would not have happened to him had he not ventured out of his normal routine to take financial support to the apostle Paul in prison.
- D. A little less than half of the times that I have traveled overseas or similar far distances, I have gotten ill during or after the trip. The last time I got COVID. Other times it has been various afflictions toward which I tend. Therefore, I know that if I travel, there are risks involved and it could be unpleasant. But none of these things were life-threatening like Epaphroditus. I do not know that any of us listening to these words could legitimately say, “I became severely ill *because I ministered for the Lord.*” He could say so.
- E. Notice that there are two inter-connected reasons why they should honor Epaphroditus: he nearly died in service to Christ, and he was doing what the Philippian church could not do in support of Paul.²
- F. As I sit in my study thinking about this situation, I am imagining someone speculating that Epaphroditus had some common transmissible disease that would be easily treatable today. This in turn could make you think that the situation really was not *that* bad, or that it does not apply today because our deadly diseases are much more difficult to fix. So, imagine yourself in the “modern

² Prayer for missionaries is good, but there is no substitute for money, communication, and personal visits.

Epaphroditus” situation: heart failure, cancer, stroke, or something that *would* be life threatening. Imagine further that illness came upon you because you were serving the Lord. Maybe the airplane flight caused a blood clot in your leg that traveled to your brain. Or maybe the stress of hiking to a remote church meeting put your heart over the edge and you became unable to function. Or maybe you were called to a place full of air pollution and got a terrible lung infection. *Then* think about how important God’s mercy would be to you.

- G. The sorrow that Paul would have felt because of his friend’s death would have been awful. “Sorrow upon sorrow” is a phrase that conveys a depth of grief that is hard to explain in mere words. That sorrow would be multiplied because not only would a man be dead, and not only Paul would feel responsible, but also the church in Philippi would be missing one of its key leaders and servants. You see, the apostle Paul felt great compassion for both the messenger and the church. He was not so concerned about himself as he was for others (2:4).

You may well have gone through (or are presently in) a time of sorrow upon sorrow. By trusting God and with His help and fellowship with His people, you *can* make it through to a better state. A lot of it depends on you—will you spiral down into despair, or will you spiral up toward God?

- H. Paul attributes the healing of this illness to God. God had mercy. There is no indication that God worked a miracle—that would have likely been done by the hand of the apostle if so. A happy providence smiled upon all involved and God granted Epaphroditus an extension of life. Paul and others must have been praying for God to do this work, and now they could offer deep thanksgiving to God for His mercy.

III. Return of Epaphroditus, v. 28-30

- A. Once Epaphroditus was healthy, Paul eagerly sent him home. He had a zeal and earnestness in sending Epaphroditus home. Have you had the experience of having a dear friend or family member in your home, and wanting them to stay, but knowing they must go

because of some circumstances back home? You urge them to leave, even though they might not want to, and you do not want to see them go, but you virtually push them out the door! Paul pushed his friend out the door and on his way.

Why send him back? First, to comfort the Philippians who were concerned that he had become ill, and second to comfort Epaphroditus, who was distressed. He was distracted and burdened by the effect on the church, and it was better that he return.

B. The church back home would be happy to see their fellow servant. And *that* made Paul happy to think about. His sorrow would be erased. His was not a Monday to Friday business trip such that he did not miss a weekend of ministry. It was many days of travel, a lengthy illness and recuperation, and more days or weeks of travel in return. It may have been many weeks or months of time total.

When some of you in our church family go away for a time, it is noticed. And joy comes when we see each other again. How much more when someone returns to church after a lengthy hospitalization and near death.

C. Paul instructed the church to receive their messenger with great rejoicing. With this letter, there could be no question that he was a servant of the highest caliber of godliness and dedication. He was worthy of high esteem, not doubt; of honor, not dishonor; of commendation, not condemnation. People who stick their necks out to the point of death for the Lord are worthy of admiration. And Epaphroditus volunteered for this work in which he would become associated with the apostle and risk being thrown into prison with him. He knew there were risks involved, and he undertook the work anyway.

D. The work of Christ for which Epaphroditus was near to death was that he helped Paul. He was not directly preaching or being a missionary *per se*. But it was real service!

E. The aid sent with Epaphroditus was probably in the form of money because that would be easier to carry over the distance required. It was over six hundred straight-line miles, including a trip across the

Adriatic Sea. Even today it would be 770 miles and 20 hours by car on the *Egnatius Odos*, the Ignatian Way. It could have taken weeks of journey with stops along the way. No doubt hazards abounded.

- F. Paul needed finances to live (food, drink, clothing)—if Roman prisons were as we have heard, places where the provisions were scarce at best. But he might also have needed support to pay for legal help. The modern application of his situation would certainly require such financial support.
- G. We must not read “lack of service” at the end of verse 30 as a criticism. Since the church had helped Paul on multiple occasions, he was not complaining about their lack of involvement. It had to do with their inability to be physically present.

Conclusion

Interpreters often say that the book of Philippians is about joy, but another good theme to observe is service to others. Consider the teaching of 2:4-5 to all Christians. Consider the examples of Jesus Christ (2:5-8); Paul (2:17, 22); Timothy (2:19-23); Epaphroditus (2:25-30, 4:18); and the entire church (4:14-18). Do you think that God is trying to tell us something?

The church works because of the service of its people. This service models the love of Christ toward us as we love one another. This service is not just for pastors or missionaries. It is for everyone.

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