

Epaphroditus: Another Example of a Self-Giving Christian

Philippians 2:25-30

Philippians 2:25-30: *“Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need; 26 since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. 27 For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. 29 Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; 30 because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.”*

Background Notes

The apostle Paul was a prisoner, under house arrest in Rome, when he penned this letter to the church at Philippi. One reason for writing this letter was to deal with a problem of disunity in the church at Philippi.

How did Paul know about this problem? Probably he heard about it from Epaphroditus. He had traveled all the way from Philippi to Rome - a distance of more than 400 miles (as the crow flies) - to bring Paul a financial gift from the Christians at Philippi. Philippians 4:18: *“Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.”*

Epaphroditus brought the gift to Paul, and he brought news from the church as well. The good news was that the church was growing, there were no doctrinal problems, and no false teaching had penetrated the church. The sad news was that there was a rift in the fellowship, and an increasing rift.

Paul did not mention the exact nature of the problem. In chapter 4, it appears that two women in the fellowship, Euodia and Syntyche, had taken opposite sides on this issue, whatever it was. These women were Christians - they had even helped the apostle Paul in the ministry (Philippians 4:3). But it seems that they were playing a significant role in the division and disunity at Philippi, because the apostle singled them out by name.

It appears that the issue was not false doctrine or a problem of immorality. It was probably something minor. But minor matters can cause major disunity in a church, so throughout this epistle Paul exhorted the Philippians to work their way through the problem and come to unity.

It's interesting to note that Paul uses the phrase "you all" more in this letter than in any of his other epistles, because he was calling *all* of them to come to unity. Paul used the phrase "you all" several times in chapter 1, and again in chapter 2, verse 17: "*I am glad and rejoice with you all.*" He rejoiced with *all* the believers – he wasn't playing favorites! Again we see it in verse 26, in reference to Epaphroditus: "*Since he was longing for you all.*" Epaphroditus was concerned for *all* the believers in Philippi.

Both of our doctrinal points are about sickness, because Epaphroditus became sick as a result of his ministry and mission. Thus Philippians 2 gives us some biblical insights about illness.

Doctrinal Points

1. Sickness is not necessarily the result of sin.

As most of you know, sin in the life of a believer can result in "disciplinary sickness." In 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul wrote, "*For this reason, many are weak and sick among you and many sleep.*" Some of the Corinthians were involved in sin, and yet they still were participating in the Lord's Supper. God had to discipline them with sickness, even to the point of death for some of those believers who continued to sin.

So sickness may sometimes result from sin, but not all sickness is the result of sin. Some Christians have jumped to the conclusion that every time a person is sick, they must be involved in sin, but that's *not* what the Bible teaches! Sickness is not necessarily the result of sin. Remember the man in John 9, who was born blind? Like some Christians today, the disciples assumed he was blind because of sin, and they asked the Lord, "*Who sinned, this man or his parents?*" Jesus answered, "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him*" (John 9:3).

Epaphroditus is another biblical example of illness that was *not* the result of sin. Verse 27 says that that Epaphroditus was sick almost to death. The Bible doesn't tell us about his illness. Maybe it was malaria, or maybe he caught the "Roman flu," but the sickness was not because of sin. In fact, Epaphroditus got sick in the line of duty. "*...because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me*" (v30). Epaphroditus became ill because of coming to Rome to bring the financial gift from the Philippian church to Paul. So Epaphroditus is a biblical "exhibit" to teach us that sickness is not necessarily the result of sin.

2. Sickness is not necessarily an alarm for healing.

Some Christians have the idea that if a believer is sick, they should use healing gifts and healing services, and then expect immediate healing. God had used Paul to bring healing to people in the past. Acts 19:11-12: "*Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and*

the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.” Why then didn’t Paul hold a healing service for Epaphroditus?

The case of Epaphroditus was different. It shows us that we should not necessarily expect immediate healing. Paul certainly prayed for Epaphroditus, and God answered those prayers and raised Epaphroditus back to health and strength, but we don’t read of healing services or healing gifts being used to bring about his healing. Verse 27: *“For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.”*

Notice that Epaphroditus was not looking for sympathy or requesting healing. His major concern was that his fellow-members at the Philippian church wouldn’t consider that he had failed them because of his illness (v26)! So the biblical teaching is that sickness is not necessarily an alarm call for healing.

I once had a bad cold and some Christians wanted to lay hands on me and have a prayer service for my healing. I certainly appreciated their concern and their prayers for my health, but rather than having a healing service for me, I felt we should rather have a prayer time for our brothers and sisters in communist countries who are undergoing persecution. Sickness is not necessarily an alarm for healing.

Practical Applications

1. You don’t have to become a martyr to get a martyr’s reward.

Remember Paul’s overall point about Epaphroditus in this section of Philippians: he was an example of a Christian with a self-giving attitude. After the description of our Lord’s supreme example in verses 5-11, he was one of three examples or models who show us what it means to have a self-giving attitude: Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

Notice that Epaphroditus gave of himself - *risking his life* for the sake of serving Paul and his fellow believers at Philippi (v30). Epaphroditus didn’t actually die - but he almost died in giving of himself. He was sick *“almost unto death”* (v27), and *“... for the work of Christ he came close to death”* (v30).

Epaphroditus will be rewarded by the Lord Himself in line with his motives and attitudes. Even though he didn’t become a martyr physically, yet he can receive a martyr’s reward. Look back at verses 8-9: *“And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.”* As the Lord Jesus has been highly exalted because of His self-giving attitude to the point of death, so will all Christians who give of themselves like Epaphroditus, and who are willing to risk their lives for the sake of Christ. All Christians who have that attitude will be exalted. You don’t have to be a martyr to receive a martyr’s reward.

Many Christians have sacrificed their health and well-being for the sake of the gospel, without literally being put to death as martyrs. And we're not just talking about foreign missionaries. *You* may have the self-giving attitude for the Lord and His people – even to the point where your physical health may be suffering. You can be sure that you will be rewarded according to your self-giving attitude. You don't have to become a martyr to get a martyr's reward.

2. Who are *your* heroes?

On our recent trip to Asia, Margie and I were able to take a trip into mainland China. Our guide introduced himself as Michael. "Like Michael Jordan?" I asked him, wondering if he would know who Michael Jordan is. And he did! Many people around the world consider Michael Jordan to be a "hero" because he was a great basketball player - but he didn't risk his life for the benefit of others, as Epaphroditus did.

It's great when Christians athletes like basketball player David Robinson have outstanding testimonies. But here's the point. Paul told the Philippian believers that they should consider Epaphroditus a hero. "*Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him...*" (v29). This is the word of the Lord to us. We should honor and esteem self-giving Christians who are willing to risk their lives for the sake of the gospel.

What about the "Epaphrodituses" in your church - the Christians who are not up front on Sundays or in the church's "spotlight," but they give of themselves – and may even risk their lives for the sake of Christ at times? Many times they are scarcely noticed. Do you hold Christians who sacrificially give of themselves in high regard? We should. It's a command from the Lord.

Who are your heroes? Look around you. I'm sure there are a couple of "Epaphrodituses" in your church fellowship! Do you hold them in high regard? Do you honor self-giving Christians like Epaphroditus, and consider them to be heroes?

Who are *your* heroes?