



Sending Epaphroditus

Philippians 2:25-30

1. The Man (verse 25)
2. His Sickness (verses 26-27)
3. His Reception (verses 28-30)

Each week of my life, I live with a text of Scripture. I live with the text that I'm going to be preaching the next Sunday. This week, it's been Philippians 2:25-30. Next week, I'll be living with Philippians 3:1-3. The week after that, I'll be living with the next verses in line.

I think about these verses a lot. I think about them all week long. Monday is a big day for me to listen to other pastors preach on the text as I do my work around the house. Throughout the week, I read whatever I can on the text. Each night as I go to bed, I'm normally mulling over the text in my mind; that's one of the reasons I find it so useful to memorize the passages I'm preaching. Wherever I am, I can be studying and dwelling deeply on my text.

I find that the Lord will often meet me in the text in a special way. This week, we are going to hear about a faithful man named Epaphroditus, who was sick and almost died. But, the Lord showed mercy upon him and allowed him to live. He went on to be the one to deliver Paul's letter to the Philippians to the church in Philippi.

This week, I have been sick. Mostly toward the end of the week, on Friday and Saturday. The past few nights have been pretty rough. I have this head cold. My eyes hurt. My nose is stuffed up. My head feels like it's going to explode. If I wasn't preaching this morning, I doubt that I would even have come to church. And yet, I'm well enough to stand before you today. And I trust that the Lord will give me the adrenalin that I need to preach to all of you this morning.

Let's turn to our text this morning. Our text this morning covers Philippians, chapter 2 and verses 25-30.

Before we read it, I want to remind you that when it comes to studying history, there are great differences between modern and ancient history. When studying modern history, you cannot hope to know everything there is to know about the subject at hand. If the history is recent enough, it may be that there are many people alive who can give insight into the people or events that you are studying. Depending upon your dates and topics, you may be able to find an endless supply of material to research. However, when studying ancient history, it is very much different. Depending upon the subject, you may be able to read everything there is we know about some subject or event in a matter of minutes.

The challenge of studying modern history is to synthesize all of the data into a narrative that makes sense. The challenge of ancient history is to expand upon what little data we have to form the complete story.

Well, this morning, we are going to be doing some study of ancient history. This morning, we are going to be looking at a man named Epaphroditus. In all ancient literature, he is mentioned only twice, and both times occur in the book of Philippians. He is mentioned once in chapter 2. He is mentioned once in chapter 4. As such, in less than a minute, we can hear all that there is to know about this noble man.

As he is mentioned in the Bible, I trust that the Lord has something for us all this morning. So, let's read our text, beginning with chapter 2, and verse 25.

Philippians 2:25-30

But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you. Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

The only other place that we read of Epaphroditus is in chapter 4, verse 18, ...

Philippians 4:18

But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.

This is all that we know of Epaphroditus. And so, this morning, as we are doing a bit of ancient history, let us try to put together what little pieces we have and fill in the story.

From chapter 4 and verse 18, we can discern that Epaphroditus came from Philippi, bringing a financial gift to be used for meeting his physical needs while in prison. "I have received ... from Epaphroditus what you have sent." And turning back to chapter 2, we see that he had remained with Paul for some time, but now, Paul was ready to send him back to Philippi. You see this in verse 25, "But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, ..." This thought governs our entire passage, from verses 25 to 30. In this paragraph, Paul is explaining why he is sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi.

In this way, this text is much like our text we looked at last week, in which Paul was explaining his hope of sending Timothy to Philippi as well. The title of my message last week was, "Sending Timothy." Appropriately, the title of my message this week is, "Sending Epaphroditus."

It seems almost as if it was Paul's decision, and Paul's decision alone, to send him back. He writes, "But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, ..." Paul's words indicate that it wasn't so much that Epaphroditus had informed Paul that he was going back to Philippi, and Paul is passing that on. No, it seems as if Epaphroditus was willing to stay with Paul. But, in evaluating the situation (as I will unfold in my message), Paul thought it best to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi. And most scholars believe that Epaphroditus brought the book of Philippians during his trip, which was to be read to the entire congregation in Philippi (Philippians 1:1).

Now, before explaining why he was sending Epaphroditus to them, Paul first speaks to his character. Or, as I'm calling it in our outline this morning, ...

1. The Man (verse 25)

In verse 25, Paul uses five terms to describe this honorable man. He calls him, ...

- a. My brother
- b. My fellow worker
- c. My fellow soldier
- d. Your messenger
- e. Minister to my need.

In the spirit of exposition, let's work through each of these characteristics one by one. And as we do, please note that there is much application here for all of us. Each of these descriptions call us to think highly of this man, Epaphroditus. We would do well to have all five of these characteristics in our lives as well.

So, let's begin with the first one, ...

a. My brother

That is, "my fellow believer." In Bible times (and in our times as well), people addressed fellow believers with familial terms. This practice comes out clearly in Philippians. Eight other times in this letter, Paul refers to fellow Christians under the banner of "brethren" [\[1\]](#), which means "brothers." In fact, the ESV translates this word, "brothers." Look down at chapter 3, verse 1, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord." Look at the beginning of chapter 4, "Therefore, my beloved brethren." Chapter 4, verse 8, "Finally, brethren." Paul considered those in Philippi to be his "brothers." That is, his spiritual "brothers."

Now, of course, this does refer to the sisters in Philippi as well. Paul is using the inclusive masculine in this case, using "brothers" to refer to "brothers and sisters" alike. That's why the NIV translates this one word with the phrase, "brothers and sisters." It is appropriate for us to use that terminology here at church. We are a church family, filled with brothers and sisters by faith.

This follows the pattern established by our Lord Jesus. Do you remember the time when Jesus was at home and the house was so filled that His mother and brothers were unable to enter the home? Word of what was going on reached someone in the home and he cried out, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You" (Mark 3:32). At that point, Jesus said, "Who are My mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:33). Then, looking about at those who were sitting and listening to Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34-35).

This is the reason why Paul would call Epaphroditus, "my brother." They weren't brothers by birth. They were spiritual brothers, brothers in the Lord. They had both placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His finished work on the cross on their behalf. And thus, they had a bond between each other.

Here's the simple application: Are you a brother? Are you sister? Have you placed your faith in Christ? If Paul were sending you back to Philippi, would he say the same of you? That you are his brother? That you are his sister?

Let's move on. Epaphroditus was identified by Paul as "my brother." He is also identified as ...

b. My fellow worker

That is, "one who is working with me in the cause of the gospel."

This puts Epaphroditus in the category with others in the Bible who Paul identified as "fellow workers." And it's a pretty stellar list. Here are a few: Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3); Timothy (Romans 16:21); Apollos (1 Corinthians 39); Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23); Philemon (Philemon 1); Mark and Luke (Philemon 24).

Epaphroditus is in pretty good company. But, then again, he was one of the members of the church in Philippi, where Paul identified many as "fellow workers" (Philippians 4:2). In chapter 1, we saw how the entire church had been laboring for the progress of the gospel. And Paul was thankful to God for them in all his prayers, "in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5). And one way that they participated was to send them this financial gift through Epaphroditus. And as Epaphroditus was the one they selected to bring the gift, he willingly demonstrated his heart to work for the gospel.

The trip from Philippi to Rome would certainly have been by sea, as both cities were near the coasts. To the best of my knowledge, it took a few weeks to travel between these two cities. ²This is why Paul called him, ...

d. Your Messenger

He was the one who came and delivered the gift from the Philippians. And I'm also sure that he came with a report of how things were going in Philippi. How else could Paul know all of the things that he knew about the church in Philippi, but that Epaphroditus told him? How else could Paul know about the trials of unity going on in the church [that two women named Euodia and Syntyche were quarrelling (4:2)], but that Epaphroditus told him? How else could Paul know about the concern they had for Paul's imprisonment (1:12-13), but that Epaphroditus told him? How else could Paul know about how they had a heart for Paul's ministry, but circumstances prohibited them from giving to Paul until now (4:10), but that Epaphroditus told him?

But, I don't think that it was only the travel for the sake of the gospel that made Paul call Epaphroditus, "My fellow worker." Certainly, his character in Rome spoke for itself. In fact, look at the fifth characteristic of this man. He was ...

e. Minister to My Need

Epaphroditus was a servant to Paul. Remember last week when I spoke about the terms of prison in the Bible times. The prisoners didn't provide everything that you needed. You needed a friend on the outside of prison to help you. Last week, I argued that Timothy was certainly one of these friends. And here we see another one of Paul's friends, Epaphroditus.

Surely, when Paul had a need, Epaphroditus was ready, willing, and able to meet his need. Need a food run? Epaphroditus was there. Need a clothes run? Epaphroditus was there. Need a message sent? Epaphroditus was there. He brought a message from Philippi to Rome. He was going to bring one back again. Certainly, he would be up for any length of distance to travel to get a message from one place to another.

The word Paul used here to describe Epaphroditus' heart of service is a word most often associated with the priestly service. In using this word, I'm sure that Paul had in mind more than mere manual labor. No, Epaphroditus was able to serve in such a way that Paul's spiritual needs were met as well. In other words, Epaphroditus was a godly man who went about his business in a godly way.

He didn't complain (2:14). He didn't grumble (2:14). No task was too low for him (2:3). He kept Paul in mind (2:4). He served with joy, rejoicing in the gospel (1:27). He was thankful (1:3) and prayerful (1:4). He probably was encouraging to Paul as he awaited trial. Certainly he was telling Paul of the things that the Lord was doing in Philippi.

Is this your manner of service toward others? Do you do so willingly? Do you do so with joy and thankfulness? Do you speak much of God's work you see Him doing? Are you dependent upon the Lord in all that you do? Epaphroditus certainly was. Such things speak to the character of the man. Paul also called him (in verse 25), ...

c. My fellow soldier

I believe that this term has reference to his hard work and durability and strength. Soldiers are tough guys. Traveling for several months with a load of cash on hand is not for the faint of heart, especially in those days, when thieves and robbers were at your every turn. Soldiers are loyal guys. When their commander tells them to go into battle, they charge. Their loyalty is to their country and the king they serve. Soldiers are troopers. When it's muddy and cold and rainy outside, they keep right on marching. When they have been keeping a 15-hour shift, they remain at their post until told otherwise. It's right here that you sense a difference between Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Now, this is somewhat conjecture. But, I picture Epaphroditus to be a big guy. I picture him to be a faithful guy who will sacrifice whatever he can for you. I picture him to be a soft guy, tender towards Paul. I picture him to be a lovable guy, someone you really like. But, I also picture him as not having the pastoral gifts like Timothy had. So, he's not going to return to those in Philippi and open the Scriptures and teach them and help to shepherd the congregation. That's simply not his gifting.

Now, that's not a slam on Epaphroditus. Far from it. However, that's the very thing that helps me to understand verses 20 and 21, "For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus."

See, I have often had this question about Epaphroditus. How can Paul say verses 20-21, and yet commend Epaphroditus so highly? I think that this is the key in verses 20-21, Paul is thinking about the man who will come and help shepherd the people of Philippi with a genuine heart of care. That's outside the scope of Epaphroditus' gifts. But, it's not that Epaphroditus is in any way a second-class Christian. His gifts are different. But, his heart is the same as Paul and Timothy's. His heart is Philippians 2:3-4.

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Isn't this Epaphroditus? Isn't this what he said about him in verse 25? Then how could Paul say, "For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:20-21). I think it has to do with gifts. "I don't have anyone else able to come and be a pastor to you all in Philippi. But, I do have Epaphroditus, who has been a great blessing to me."

How about getting real practical here? I'll try to give you an idea of what's going on. I think of myself as a Timothy sort of person, one willing and able to go and help shepherd a group of people that I love. I think of Epaphroditus a bit like Steve H. He's big. He's strong. He's trustworthy. I would trust him with a boatload of cash to bring someplace on my behalf. He is a servant. He thinks of others. But, don't get me wrong, Steve's not going to come and shepherd Rock Valley Bible Church. That's not a slam on Steve. That's an acknowledgement of his giftedness, as opposed to mine.

God has created us this way. It is our call to be faithful with the gifts He has given to us. And this passage ought to come as a great encouragement to all of you. Whatever God has given you, use it in serving Him for His glory.

Not everyone has to be a Timothy. His attitude and heart? Yes. His ability? No. Not everyone has to be an Epaphroditus. His attitude and heart? Yes. His ability? No. So go and serve the Lord and be the man or woman or boy or girl that God has called you to be. That's Epaphroditus. He is identified as ...

- a. My brother
- b. My fellow worker
- c. My fellow soldier
- d. Your messenger
- e. Minister to my need.

So, let's transition to my second point this morning. Let's now look at ...

2. His Sickness (verses 26-27)

Philippians 2:26-27

because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.

Not only do these verses explain his sickness. They also explain why Paul wanted to send him back to Philippi. And what I love about these verses is that they so well illustrate Philippians 2:3-4, which we have already mentioned.

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Catch the logic of what Paul is saying. In verse 25, Paul explains that he thought it best that Epaphroditus be sent back to Philippi. In verse 26, he says why, Epaphroditus was homesick. Well, not as we normally count homesickness. But, concerned for those in Philippi. He wanted those in Philippi to know that he was feeling fine. See, the Philippians had heard that Epaphroditus was sick. And they were concerned about him. And Epaphroditus was concerned because they were concerned. Get it?

This so reminds me of my sister, Sonya. She has a great heart of compassion for other people. When others are distressed about something, she is distressed about it as well. Her stomach starts churning, and she genuinely feels bad. Not because of her own calamity, but because of the trials that others are facing.

That's was the case for Epaphroditus. Verse 25 lists five things that characterize the character of Epaphroditus. Verse 26 could easily add a sixth. Epaphroditus has ...

f. A Tender Heart

He was distressed when thinking how they were concerned about him! And to give you an idea of the extent of his concern, we see this word, "distressed" in verse 26. "He was ... distressed because you had heard that he was sick." This word is only used three times in the New Testament. Right here in verse 26 and also in Matthew 26:37 and Mark 14:33, which both speak of the anguish that Jesus experienced in the garden of Gethsemane. It says there that Jesus was "grieved and distressed" (Matthew 26:37).

There it is. Jesus was "grieved and distressed." The next few verses in Matthew and Mark describe how distressed Jesus was. "He then said to Peter, James and John, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me" (Matthew 26:38). And of course, you know that Jesus then went a stone's throw away and began to pour out his heart to the Lord, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

Such is the picture of the distress of Epaphroditus. Now, certainly his distress wasn't as deep as the distress of Jesus. But, even if it comes close, you can see why Paul felt it necessary to send him back home. His heart was too burdened elsewhere to be a genuine help to Paul in Rome. And so, he must go back.

But, Paul wanted the Philippians to know that there was truth to the rumor. Verse 27, ...

Philippians 2:27

For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.

Now, we don't know what his sickness was. It may have been a natural sickness, like the flu, dysentery, malaria, bronchitis, pneumonia, or massive head cold. You name it. It may have been because of persecution. I say that because his sickness is also mentioned in verse 30, "... he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me" (Philippians 2:30). This verse seems to indicate some connection between his sickness and what he did in his service to Paul. Perhaps he was beaten up. Perhaps he had some broken ribs and pelvis that were life-threatening. Then again, perhaps it was only that he got sick on the journey.

We don't know what his sickness was. We are dealing with ancient history here in these verses. And there's no way to find out. But we do know that his sickness was great. He was on his deathbed. Surely, that's when the messenger left him to report back to Philippi. And so, for all they know, he may have died. It was looking that grim. But God had mercy upon him. Again, we don't know what exactly this means. But, it means that God healed him. Indeed, whenever we recover from sickness, it is the Lord who heals.

As I have been sick with a cold, it's only the Lord who is going to heal my sickness. It's only the Lord who will heal your sickness. And I also note here that sickness isn't always due to sin. Epaphroditus was fully in the will of the Lord, bringing this financial gift to Paul in Rome. And yet, he found himself sick.

Sadly, there are those who teach that your sickness comes because of your sin. When you hear that, run far away. Not only is their teaching not Biblical. It's also discouraging and damaging to those saints like Epaphroditus who were serving the Lord with their whole heart and fell sick.

Now, it may be that your sickness is due to sin. The Bible is full of such examples. When the people were smitten with snakes in the wilderness (Numbers 21); when the people looked into the arc in Bethshemesh (1 Samuel 6:19), they knew better and many died because of their sin. David's vitality was drained away due to his sin (Psalm 32:4). In the New Testament, because of abuses at the Lord's Supper, many became sick and died (1 Corinthians 11:30-32). And the book of Hebrews speaks of the discipline that the Lord brings upon those who are disobedient to the Lord (Hebrews 12:5-13), and such discipline may come in the form of sickness.

So, the Bible speaks of a direct connection between sin and sickness. But, it's not always the case. Epaphroditus is case in point. The blind man that Jesus healed is another example (John 9:1-3). The death of Lazarus is another example (John 11). Even the sickness of the apostle Paul was not because of his sin, but was to direct Paul to the churches in Galatia (Galatians 4:13). Well, anyway, the Lord was merciful to Epaphroditus in healing him. But, he wasn't the only one to feel the mercy of the Lord. Paul felt it too.

Philippians 2:27

... God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.

This is yet another expression in the book of Philippians of the love that Paul had for the people of God. Losing a man of such integrity like Epaphroditus would have brought him great sorrow. He was already facing sorrow in prison. His circumstances were pretty grim. He was awaiting trial under an unjust accusation. As such, he was at the mercy of the courts. To get a corrupt judge on a bad day would mean his death. He wrote about that possibility in chapter 1. But, he was also facing sorrow because of the hardness of the Jews against their Messiah.

At the end of the book of Acts, you can read of his imprisonment in Rome. On the appointed day, the Jews had come to hear from him. They came in "large numbers" (Acts 28:23) and listened to Paul testify solemnly about "the kingdom of God" as he attempted to "persuade them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening" (Acts 28:23). But they left hardened and unbelieving and even hostile toward Paul (Acts 28:29).

Later, Paul would write to the Roman church of his sorrow, ...

Romans 9:1-3

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

And if he would have lost Epaphroditus, it would have overwhelmed him. "Sorrow upon sorrow" is what he said. This is yet another expression in Philippians of the great love that Paul had for those in Philippi. He's always thinking about the interests of others, and not himself.

We see this clearly in my third point this morning.

3. His Reception (verses 28-30)

Philippians 2:28

Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less

concerned about you.

In many ways, it would have been better for Paul to have kept Epaphroditus with him. He was a faithful man who would be able to help Timothy care for Paul in his imprisonment. And yet, just like Epaphroditus, Paul wasn't thinking about himself. Rather, he was thinking about those in Philippi. Verse 23 says that he was "concerned" about them. Probably in the same way that Epaphroditus was. He was concerned that they thought Epaphroditus had died.

Again, I mention one last time, how Paul's actions are an expression of Philippians 2:3-4, ...

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

In fact, there are some who use Philippians 2:3-4 as a canopy over this entire chapter. And see the three main characters as examples of what a heart looks like. Paul was willing to pour himself out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of their faith (Philippians 1:17). Timothy was genuinely concerned for their welfare. Epaphroditus was longing for those who thought he had died because of his sickness. We have much to learn from these three men.

But, here in verse 28, we see Paul envisioning the day when Epaphroditus shows up in Philippi. What a day of rejoicing that would be! For all intents and purposes, from their point of view, Epaphroditus was raised from the dead. And as he comes into their midst, they may rejoice. And just in case those in Philippi didn't get it, Paul commands them to rejoice.

Philippians 2:29

Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, ...

Can you imagine the reaction of the congregation when this was read? It may well have erupted in praise to God, because Epaphroditus was now among them again. He has come back from the dead! Then, Paul honors him, ...

Philippians 2:29

... and hold men like him in high regard.

The way that I have preached this passage, you might say, "Of course you should honor Epaphroditus. He had done a great thing. He has travelled to Rome, delivered the gift, had a heart of love for Paul, and was for those in Philippi." Yet, those in Philippi may have had a different perspective. They may easily have felt that Epaphroditus did wrong. They sent him with a gift. They may have sent him to stay with Paul and serve him in his hour of need. But, to come back so quickly would not have seemed quite right. He should have stayed.

But Paul takes full responsibility for sending him back. That's the point of verse 25, "But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus." It wasn't Epaphroditus who chose to return. It was Paul who, in effect, forced him to return.

At any rate, Epaphroditus was to be held in high honor among all. Why give him so much honor? Verse 30, ...

Philippians 2:30

because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

Epaphroditus was a true servant of the Lord. He was willing to risk his life for the work of Christ. He was willing to lay it all on the line to serve the apostle Paul in his imprisonment. That's what the sacrifice of Christ calls us to do. Jesus gave His all for us. How can we not all give our all for Him?

This is Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 5:15, "And He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf."

Surely, Epaphroditus knew what the Lord had done for him. From the best we can tell, he was a pagan man. At least, he had a pagan name. He also came from a town that didn't have a synagogue, so there weren't too many Jews in Philippi. But as the gospel spread in Philippi, he heard that Jesus came and died upon a cross for our sins. He heard that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. And Epaphroditus believed.

His belief is what accounts for his character (verse 25). His belief is what accounts for his great risk of life. And, do you want to be one who does a great thing in the work of Christ? Then, believe and trust in the gospel.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 16, 2014 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Philippians 1:12, 14; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 8, 21

[2] http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Journals/TAPA/82/Speed_under_Sail_of_Ancient_Ships*.html