

Paul and Epaphroditus

A Meditation on Philippians 2:25-30

By Arjan de Visser

Philippians 2:25-30 (NIV)

²⁵But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸Therefore 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. ²⁹So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, ³⁰because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

One of the fascinating aspects of the ministry of the apostle Paul is his relationship with his co-workers. Paul never worked just by himself. He liked to do the Lord's work together with fellow believers. In Romans 16 there is a long list of co-workers of Paul, male and female.

One of Paul's most trusted helpers was Epaphroditus. In his letter to the Philippians Paul speaks highly of him. He uses three words to explain how much Epaphroditus means to him: "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Phil. 2:25). Let's consider these three words.

Paul calls Epaphroditus his brother (*adelphos*). In this context it means more than just brother: he was Paul's colleague. Similarly, in 1:14 Paul refers to *brothers* who have been encouraged "to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." Epaphroditus was a colleague of Paul in the work of spreading the gospel.

Second, Epaphroditus is Paul's co-worker (*sunergos*). This word is often used by Paul to refer to those who were commissioned by God to the task of missionary preaching. In the case of Epaphroditus, he had probably assisted Paul with the founding of the church in Philippi.

The third term Paul uses for Epaphroditus is fellow soldier (*sustratiotes*), brother in arms. Epaphroditus struggled side by side with Paul against those who opposed the gospel. That Paul is thinking about struggle with opposition is clear from Phil 1:27-28 where he encourages the believers in Philippi to "contend as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you..."; and in vs. 30 he once again refers to a common struggle: "since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had..." Epaphroditus was from the church of Philippi. He had been in the same struggle with Paul. No doubt, Epaphroditus had experienced suffering and conflict in his ministry and Paul regarded him highly.

The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to Paul when Paul was in prison. Where exactly Paul was is not certain. It could be Rome, it could be Ephesus. From Paul's writing we learn something about the relationship between Epaphroditus and the church in Philippi. Paul uses two terms in this connection: First, he calls Epaphroditus "your messenger." Actually, Paul says that he is their *apostle*. Of course, Epaphroditus did not formally have the position of apostle. Paul uses the word Paul to honour Epaphroditus and to highlight his abilities as a preacher of the gospel.

Paul also calls Epaphroditus a "minister to my need" (*leitourgos tes chreias mou*). It is a beautiful expression. The church in Philippi had sent Epaphroditus to Paul to minister to his need. The question is what kind of need Paul had that needed to be addressed. Was it financial need or something else? It is clear that financial support was part of it. See 4:18: "I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God."

But it appears that more is involved. In 2:30 Paul writes that Epaphroditus “almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for *the help you could not give me.*” In other words, they were able to help Paul financially. But there was also some help they could *not* give. That is the help Paul received from Epaphroditus. In other words, Epaphroditus did more than just delivering a financial gift to Paul. He stayed with Paul for some time, supported Paul with his presence and conversations, and was probably involved in some way in Paul’s ministry. In the process he became ill (vs. 27) and he almost died. The fact that Epaphroditus was a loyal companion must have been very encouraging to Paul.

Conclusion: The church in Philippi sent Epaphroditus to Paul for two reasons, (1) to bring financial support to Paul, (2) to encourage and support Paul in his difficult situation, helping him in whatever way he might be able to.



Reflecting on the ministry of Epaphroditus helps us to appreciate the fact that the Lord uses a variety of servants for the spreading of the gospel.



This also explains why Paul finds it necessary to explain in some detail why he is sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi. Clearly, the Philippians were not expecting him to come back yet, so Paul makes it very clear that Epaphroditus is not running away from his task but that he, Paul himself, is sending him back sooner than expected. Paul gives several reasons: (1) the Philippians are concerned because they have heard that Epaphroditus is ill, vs. 28 (2) Epaphroditus longs for all of them, vs. 26, (3) Paul himself will have less anxiety

when he knows that Epaphroditus is back in Philippi. Perhaps Paul thought that Epaphroditus was needed in Philippi in order to protect the church against false teachers who were promoting a spirit of perfectionism and legalism (see chapter 3:2-19). Perhaps Paul thought that Epaphroditus was needed to help Euodia and Syntyche to put their differences aside (4:2). It could very well be that Epaphroditus is the “true companion” (or “loyal yokefellow,” NIV) who is mentioned in 4:3. Anyhow, Paul wants the Philippians to understand that Epaphroditus is not running away from his responsibilities but that he, Paul, is sending him back.

If we interpret Paul’s words along these lines, we also have a better understanding of Phil 1:3-6 where Paul mentions the “partnership” (*koinoonia*) of the Philippians “in the gospel.” The question is often asked: What does Paul mean when he uses the word partnership? In what sense were the Philippians *partners* with Paul in the gospel? The standard answer: by supporting him financially and prayerfully, and perhaps, because they too were involved in spreading the gospel in their own environment. We can add one more aspect to this: The Philippians also partnered with Paul in the gospel by sending him their own minister in order that he should support and assist Paul for some time. In other words, partnership in the gospel means cooperation in mission work, not just by way of financial support, but also by way of sharing human resources, manpower. The same thing still happens in our time when one of our ministers or professors goes to Brazil or PNG or some other place in the world to assist the churches there with teaching or advice or encouragement. That is ‘partnership in the gospel’ and it is a beautiful thing. Something that brought joy to Paul, and something that still brings joy to our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

Reflecting on the ministry of Epaphroditus helps us to appreciate the fact that the Lord uses a variety of servants for the spreading of the gospel. Let me put it this way: Epaphroditus was not an “A category” apostle like Paul. He

was not as significant as the other apostles. Perhaps he was not even in the same league with Timothy and Titus. Yet, he was a faithful minister of the gospel who led the church in Philippi very well and whose support meant a lot to Paul. When you read how Paul writes about Epaphroditus, you feel real warmth and affection. Application: Each one of us is different. We have different gifts and abilities. But we don't all have to become Pauls and Tituses, Kuypers and Bavincks. In the church of Christ there is great appreciation for the faithful minister who serves his Lord and the Lord's people. If it is our aim to do just that, we will be honoured by the Lord and we will experience genuine warmth and affection from those who love the Lord.

A final thought: It is beautiful to see how Paul does his best to guard the reputation of Epaphroditus. The whole paragraph of 2:25-30 is meant to make sure that nobody will be able to say anything bad about Epaphroditus (for example, by suggesting that he had run away from his responsibility). They need to know that it was Paul's decision that Epaphroditus should return home. So Paul asks the church at Philippi to "welcome him in the Lord with great joy and to honour men like him" (vs. 29). Perhaps Epaphroditus had had his struggles with people in the congregation who were critical of him and looked down on him. There is an important lesson here. Ministers of the gospel are only servants, and they are expected to be willing to suffer as the Lord himself has suffered. But as much as we can, we are called to promote the reputation of those who work for the proclamation of the gospel. Let this be an attitude we cultivate among ourselves.



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