

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (7-7-1991 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 2:25-30

Additional Bible reading: Philippians 4:14-23

### Introduction

Last time we learnt from the character and preparation for service of Timothy. The second man Paul mentions in this part of his letter is Epaphroditus. He was not a member of the Roman church, but of the Philippian church. He was the man the Philippians had entrusted to carry their gifts of money to Paul. He had stayed with Paul for some time, and in this time had fallen ill. He also felt homesick. His illness had brought him close to death, but God had spared him, thus sparing Paul from sorrow on top of sorrow. Epaphroditus was also concerned that the people in Philippi were worried about him, so Paul sent him back to Philippi, probably carrying this letter with him. In the letter Paul relates what has happened to Epaphroditus, and tells the readers they need to welcome him back and honour him.

Note in passing that although Epaphroditus was miraculously healed, many others in the New Testament were sick, and had to endure their illness, for them there was no miraculous cure, e.g. Timothy suffered from stomach trouble, Trophimus was left sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Today, as then, we have no right to expect everyone to be miraculously healed. We must never say that people are sick because of their sin, or that they are sick because of lack of faith. It may be true in some cases, but not all.

We will learn from Epaphroditus, from the roles he served, the devotion he showed and the honour which he was due.

### The roles in which Epaphroditus served

Epaphroditus played five different roles, functions or parts. He was a brother, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, a messenger and a minister (sent to “minister” to Paul’s needs).

Firstly, Epaphroditus was a brother. As such he was recognised by every other Christian, everyone who was born again, everyone who belonged to Christ. He also acted in a brotherly way towards them. Paul likes to use the term “brother”, a term of affection, and he uses it more in this epistle than in any other, nine times in total.

We are all brothers, and of course sisters, in God’s family circle. We love one another, share the same allegiance, same home, same problems in general terms, same hopes and fears. We bear with one another’s burdens, and try to keep away anything that spoils or mars this close family relationship.

Secondly, he was Paul’s fellow-worker. Paul was into his Christian work up to his eyes, but he was not alone, and he was especially grateful to his fellow workers, e.g. Priscilla, Aquilla, Urban, Timothy, Luke, Philemon. *συνεργος* is used twelve times in the epistles. He was grateful to those who took the strain, bore the burden, carried their end of the log, and so supported and encouraged. A burden shared is a burden halved. This is what the church is meant to be. It is not meant to be like a passenger

train, with just two workers – the driver and the guard, with everyone else as the passengers. We are all meant to be fellow workers. Not just the pastor and his elders, with everyone else as “passengers”. We are all involved together.

Epaphroditus was also a fellow soldier, in the same army, same warfare, against the world, the flesh and the devil. Facing the same dangers, standing together, closing ranks, under orders together. Standing up against the error of false doctrine, world rulers of this darkness. Together, demonstrating military virtues of courage and endurance. Often opposed by the spirit of the age, godless values, and sin within. Epaphroditus was certainly someone Paul had in mind when he wrote **striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel, not frightened in anything by your opponents** (Philippians 1:27,28). Epaphroditus and Paul were in the fight together.

He was also a messenger, *αποστολος*, the Greek word often translated in the New Testament as “apostle”, but here as “messenger”. Epaphroditus faithfully carried gifts of money, and news of the church and its growth to Paul. He was the medium through which practical expression of fellowship in the Gospel was made. Without him, his courage and willingness to face danger and difficulty, Paul would have gone without much which helped and encouraged him.

Finally, Epaphroditus ministered to Paul’s needs, waited on him, served him. He shared his cell, and his lot. In everything, Epaphroditus was a real blessing to Paul.

And he is a blessing to us today, for he shows us that a joyful life is a life of sacrifice and service.

*“Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free”  
“Whose service is perfect freedom.”*

#### The extent of the devotion he showed

Epaphroditus knew what it meant to spend and be spent. He was distressed, in deep agony (*αδημονων* - same word to describe Jesus in Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:37), sick almost to death. **He almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me** (Philippians 2:30). The word for risking, *παρα βουλευσαμενος*, is a gamblers word, staking everything on the turn of a dice. Paul, in using this vivid word, is saying Epaphroditus gambled with his life for the sake of Christ.

Later on, this word gave rise in the early church to an association of men and women called the *parabolami*, the gamblers, whose aim in life was to visit prisoners and sick, especially those with dangerous and infectious diseases. Also, in 252AD, during the plague in Carthage, the heathen threw out the bodies of the dead, and fled. Cyprian, the bishop, gathered his congregation together, and set them to bury the dead and nurse the sick in that plague-ridden city. So they risked their lives in service to Christ and others.

Christ needs, in every age, those who, with reckless courage, are ready to gamble their lives in His service. This is what Epaphroditus was. This challenges our easy-going

Christianity, which makes no stern demands and calls for no limits in self-denial and self-sacrifice. Nowadays in the western world there is comfort and ease, a “looking after number one” spirit of the world within the church. The commitment of Christians in the Muslim world or Communist countries shows more of the attitude of Epaphroditus. Two or three hundred years ago, Christians faced death or imprisonment for the Gospel. Even one hundred years ago, people knew more of self-sacrifice, walking for miles to hear or preach the Gospel.

With all our greater ease and comfort, there is no more enthusiasm for the word of God. And we wonder why we make no impact and do not prosper! There is little self-sacrifice and putting selves out for the Word of God. It means little to us. The world knows that, so it remains unimpressed.

### The honour to which Epaphroditus was due

**Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him** (Philippians 2:29). Epaphroditus was homesick, he longed for his fellow Philippians, and so Paul planned to send him back home. But lest some criticized him for staying too long with Paul, the apostle writes this great testimonial. He wants them to give Epaphroditus a warm welcome, because he hazarded his life for Christ.

Paul emphasizes respect and honour for those who have served the Lord well. It is true that behind them is the Lord, who gives them their gifts and grace and power, and yet respect has to be shown them since they are His instruments. C.f. **Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard because of their work** (1 Thessalonians 5:12). **The elders who direct affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching** (1 Timothy 5:17). They are only sinners, saved by grace, no better than any one else. Also we believe in the priesthood of all believers. They are not always right. Yet because of their work and service, they are to be honoured and respected.

This can be hard to do. Such is human nature – it is often easier to criticize than say something pleasant about people. Honoured people have an advantage over us, get ahead of us, and then they can be a threat to us. It is easier to stay quiet and keep them in their place and keep them guessing. How many nice things said at funerals are ever said to people before their death? It is sad when we have to say to ourselves that we regret leaving some things unsaid while people were alive, and it is too late now. Let’s appreciate one another and say so while we are alive.

Honour and respect leaders – and let them know. A word of appreciation can do untold good to discouraged and disheartened people.

### Conclusion

Epaphroditus means “charming” and “lovely”. How his life fitted his name. He was brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger and minister. He was utterly devoted to God, His servants and His work. He even gambled with his life for the sake of Christ. If anyone deserved honour, respect and welcome, Epaphroditus did. **Go thou and do likewise.**

