

Epaphroditus – Paul’s fellow soldier

Philippians 2:23-30

2:23 Him [Timothy] therefore I hope to send presently, so soon as I shall see how it will go with me. **2:24** But I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly.

2:25 Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you **Epaphroditus**, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants. **2:26** For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick. **2:27** For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. **2:28** I sent him therefore the more carefully, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful. **2:29** Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation: **2:30** Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.

Philippians 4:16-19

4:16 For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity. **4:17** Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account. **4:18** But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of **Epaphroditus** the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God. **4:19** But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

dangerous service

Perhaps the most memorable thing about Epaphroditus is the fact that he became seriously ill and nearly died (2:27, 30) while helping Paul who was a prisoner (probably) in Rome.

Epaphroditus willingly risked his life by being the main courier who brought a large sum of money the considerable distance from Philippi to Rome (4:18). Moreover the long-distance travel and working with Paul in a prison setting was not great for his health. There was danger because of the violence of robbers, but the danger was probably even greater in that age because of disease. Both of these things are probably reflected in the “fellow soldier” title that Paul gave his helper (2:25).

Throughout history the number of soldiers who have died from disease has often outnumbered those who died from wounds. (This was especially so in the past compared to today.) The same is true of those like Epaphroditus who have engaged in missionary work. The more he traveled, the more he was exposed to dangerous diseases. In that sense, it would have been far safer for him to have stayed home.

Epaphroditus did not stay home however. Though he nearly died in the process, he was greatly used of the Lord. The gift that he brought to Paul was a great blessing at the time, and the Letter that he took back to Philippi is still a great blessing to us today.

negatives

Paul sent Epaphroditus home to Philippi, but that sending does not mean that his helper in the work (2:25) was also an apostle (a sent one) like Paul himself. Carrying Paul's letter was a good work, but it was not nearly as impressive as Timothy personally receiving two inspired letters from Paul and being sent to organize and lead the church in Ephesus. In addition, Paul spoke about his desire to send Timothy to Philippi in 2:19-23 *before* explaining why he was immediately sending a letter with Epaphroditus (2:25-30). These things, along with the fact that Epaphroditus is mentioned only in Philippians, indicates that Timothy had a much more prominent role in Paul's ministry than Epaphroditus.

Admittedly, it is unfair to compare Epaphroditus and Timothy, since they were naturally very different. Therefore it is better to focus on the various specific things about the role that Epaphroditus played. The difficult and limited nature of his ministry is covered in the worksheet below.

Several of the difficulties that Epaphroditus faced were simply characteristic of the age in which he lived. Paul himself faced the same dangers and challenges. Other difficulties arose because of the nature of the work to which Epaphroditus was called. For instance, taking care of the needs a prisoner (A-1) was not exactly a dream job.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() Epaphroditus' role was difficult.
A-1	() He was helping a prisoner (1:12-14, 2:23, Acts 28:30).
A-2	() Poor (slow) communications caused a lot of stress (2:26).
A-3	() Medical care is much better now than it was in ancient Rome.
A-4	() Travel is much safer today than it was in New Testament times.
A-5	() He wanted to go home because the work was difficult (2:25-26).
A-6	() He would have been much safer at home than in Rome (2:30).
B	() Epaphroditus' role was limited.
B-1	() It does not sound like he was with Paul for many years (2:23-25).
B-2	() He may not have been highly regarded in his church (2:29).
B-3	() He was probably not a preacher or teacher (2:25, 29).
B-4	() He is never mentioned in the Book of Acts.
B-5	() He is only associated with one church.
B-6	() He was only a courier (2:25).
B-7	() He was probably young.

positives

There is much about workers and the work of the Lord in Philippians, and Epaphroditus is a highly visible part of this emphasis (2:25, 29). He was not nearly as prominent in Paul's Letters as a whole, as Timothy. but he helps bring out various aspect of Paul's close cooperation with the church in Philippi better than Timothy ever could.

Paul and Timothy worked together as bondservants of Jesus Christ (1:1), but it was Epaphroditus who provided a personal connection between Paul and the Philippians. Unlike Timothy, Epaphroditus was from Philippi and brought support (2:25, 4:18) to Paul and later delivered the Philippian Letter (2:29).

The ministry of Epaphroditus is described in various negative ways on the first worksheet (left), but it is more important to note that Paul said only good things about his fellow worker. Even the serious illness that nearly took the life of Epaphroditus became a positive in the end (2:26-30). It helped show that God himself was at work (1:6, 2:13, 27).

A great way to appreciate the ministry of Epaphroditus is to read through all four chapters of Philippians taking special note of terms like work(s), worker(s), labor(ed), service, suffer(ings) and bond-servant(s). He and others like him were to be highly esteemed because of their work and suffering for Christ (2:30).

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

D	() God spared Epaphroditus' life.
D-1	() Epaphroditus nearly died (2:26-27, 30).
D-2	() He was miraculously healed by God (2:27).
D-3	() God spared him because he was highly gifted.
D-4	() His life was spared because of God's mercy (2:27).
D-5	() His healing was encouraging to Paul and others (2:27-28).
D-6	() He was spared so that he could deliver Paul's Philippian Letter.
E	() Epaphroditus was a good worker (2:25).
E-1	() He was a good worker like Timothy (2:19-22).
E-2	() He was like a faithful soldier (2:20, 25-30, 1 Tim. 6:12).
E-3	() He was not like the evil workers mentioned in 3:2.
E-4	() Paul highly valued Epaphroditus' work (2:25-30).
E-5	() He could be trusted with lots of money (4:18).
E-6	() He was always a very careful worker (2:30).
E-7	() God spares us to serve Him (1:19-26).

worksheet answers

As a faithful soldier for the Lord Jesus (E-2), Epaphroditus was like Timothy (E-1), since they both were more than just couriers (B-6). Yet, he probably was not a preacher or a teacher either (B-3). God did not spare him because he was highly gifted (D-3). He was trustworthy (E-5) and tender-hearted (2:26), but nothing is directly said about his ability to speak.

Epaphroditus' service was greatly appreciated by Paul (E-4), but Phil. 2:29 perhaps shows that he may not have been as highly esteemed in his home church as he should have been (B-2). Maybe that was in part because he was still young (B-7) and single rather than an elder. This is just a guess, however, based on a similar situation regarding Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12).

For sure, Epaphroditus was not a quitter who wanted to go home because the work was difficult (A-5). Since he was in the will of God with Paul, he would not have been, in that sense, any safer at home in Philippi. Even so, his near fatal illness was obviously contacted on the road, and Paul told the Philippians that Epaphroditus should be highly regarded because he had not put personal safety first. (Line A-6 is partly correct and line E-6 is incorrect.)

Finally, it is only partly correct to say that Epaphroditus was spared in order to deliver Paul's Letter to the Philippians (D-6). There was more to it than that alone.

So what?

One of the most powerful personal messages in Philippians is that God spares his servants so that they can continue to serve. This was true of Paul (1:19-26) and Epaphroditus (2:25-30). So line E-7 is correct. Yet, this depends on God's will. So Paul did not know beforehand what would happen regarding himself (1:23-25, 2:23) or Epaphroditus (2:26).

We, like Paul and his helpers, are protected and kept again and again in daily life so that we can continue to serve. Thankfully this includes God's lesser known and perhaps less-gifted servants like Epaphroditus. Line E-7 is correct, of course, but it also is probably the most important point in this study. *God spares us so that we can continue to serve him.*

Less important is how Epaphroditus was healed. Nothing is said about this, other than that it was God who did it because of his mercy (2:27). There was no laying on of hands like in Acts 28:8. Moreover, though the healing was a great blessing, it probably was not instantaneous. It was miraculous because God did it (D-2), but it did not require an apostle. Thus his healing was more like the way God commonly restores health to his servants today.

Epaphroditus was not able to suddenly jump up and serve like Peter's mother-in-law (Mk. 1:31), but happily God still gave him a second chance to serve.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
