**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Cherished Friendships of Paul (7): “Epaphroditus, A Self-Sacrificing Servant”**

**Philippians 2:25-30; 4:18**

**October 22, 2023**

In today’s world, someone like Epaphroditus would hardly be thought of as a celebrity. He would never win an Oscar nomination or an MVP award. Nor would any sponsor ever hire him to sell their product. He probably wouldn’t be asked to share his testimony by any televangelist, or to speak at any of their fund-raising banquets. Yet in writing to the Philippians, Paul says, “*honor men like him*” (2:29).

So, what had he done to be merit such high praise from the most renowned apostle in the early church? The answer is found in what Paul has said just a few verses earlier: “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others*” (2:3-4). Epaphroditus is a striking illustration of what that means. He was willing to sacrifice everything because of his desire to serve others in need. No one knew this better than Paul, and no one appreciated it more than Paul.

We only know about Epaphroditus through a few weighty sentences in Paul’s letter to the Philippian church (2:25-30; 4:18). He was entrusted by the members of that church to bring a financial gift to Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome (4:18). They also asked him to give Paul whatever help he could as their official representative. But at some point in the fulfillment of his commission, he became critically ill and nearly died.

F. F. Bruce further explains: “News of his illness got back to Philippi and filled his friends there with anxiety; he knew that they heard of it and was himself anxious to relieve their fears, but at the same time he was anxious to stay on in Rome and make himself useful to Paul. But Paul sent him back with a letter in which he not only thanks the Philippian Christians for their gift but explains that he takes sole responsibility for Epaphroditus’ return to them. If they asked Epaphroditus why he did not stay with Paul and serve him as he had been instructed to do, here was their answer. At the same time Paul expresses deep appreciation of what Epaphroditus has done for him already, and tells the Philippians that this is the kind of man they should honour” (The Pauline Circle).

As commentators have also noted, the name Epaphroditus was a common one in the first century world. It comes from the name Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, who was worshipped throughout almost all of the Greek speaking world. The significance of this has been noted well by Gerald Hawthorne, who writes, “. . . no believer, not even the Apostle Paul, demanded that this leader of the church change his pagan, idolatrous name to something more Christian. The reason for such toleration may have been the awareness that a Christian is not one who merely possesses a Christian name. Rather a Christian is one who practices the Christian life” (Philippians). Although his name was of pagan origin, his heart belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ.

**A. Paul’s Plan and Generous Praise for Epaphroditus (2:25):** “*But I think it necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow-worker, and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs*.” In this verse, Paul counters all potential doubt about the quality of his friend’s life and ministry while with him in Rome. In case the Philippians might think that his unexpected return was due to some spiritual failure on his part, Paul speaks of him in a series of glowing terms.

*First*, within the fellowship of the church, Epaphroditus had proven to be a “*brother*.” The family likeness to Christ could be seen in him, as well as the spirit of love and devotion to other members of Christ’s family. *Second*, he was a “*fellow-worker*,” prepared to take his share of the burdens of the Christian ministry. He might have even volunteered to make the long and difficult journey to Rome (instead of having to be asked!) *Third*, he had earned the title of “*fellow-soldier*,” willing to join the fight against the opponents of the gospel.

*Fourth*, with respect to the Philippians, he was the “*messenger*” of the church who was sent “*to take care of*” Paul’s needs. The word translated “messenger” is literally “apostle.” In the broadest sense of this word, Epaphroditus was commissioned and “sent out” with the full authority of the church to “*minister to*” (NASB, ESV) or “*take care of*” (NIV) Paul’s needs. The implication is that Epaphroditus was not only sent with the money, but was also commissioned to remain with Paul as his personal aide as long as he might be needed.

**B. The Reasons for Sending Epaphroditus Home (2:26-27):** “*For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow*.” When Paul says that he “*longs for all of you*,” he uses the same word that he previously used to describe his own intense longing for the Philippians – to be with them, to enjoy their presence, and to help them in their Christian faith (1:8). Thus, the first reason for sending Epaphroditus home was because he was homesick.

But he had also become gravely ill, which caused him great “distress” (a very strong word in Greek, also used to describe the anguish of Jesus in Gethsemane; Mark 14:33). But he wasn’t concerned for his own welfare; his concern was for the church’s concern once they learned of his affliction. Evidently he couldn’t bear the thought of being a source of sorrow to them, knowing how much they cared about him. It’s an amazing picture of how much he loved the Philippians and how much they must have loved him!

It's also evident how much Paul loved Epaphroditus. Had he lost his loyal friend and faithful co-worker, he would have felt “*sorrow upon sorrow*” (or “wave upon wave” of grief). How relieved he must have been that God had been merciful to both of them. In the words of Hawthorne, “Paul views Epaphroditus’ recovery as the direct merciful intervention of God which not only spared a devoted servant for the work of the gospel, but which also spared himself . . . the pain of bereavement added to the pain of suffering with a much-loved friend during his illness.”

Epaphroditus must have been sick for some time. Philippi was about eight hundred miles from Rome, and it would have taken at least several months for the news of his sickness to reach the church and the news of their response to get back to Epaphroditus. His slow recovery indicates that Paul could not perform miraculous healings at will (if he could he surely would have healed his afflicted friend). The sickness of Epaphroditus also refutes the terribly wrong thinking that God wills all Christians to have strong and healthy bodies, and that a failure to be healed is because of a lack of faith, or that sickness is always a result of sin or a sign of God’s chastening.

**C. The Welcome Epaphroditus Should Be Given (2:28-30):** “*Therefore, I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me*.”

It’s because of this illness that Paul is sending Epaphroditus to Philippi sooner than either he or the Philippians had expected. The intended result of this change in plans is two-fold: **(a)** the Philippians would be glad that he was alive and well when he safely returned to them; **(b)** Paul would have less anxiety than he would have if Epaphroditus were to remain in his company. Yes, there *are* legitimate cares and concerns that come with the Christian life and ministry, as opposed to self-centered and counter-productive worry (Cf. 4:6)!

Paul thus exhorts the Philippians to welcome Epaphroditus with great joy and to honor him, especially in light of his final word of explanation; “*. . . because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for all the help you could not give me*.” Men like Epaphroditus are to be held in high esteem not simply because of what they have done, but because of why they have done it. In this instance, Epaphroditus was willing to sacrifice everything because of his desire to serve Christ and to fulfill the mission of his church. He had left home, undertaken a long and hazardous journey, subjected himself to the worst kind of physical and emotional stress, and almost died in the process.

The word translated “risking” is one that Paul may have coined for this occasion (it’s the only time it appears in the New Testament). The idea behind it is of someone who has gambled or gone out on a limb in a particularly risky venture. Epaphroditus was doing just that. He was “gambling with his life” in order to make up for the Philippians’ absence from Paul. From this one word alone, writes Hawthorne, “it is clear that Epaphroditus was no coward, but a courageous person willing to take enormous risks, ready to play with very high stakes in order to come to the aid of a person in need. He did not ‘save’ his life, but rather hazarded it to do for Paul and for the cause of Christ what other Philippian Christians did not or could not do.”

We don’t have a photograph of Epaphroditus. We don’t know if he was tall or short, handsome or not so handsome, with or without any distinctive features. **Q.** If he was to walk into our church fellowship, then how would we recognize him? **A.** Not by his theological expertise; nor by his charismatic power to heal the sick; nor by his prophetic words of wisdom or knowledge. But all of us would surely *know* who he was. His love and devotion for you and me, and his self-sacrificing service for the cause of Christ would be his calling card.

Small wonder Epaphroditus was one of Paul’s much-loved friends. He chose *against* his own interests *for* the interests of someone else. Everyone should *have someone* in their lives like him; everyone should seek *to be someone* like him in another’s life. The Christian life *is* a team effort. That’s the way God designed it. Why, then, would we even think about facing the challenges of the Christian life alone? Paul never did, and neither should we!