

Series: To Live is Christ
Title: Serving Christ, Part 2
Text: Philippians 2:25-30
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Verse 25

Philippians 2:19-24 gave attention to Timothy, one of Paul's ministry counterparts. In verse 25, the apostle mentioned another gospel worker. He said, "But I considered it necessary to send you Epaphroditus—my brother, coworker, and fellow soldier, as well as your messenger and minister to my need" (Philippians 2:25). Though Paul hoped to send Timothy shortly (Philippians 2:19), he planned to immediately dispatch one named Epaphroditus. The man's voyage to Philippi was deemed "necessary" by Paul. The language conveyed the idea of urgency. For some reason, Paul considered Epaphroditus' service as indispensable to the church at Philippi. Maybe unhealthy doctrines (Philippians 3:1-21) and divisions (Philippians 4:2-3) made the man's trip a pressing priority. Paul knew the church needed to hear the apostolic teaching contained within his letter.

In sending Epaphroditus, Paul used several labels to describe the man's faithfulness to the Lord. First, he called him a "brother." The term was one that was used in the early church of born-again believers. It depicted the family-like love that exists amongst Christians (Matthew 12:50; Romans 16:14; Hebrews 2:11). In referring to Epaphroditus as a brother, Paul made intentional reference to the man's standing as a Christian convert. The man's name was a Gentile one. It literally meant "One devoted to Aphrodite." The name was a tribute to the Greek god of sex, pleasure, and procreation.

Epaphroditus undoubtedly had a pagan upbringing. Quite possibly, the man was a convert from Paul's church-planting days in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40). Despite his pagan upbringing, His position before God qualified Him to serve within the body of Christ. Though he was reared in a licentious, polytheistic family, he was used by the Lord to deliver letters for the greatest missionary who ever lived (Philippians 4:18). He was an instrument of encouragement and service during Paul's house arrest (Philippians 2:30).

Epaphroditus stands as a memorial for believers of all generations. His life demonstrates how God wants to use each believer in kingdom service. Christian conversion qualifies every believer to work within the church. Some mistakenly view Christian service as something reserved for the spiritually elite. No such economy exists in God's mind. Through Christ and His Spirit, every believer has been gifted (Romans 12:6-8) and commissioned (Matthew 28:18-20) to serve in God's Kingdom.

Paul secondly referred to Epaphroditus as a "coworker." The label indicated that the man exerted effort in toiling for the church. Paul often used it to speak of those who worked with him for the sake of the Great Commission (Romans 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 8:23; Philippians 4:3; Colossians 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Philemon 1, 24; 3 John 8). Epaphroditus' testimony is a reminder that the Christian life is not one of ease. Service for Christ often requires hard work.

Third, Paul referred to Epaphroditus as a "fellow soldier." Paul used the same title in speaking of one named "Archippus" in Philemon 2. The term was a fitting one for those engaged in Christian service, since all Christian service involves a degree of spiritual warfare. The Bible says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens" (Ephesians 6:12).

Fourth, Paul called Epaphroditus a "messenger." The Greek term underlying English translation is the one from which we get our term "apostle." The term literally meant "sent one." Epaphroditus was not an apostle in the official sense of the word, but he was in an unofficial sense. The New Testament often used apostolic jargon to speak of the believer's responsibility to share the gospel (2 Corinthians 8:23). As it appears in our text, the term

provided a reminder that all Christian service involves the act of sharing the message of Christ. As Paul dispatched his helper, he was confident that the man would serve as a faithful gospel herald.

Lastly, Paul regarded Epaphroditus as a “minister” to his own “need.” The apostle undoubtedly sensed a great need for help, considering both his imprisonment (Philippians 1:12-13) and the ongoing weight of his ministry obligations (2 Corinthians 11:28). The apostle had need of encouragement (Philippians 1:12), physical help (Philippians 1:21-23), and financial assistance (Philippians 4:15-20). Epaphroditus had travelled back and forth between Paul and the church at Philippi to provide help with all of these matters. The man embodied the essence of true Christian service. Such service is aimed at the physical and spiritual needs of the body of Christ.

Verse 26

Paul’s description of Epaphroditus continued with the apostle saying, “...since he has been longing for all of you and was distressed because you heard that he was sick” (Philippians 2:26). The apostle’s language depicted intense desires and yearnings.¹ Paul had previously used the term to speak of his love for the church at Philippi (Philippians 1:8). His intent now was to convey the deep affection Epaphroditus had for his church family.² Such love for the body of Christ is an essential attribute of healthy Christian living (John 13:34). In addition, it serves as a driving motivator for faithful Christian service. Believers who love the body of Christ will naturally serve the body of Christ. The love of Christ will compel them to do so (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Epaphroditus’ love for the Philippians was so deep that he was actually “distressed” because of his absence from the church. Paul’s language was strong. It spoke of one undergoing a “great mental and spiritual disturbance.”³ The term was sometimes used of a traveller experiencing a bout of homesickness. It was a compound word that literally meant “away from home.”⁴ The language picturesquely described one who was almost overwhelmed by sorrow.⁵

By reading between the lines of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, it seems Epaphroditus had travelled as a representative from the church at Philippi to meet Paul in Rome. He carried the congregation’s generous financial offering to the apostle. Either while in route or after he had arrived in Rome, the man became ill. Consequently, he was unable to return to Philippi as scheduled. Through some means unknown to us, news was sent to Philippi concerning the man’s illness. Epaphroditus was “distressed” by the fact that his home church might be anxious about his physical well being. He longed to be with them in order to put them at ease and to assist them in continued gospel ministry. Epaphroditus certainly emulated the type of Great Commission love that drives an individual to sacrificial service for the church. He embodied the words Paul uttered earlier in his letter — “Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).

Verse 27

In verse 27, Paul elaborated on Epaphroditus’ sickness and explained how the man had been of personal benefit to his apostolic ministry. He said, “Indeed, he was so sick that he nearly

¹ Zodhiates, 633.

² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, ἐπιποθέω.

³ Martin, 138.

⁴ Robertson, 449.

⁵ Zodhiates, 81.

died. However, God had mercy on him, and not only on him but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow” (Philippians 2:27). Apparently Epaphroditus’ sickness was severe. Interestingly, Paul said nothing about the possibility of healing in his account of the man’s illness. As the apostolic age came closer to an end, the signs and wonders that accompanied that age (Hebrews 2:4) also came to end (1 Corinthians 13:8). Thus, supernatural healing was not a foremost concern for Paul.

It is also interesting to note that Paul in no way blamed Epaphroditus’ sickness on sin or a lack of faith. The apostle Paul did not hold to views of healing seen within the modern charismatic movement, nor did he regard physical sickness as being a result of a lack of faith, as some within the modern word-of-faith movement do. From Paul’s words we learn that even the most faithful of Christian servants can experience sickness, even sickness that leads to death. Sometimes the Lord heals such servants, on other occasions He doesn’t. The ways and will of God in such things are often a mystery to us.

Nevertheless, Epaphroditus’ sickness resulted in healing and health. Paul said, “God had mercy on him.” The virtue of “mercy” involves displays of pity and compassion. Seeing the man’s physical suffering, the Lord mercifully provided providential physical healing. The man experienced relief of pain and he was restored to a healthy state.

However, Epaphroditus’ healing didn’t result in mercy for him alone. Paul was also a recipient of divine compassion and pity. If Epaphroditus would have died, Paul would have had “sorrow upon sorrow.” According to Paul’s testimony, Epaphroditus was undoubtedly of great assistance to the apostle. Paul was surely lonely in his imprisonment. Maybe his state was similar to the one he experienced toward the end of his life. In what many believe was a later imprisonment shortly before his death, Paul said, “...Demas has deserted me, since he loved this present world, and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me” (2 Timothy 4:10-11).

The loneliness and isolation of prison was surely difficult for the apostle. Though he was a mighty minister for the gospel, he was still human. He needed Christian interaction and encouragement. No pastor or minister is beyond the emotional needs of finite humanity. Each needs the regular encouragement all humans need.

While imprisoned in Rome, chained to members of the Praetorian Guard, Paul undoubtedly valued any visit from the brothers and sisters of the congregation in that city. His grief was likely compounded by reports of those who gloated in his imprisonment (Philippians 1:15). Consequently, Epaphroditus’ visit from Philippi was surely a great encouragement. If the man’s sickness would have resulted in death, Paul would have had more sorrow on top of the sorrow of his imprisonment and isolation.

Verse 28

Knowing that the return of Epaphroditus would be a blessing to the church at Philippi, Paul intended to send the man back to the church. The apostle said, “For this reason, I am very eager to send him so that you may rejoice again when you see him and I may be less anxious” (Philippians 2:28). Considering the encouragement Paul received from Epaphroditus, it may have seemed strange for him to send the man back to Philippi. However, Paul, by his own admission, was “very eager to send him.” The language indicated that Paul intended to send the man on his way “as quick as possible.”⁶

Why was Paul eager for Epaphroditus to return? The words “so that” depict Paul’s purpose in sending the man back to Philippi. The apostle said, “...so that you may rejoice.” The joy of the church was Paul’s concern. Though he received personal comfort in his imprisonment from Epaphroditus’ visits, he knew the church’s need of joy outweighed his own needs. In the original language of the text, Paul used a passive voice verb. The verbiage

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, σπουδαίως.

indicated that Epaphroditus' return would have the effect of provoking joy in Philippi. A groundswell of happiness would rise as the man returned to the congregation.

Though Paul himself was struggling with anxiety and loneliness in his imprisonment (Philippians 1:30), he knew the Philippians had a greater need of joy. It is for this reason that joy was such a recurring theme in his letter (Philippians 1:18; 2:17-18; 3:1; 4:4, 10). In accordance with other New Testament teaching (Romans 16:19; 1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:13; Colossians 2:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:9; 2 John 4), Paul knew that believers have supernatural abilities for encouraging one another. Thus, he knew Epaphroditus' arrival would do something to brighten the mood of believers at Philippi.

With the Philippians' increase of joy, Paul would experience a release of tension himself. He said, "I may be less anxious." The apostle's language depicted a state of carefree living. It seems the apostle was concerned about the Philippians' concern for Epaphroditus. If the man's return would serve the purpose of encouraging the church, Paul would rejoice in allowing him to return. One has said that the "joy felt by the Philippians would mitigate" the apostle's own sorrow.⁷ Epaphroditus' life and ministry stands as a memorial to the benefit and blessing of Christian service. When believers faithfully use their spiritual gifts within the church, others are encouraged and edified. The body experiences more joy when more people serve.

Verse 29

Knowing that some in Philippi might have been a little perplexed by Epaphroditus' return after such a long absence, Paul instructed the church to give the man a favorable reception. He said, "Therefore, welcome him in the Lord with all joy and hold men like him in honor" (Philippians 2:29). In the original language of the text, Paul's words contained a command. The apostle didn't want the church to be hesitant with their hospitality. None needed to hold a grudge on account of the man's long delay in returning. It would have been unbecoming of any within the membership to be suspicious about Epaphroditus' sickness and absence. One has called Paul's words a "noble plea" for the church to receive the man warmly.⁸

On top of welcoming the man well, Paul wanted the church to "hold people like him in honor." The word rendered "honor" (*éntimos*) wasn't the typical word (*timé*) used for honor in the New Testament. The most basic word for honor carried ideas of respect and esteem. In our current text, Paul used a word that added a preposition to the normal word for honor. Thus, he depicted heightened levels of respect and esteem. The honor of which he spoke portrayed a person as being "precious" or "costly."⁹

As a committed Christian worker, Epaphroditus was valuable to the cause of Christ. His work was helpful to the church; therefore, he deserved a healthy degree of respect within the church. Paul encouraged the Philippians to have the same attitude he upheld in one of his letters to Timothy — "The elders who are good leaders are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). Epaphroditus' life serves as a reminder of the high value of Christian service to the church. Because of the blessings that come from those who serve well, the church should exhibit a healthy type of regard for Christian service and servants.

Verse 30

Epaphroditus was to be so honored because of the way he ministered. Paul said the man "... came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life" (Philippians 2:30). The word translated "risking" was a first-century term that referred to gambling. Though the exact nature of Epaphroditus' risk is unknown, it seems the man put his life in jeopardy for the sake of

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 454.

⁸ Robertson, ?.

⁹ Zodiates, *ἐντιμος*.

gospel ministry. Maybe he had worked himself to the point of exhaustion, ignoring his own physical health (Philippians 2:26). Perhaps he had traveled into hostile regions for the sake of Paul and the Philippians, exposing himself to the threat of persecution. Whatever the case, it is apparent that Epaphroditus made great sacrifices for Christ's mission. Such a commitment is a stark contrast to that of many modern evangelicals. Nowadays it seems the slightest discomforts, inconveniences, or scheduling conflicts often qualify as valid exemptions from Christian duty. One has rightly said, "Epaphroditus' life brings its own challenge and rebuke to an easy-going Christianity which makes no stern demands."¹⁰

Epaphroditus sacrificed and worked hard for the gospel. According to Paul, he was devoted to "...make up what was lacking..." (Philippians 2:30). Paul had financial need associated with his missionary work. The Philippians were generous to send an offering in an attempt to help the apostle (Philippians 4:15-20). Paul spoke of their generosity when writing to the Corinthians. In doing so, he used some of the same terms from our current verse: "When I was present with you and in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my needs. I have kept myself, and will keep myself, from burdening you in any way" (2 Corinthians 11:9).

When they sent their offering to Paul, the Philippians chose Epaphroditus to deliver it. He almost died in route to the apostle. However, he spared no expense in making sure Paul had what he needed. If the man would have failed in his assignment, the apostle's needs would have not been satisfied. In a sense, the Philippians would have been "lacking" in their responsibility to the apostle. Epaphroditus was not willing to let such a thing happen. He pressed on, despite his physical sickness, so that Paul might have what he needed for ministry.

¹⁰ Martin, 141.