

Epaphroditus. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 15 May 2011.

This morning I should like to introduce you to one of Paul's circle of friends and valued co-workers – to a 'lovely man' by name Epaphroditus. And I say 'lovely man' deliberately, not so much because that is what his name means (which it does), but because that is what he was.

We know Epaphroditus only from what Paul tells us of him in his letter to Epaphroditus's home assembly – the apostle's letter to the saints at Philippi.

So let us read what Paul has to say of him. First, from chapter 2, commencing at verse 25 ...

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. And indeed he was ill, coming near to death.

But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

I am sending him more eagerly (or, probably, 'speedily'), therefore, that seeing him again you may rejoice, and that I may be less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all joy; and hold such in honour, because for the work of Christ he drew near even to death, risking his life to complete the ministry you could not give to me.

Now a few verses in chapter 4, breaking in at verse 14 ...

You did well that you had fellowship with my affliction. And you yourselves know, Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church had fellowship with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only. For even in Thessalonica once and again you sent to my need ... I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the things you sent, a fragrant odour, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Back in verse 4 of chapter 2 Paul had exhorted the believers to consider, not only their own interests, but also the interests of others ... and through the remainder of the chapter he sets before us four examples of those whose attitudes and actions provide us with living commentaries on those words – first, and supremely, the example of our Lord – 'Christ Jesus', then of himself and of Timothy, and, finally, of our man for today, Epaphroditus.

But although our two passages for this morning focus particularly on Epaphroditus, they paint for us the most beautiful picture of selfless care and consideration displayed, not only by him, but also by the church at Philippi and by the apostle Paul himself.

First, we note the thoughtfulness shown **by the church** for Paul, in that, not for the first time,¹ they had felt moved to forward financial support to him when was in need of it ... and their heartfelt concern for Epaphroditus when they heard of his serious illness.

Second, we note the deep care shown **by the apostle** for Epaphroditus in the way that he speaks of God, in healing Epaphroditus, having had mercy not only on him (Epaphroditus), but on himself (Paul) also, lest, as he said, 'I should have sorrow upon sorrow' ... that such was his attachment to Epaphroditus that for God to spare his (Epaphroditus's) life was, at the same time, for God to spare him (the apostle) yet more sorrow. And we can hardly miss the consideration which Paul shows for the Philippian church in speedily sending Epaphroditus back to them that they might rejoice at seeing Epaphroditus back safe and sound. And, please note, Paul sent Epaphroditus to them, even though he would doubtless have proved an ongoing source of help and encouragement to Paul – much as, shortly before and for entirely different reasons, he had sent Onesimus back to Philemon, even though this newly converted runaway was now 'profitable' to him.²

And third, we note the tender concern shown **by Epaphroditus** for his home assembly in his great longing for them, and in the deep distress he experienced on learning that they had been informed of his illness ... a response far removed indeed from the sense of satisfaction which some get from being the centre of attention and who would be distressed rather if others had not heard of their sickness! And what can we say about the selfless care which Epaphroditus showed for Paul in putting his own life at risk to minister to him by carrying a monetary gift from his home church to help meet Paul's 'need' (as the apostle himself expressed it twice³) even though this involved him a journey of upwards of 830 miles, largely by road,⁴ but partly by sea (across the Adriatic straits)⁵ – which journey would have taken him in excess of a month of non-stop travel. Apart from which there was the serious risk to his life of associating himself with a man awaiting trial before no less than the then-Emperor Nero.

Yes indeed, what a beautiful picture our passages in Philippians 2 and 4 paint for us of Christian thoughtfulness and consideration, as all of those involved looked not only to their own things but also to the things of others.

But we are interested this morning in particular with Epaphroditus, and I want us to think of him briefly under three simple headings.

First, **his relationship to both Paul and to the Philippian church** – which Paul outlines for us in verse 25.

‘My brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier’, Paul says. If you like, one in faith, one in work and one in conflict. For one faith bound them as brothers in the same great family, one work occupied them as they laboured in the same great cause, and one conflict faced them as side-by-side they contended for the same great gospel.

And Paul describes Epaphroditus, not only as sharing the same spiritual life as him, but as his ‘fellow-worker’, being Paul’s usual way of speaking of who laboured with him. Indeed, I note that, of the thirteen times it is used in the New Testament, all but one⁶ come from the pen of Paul.

But they not only worked together – they warred together. They stood together, so to speak, with trowel in one hand and sword in the other.⁷ In that Epaphroditus chose to join the apostle in the firing line, he fully merited the title ‘fellow-soldier’ – or ‘comrade in arms’ as the word here signifies. And scholars assure us that ‘only those who had been through experiences of battle together greeted one another in this way’.⁸

But if this man is ‘my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier’, he is, Paul reminds the Philippians, ‘your messenger and minister to my need’. By ‘messenger’, Paul views Epaphroditus as their envoy and representative, as someone who had been delegated by the church to carry out a task for them.⁹ And, clearly, if the assembly at Philippi had selected Epaphroditus to bring their gift to Paul they must have had great confidence in and trusted him implicitly.

When the apostle writes of Epaphroditus as their ‘minister to my need’, the word he uses which we translate ‘minister’ differs from the word we normally render that way, and which is used to describe others of his companions – for example, Archippus, Epaphras and Tychicus.¹⁰

The word which Paul uses of Epaphroditus here is closely related to the word rendered ‘priest’ throughout the Greek Old Testament. And, with my eye on what we read from chapter 4 (verse 18) – namely that Paul described the monetary gift which Epaphroditus brought from the Philippian assembly as ‘a fragrant odour, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God’, I can only conclude that Paul looked on the service of Epaphroditus as a priestly service. My, what a dignity this bestows upon our giving!

We mentioned earlier that the generous gift which the Philippians had forwarded through Epaphroditus was not the first they had sent to him. We know, for example, that, following Paul’s first – and eventful – visit to their city, they had more than once sent him timely assistance when he laboured at Thessalonica (another city in Macedonia),¹¹ and when he passed on from Macedonia into Achaia, they sent further support to him while he worked at Corinth.¹²

And I note that, when writing to the Corinthians, he praised the self-sacrificing generosity of the churches of Macedonia (including, needless to say, Philippi), in contributing toward the relief of the poor saints of Jerusalem and Judea.¹³ But I note with sadness that a little over 50 years later the fame of the same church had been sullied by the sin of avarice. For, Polycarp, a Christian leader from Smyrna, then had occasion to repeatedly denounce avarice and to express great grief over the scandal brought on the gospel by the greed of one couple in the church – that of a former elder (a certain Valens) and his wife¹⁴ – who one respected commentator well described as ‘the Ananias and Sapphira of the Philippian community’. But here in his letter, the apostle cannot speak highly enough of ‘the sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God’ which Epaphroditus had brought him and of the whole-hearted way in which Epaphroditus had performed his sacred, priestly duty.

Secondly, I want to consider **the circumstances surrounding Epaphroditus’s return to Philippi**.

In the section immediately before that in which he speaks of Epaphroditus in chapter 2, Paul expressed his hope that he would be able to dispatch Timothy to them ‘soon’, so that Timothy could both inform them how things had gone with him (Paul) at his trial and bring back word to him of how things were going with them (the Philippians).¹⁵ Indeed, he trusted that a favourable outcome before Nero would mean that he would soon be able to come to them himself.¹⁶ But now, in our section, Paul turns from his future plans to one of his present purposes in writing – namely, to make it clear to the Philippians that, in his eyes, it was ‘necessary’ for him to ‘send’ Epaphroditus ‘speedily, ‘as quickly as possible’ – which is how the word in verse 28 should probably be translated.

And the apostle explains what led him to this conclusion. At some point and for some reason Epaphroditus had been taken seriously ill. We do not know whether this was on the way to Rome or while he was there. We do not know whether Epaphroditus had simply succumbed to some dangerous disease – perhaps the notorious Roman fever, which sometimes swept through the city – or whether it was the effect of his long journey or his exertions at Rome.

What we do know is that in His 'mercy', God did for Epaphroditus what he had done for King Hezekiah some seven and a half centuries before, and granted him an extension to his life.

We know that Doctor Luke had spent between five and six years at Philippi after the assembly first began – and so may well have come to know Epaphroditus – and we know that Luke was with Paul when he first arrived at Rome.¹⁷ But we have no way of knowing if Luke was with Paul during Epaphroditus's illness. And even if Luke was there, and even if – as we should expect – Luke did all he could to help, it is not to any physician or medication that Paul attributes his fellow-worker's recovery. In Paul's book, it was God and His mercy which brought Epaphroditus through.

But Paul was well aware that the healed Epaphroditus eagerly longed to see his brethren back home, and that, indeed, he was greatly distressed – distressed, not that he had been sick, but that news of his earlier illness was still causing great sorrow among the believers there.¹⁸ 'Distressed' did I say? I note that the word translated 'distressed' is found elsewhere in the New Testament only where Matthew and Mark use it to describe our Lord's deep anguish and distress when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane!

Scholars point to a somewhat similar case of unselfish concern revealed by a second-century letter. The mother of a soldier had heard that her son was ill, and he wrote to her to tell her that she should not have been troubled by the report she had heard. It was true, he admitted, that he had not written to her for some time, but this had not been on account of his sickness, he said, but on account of the pressure of his military duties. 'So', he wrote, 'do not be distressed about me. I was deeply grieved to hear that you had heard about me, for I was not seriously ill'.¹⁹

But, as you can see, the case with Epaphroditus was very different. For the report that had reached the Philippians was certainly no exaggeration. On the contrary, Paul assures them, 'indeed he was ill, coming near to death' ... he, that is, as we would say, lay at death's door – humanly speaking, his life had been hanging by a thread.

But that was all history now. For 'God had mercy on him'. And Paul is aware that the one sure way to put the minds of the Philippian saints at rest is for them to see Epaphroditus face to face and to satisfy themselves that he is indeed recovered from his sickness. Paul could only imagine what joy that reunion will mean for them, but such was his affection for them that their relief and rejoicing would have the effect of lessening his ongoing sorrow.

According to verse 27, the threat of the additional sorrow which Paul would have experienced if Epaphroditus had died had been lifted by God's mercy to Epaphroditus – for, if he had died, he (Paul) would, as Paul's language suggests, have had 'sorrow coming upon sorrow, as wave after wave'.²⁰

But, even after Epaphroditus's recovery, Paul wasn't free from sorrow. He still faced sorrow on account of his continuing imprisonment.

But the apostle's anticipation of the Philippians' joy in seeing Epaphroditus home again in good health would, he said, make His remaining burden lighter as well.

And easing the mind of his beloved Philippians and giving them cause for great joy meant far more to Paul than any further service Epaphroditus might have rendered him. No doubt about it, the apostle had drunk deeply at the well of verse 4 ... considering, not so much his own interests as the interests of others.²¹

I have no doubt from the way Paul expresses himself that Epaphroditus had the joy – and the privilege – of bearing this precious 'Thank you' letter back to his own assembly.

Just think how much we owe, under God, to the sickness of Epaphroditus – whatever it was and whatever occasioned it. Where would we be, for instance, without verses 5 to 11 of this very chapter? It would be hard not to see God's hand at work behind the scenes.

And then Paul adds what we can safely call 'a brief word of commendation'. Indeed, the first half of verse 29 reads almost identically to the first half of verse 2 of Romans 16 – where Paul writes, as he had said in verse 1, to 'commend' Phoebe of Cenchrea to the saints at Rome. And we remember that Phoebe also carried a most important item of the apostle's correspondence – and where would we be without his epistle to the Romans! But, in this case, Paul has an important addition to make. Having said, 'Receive him therefore in the Lord with all joy', he adds 'and hold such in honour'. Give my fellow-soldier a hero's welcome home ... and never cease to hold such in honour – for this good soldier of Jesus Christ distinguished himself in battle, not counting his life dear to himself.

And the mention of the honour due to Epaphroditus bring us to my last heading ... **Epaphroditus's contribution to 'the work of Christ'**.

It would be true to say that this 'lovely man' man had lost his health and almost his life in serving both his church and the apostle. But ultimately, as Paul makes clear, Epaphroditus drawing so near to death was the result of his engaging in the work of Christ. He had undertaken the journey to Rome to bring the Philippians' gift to Paul, and since Paul's imprisonment was directly related to the work of Christ, anyone who brought a gift to support him was thereby contributing to the same work – the work of Christ.

I said at the beginning that Epaphroditus's name means 'lovely' – and it does – but, for all that, it was derived from the name of a Greek goddess. And, I was interested to learn that Aphrodite was the goddess, not only of sensual love and of fertility but of gambling. Scholars tell us that when a pagan Greek threw the dice he would cry out 'Epaphroditos!', which means 'Favourite of Aphrodite' – hoping to be favoured by her with gambler's luck.

And why was I interested in this? For the simple reason that when Paul told the Philippians that Epaphroditus 'drew near even to death, risking his life', the word he used translated 'risking' was often used outside the Bible as a gambler's word, used when somebody staked all on the throw of the dice.²²

And Paul may well have permitted himself a smile when he commended back to the Philippian church one of their own number who bore a name which to many pagans suggested the goddess of gambling, and who chose to 'gamble' so to speak with his own life – to venture his life – for his (Paul's) sake, for their sake ('to complete the ministry you could not give', as he said), and ultimately for Christ's sake – and who won!²³

And who, indeed, won for himself honourable mention in a letter which has blessed the church for almost two thousand years.

Unquestionably, Epaphroditus was marked by great loveliness of character, Unlike many, he truly lived up to his name ... He was a 'lovely' man.

Footnotes

¹ Phil. 4. 15-16; 2 Cor. 11. 8-9.

² Philemon 10-13. Paul was never so lost and immersed in his own troubles to have no time to think of the troubles of his friends.

³ Phil. 2. 25; 4. 16.

⁴ It is about 370 miles along the Via Egnatia from Philippi to Dyrrachium, and 360 miles along the Via Appia from Brundisium to Rome. A journey of a little more than eight hundred miles of actual travel, from east to west. He was probably on the way about a month. Ffb = 40 days, page xxv. J B Lightfoot, page 38 ... A month would probably be a fair allowance of time for the journey between Borne and Philippi. The distance from Home to Brundisium was 360 miles according to Strabo (vi. p. 283) or 358 according to the Antonine Itinerary (pp. 49, 51, 54, Parth. et Find.). The distance from Dyrrhachium to Philippi was the same within a few miles ; the journey from Dyrrhachium to Thessalonica being about 270 miles (267, Polybius in Strabo vii. p. 323 ; 269, Itin. Anton.). 151; and 279, 2⁶. Peuting.), and from Thessalonica to Philippi 100 miles (Itin. Anton, pp. 152, 157). The present text of Pliny understates it at 325 miles, H. N. iv. 18. Ovid expects his books to reach Rome from Brundisium before the tenth day without hurrying (Ep. Pont. iv. 5. 8 ut festinatum non faciatis iter) ; while Horace moving very leisurely completes the distance in 16 days (Sat. i. 5). The voyage between Dyrrhachium and Brundisium ordinarily took a day : Cic. ad Att. iv.i ; comp. Appian i. p. 269 (ed. Bekker). The land transit on the Greek continent would probably not occupy much more time than on the Italian, the distances being the same. This calculation agrees with the notices in Cicero's letters. Cicero (if the dates can be trusted) leaves Brundisium on April 30th and arrives at Thessalonica on May 23rd (ad Att. iii. 8); but he travels leisurely and appears to have been delayed on the way. Again Atticus purposes starting from Rome on June 1st, and Cicero writing from Thessalonica on the 13th expects to see him propediem (iii. 9). Again Cicero writing from Thessalonica on June 18th says that Atticus letter has informed him of all that has happened at Rome up to May 25th (iii. 10). Lastly Cicero at Dyrrhachium receives on Nov. 27th a letter from Rome dated Nov. 12th (iii. 23). From Philippi to Dyrrachium on the Adriatic one would take the Egnatian Way; then, after crossing the Adriatic straits to Brundisium in Italy (this crossing would take about a day), one would continue on the Appian Way to Rome.

⁵ It is 100 miles from Dyrrachium to Brundisium.

⁶ 3 John 8.

⁷ Neh. 4. 18.

⁸ TDNT, VII, 704.

⁹ The word is literally 'apostle', being used in the same sense as in 2 Cor. 8. 23.

¹⁰ Eph. 6. 21; Col. 1. 7; 4. 7 – also Col. 4. 17.

¹¹ Phil. 4. 16.

¹² Phil. 4. 15; 2 Cor. 11. 8-9.

¹³ 2 Cor. 8. 1-5.

¹⁴ The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, paragraph 11.

¹⁵ Phil. 2. 19-23.

¹⁶ Phil. 1. 24.

¹⁷ Luke dropped the use of "we" from Acts 17:1 through 20:4. i.e. Luke stayed at Philippi (get to know Epaphroditus) . We sections begin again some 5-6 years later, Acts 20. 4-5 ... this letter probably 5-6 years later again. Luke rejoined at 20. 5. i.e. would have known Epaphroditus, as well as quite likely there at time, Acts 28. 16.

¹⁸ It may be that Epaphroditus was accompanied by others when carrying the gift. If he became ill either en route or shortly after their arrival, his companions would have taken back the unwelcome news on their return to Philippi. Given that Epaphroditus was probably carrying a considerable sum of money, it is altogether unlikely that he was travelling alone (cf. 2 Cor 11:9, where the same Philippian service to Paul is brought by "brothers," plural).

¹⁹ JTS July 1917 (pages 311-312).

²⁰ Vincent's Word Studies.

²¹ In passing, note not wrong sorrow over death of loved one – but sorrow of Christian always tinged with hope. it is sorrow expressed in the context of hope (1 Thess 4:13). Sometimes in mercy God spares the life of his servants ; sometimes in mercy he takes them to himself. We are in his hands, and He knows better than we what is for our real good. We may pray for health and longer life for our friends, for ourselves, if the prayer is offered in submission to the higher will of God.

²² Deissmann (*Light from the Ancient East*, p. 88) cites an example of [*paraboleusamenos*] from an inscription at Olbia or the Black Sea of the second century A.D. where it plainly means "exposing himself to danger" as here. In honour of Carzoazus, son of Attalus – 'to the ends of the world it was witnessed of him that in the interests of friendship he had exposed himself to dangers as an advocate in legal strife by taking his clients' causes even up to the emperors'.

²³ Compare Paul's play on the name 'Onesimus' ('profitable') in Philemon 11.