

## EPAPHRODITUS

Last Sunday evening we considered *The Widow's Mites* [Lk. 21:1-4]. She was just an ordinary person, as most Christians are! There are very few of the same calibre as Paul or Peter or James or John. Most of us are 'ordinary' ... and that is also how we can describe Epaphroditus. He belonged to the church in Philippi, - it is not even mentioned if he was an elder or a deacon there. He wasn't an apostle. There is nothing to indicate he was a preacher, or indeed, anything particularly dramatic or dynamic ... And yet, he had many beautiful features ordinary folk like you and me can learn from.

In the opening verses of this chapter is a section on humility, of which Christ is the supreme illustration (Phil. 2:5-11). That is then followed by the practical application of humility, as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (v.12), and this is further exemplified by the statement in v.14, *Do all things without murmurings and disputings*. ... What Paul is saying is ... if things go well for you, don't be proud ... if things go difficult for you, don't complain ... and then he leads into the issue concerning Epaphroditus.

What do we know about Epaphroditus? Not an awful lot! We don't know what he worked at, or how long he had been a Christian. We *do* know this church in Philippi, - to which Epaphroditus belonged, - sent Paul a gift during the last two years of his life, when he was a prisoner in Rome, and they trusted Epaphroditus to bring that gift, *Phil. 4:18 I have ... received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you*. ... And not only that, they considered Epaphroditus a suitable person to represent them, - he was capable of sitting down with a man like Paul and speaking with him about the Lord.

And Paul had an immediate oneness with Epaphroditus. Paul didn't 'suffer fools gladly', - he had no time for 'idlers', - but he saw in Epaphroditus a real true friend in the Lord Jesus Christ. For Epaphroditus to come and visit him in prison was a long journey to make, and it showed his genuineness in the Lord's work.

We also see how Epaphroditus was a man of courage for he knew exactly what he was walking into. Paul was in prison, - under house arrest, - and Epaphroditus knew the Romans kept records of all who visited Paul. So, he would have been identifying himself with a prisoner whose message was considered inflammatory and evocative, - a potential threat to the Roman Empire. There was a risk involved, being a friend of Paul!

So, here is a Godly man, a respected and trusted servant of the church, who courageously entered a hostile environment. He is not afraid, but he's faithful.

His name, Epaphroditus, was a pagan name, and it means 'devoted to Aphrodite'. Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love and beauty. This tells us he came from a pagan family, because Christian parents would not have given him a name like that. ... The Lord had saved him from out of paganism, - from worshipping false idols. ... What a miracle of grace the Lord saved him! ... Incidentally, there is another man Paul mentions, - Epaphras. Some commentators think Epaphras is a shortened version of Epaphroditus (like David and Dave, William and Bill, Philip and Phil). Personally, I'm not sure. Both names would have been common in those times, and besides Epaphras served in the Colossian church, whereas Epaphroditus served in the church in Philippi, - almost two hundred miles apart. By the way, Epaphras means 'covered in foam' ... but you will also notice it could refer to Aphrodite. ... Probably, though, they were two different men ...

Specifically, though, Paul wrote and told the church in Philippi, **Phil. 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 [*λεειτουργός*, - *the word used for a priest in the temple*] to my wants [*needs*]. ... Paul thought so highly of him, he gave him five titles, - three in relation to Paul, and two in relation to the Philippian church.

First of all, he is *my brother*, - Paul and him were related in the Lord, with a love and commitment to each other in Christ. And that is how they got on so well, even under those circumstances of Paul being imprisoned!

Secondly, Paul described him as a **companion in labour**, a co-worker ... someone he respected in the Lord's work.

Thirdly, Paul described him as a 'fellowsoldier'. Remember the words Paul had previously written to Timothy, **II Tim. 4:7** **I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith** ... that was the calibre Paul saw in Epaphroditus, - a 'fellowsoldier' who he would trust with his life. It hints at how they both shared in their conflicts for the Lord.

The remaining two titles in Phil 2:25 refer to Epaphroditus in the life of his local church, - *your messenger* [*ἀπόστολος*], he was an 'apostle' within the local

church, and – wrote Paul – he is *your* minister to *my* need for you have sent him to me.

But now, wrote Paul, I have to send him back, <sup>25</sup> Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus ... <sup>26</sup> For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick. ... Epaphroditus was missing his fellow-believers back home in Philippi, and he was concerned about the Christians being worried about him, and he wanted to get back as soon as he could. This church in Philippi was a ‘family’ ... and Epaphroditus missed it!

They had heard he had been *sick*, and it always worse when you are *sick* away from home, and you can imagine the worries and concerns of the Christian family back in Philippi. ... We don’t know what he was sick with, but whatever it was, it was serious enough he could have died! ... <sup>27</sup> For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him ... God spared him, and when God spared him, God showed mercy on Paul too, for all he meant to Paul in the work.

But, back home in Philippi, the people were worried, and so Paul considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus ... And that would have been a great wrench, - a great sacrifice, - for Paul, confined to his prison ... for Epaphroditus and him enjoyed each other’s companionship in the Lord.

In the background to all this, Paul knows his days were numbered, - as he wrote to Timothy, **II Tim. 4:6** I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand ... but he believed the Lord still had a purpose for Epaphroditus and that’s why he is being positive when he wrote to the Philippians, **Phil. 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. ... The word for ‘carefully’ (σπουδαιότερως) means ‘earnestly, diligently, *eagerly*’ ... I sent him therefore the more *eagerly*, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful ... He’s serving the Lord among you, he is missing you, and he’s coming home. Paul was saying, “When I hear reports of how you and he are working together for the Lord in Philippi, it will do my heart good here in Rome”. ... <sup>29</sup> Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation ... give him a warm welcome when he arrives home, and hold men like him in the highest regard.

I wonder what kind of sickness Epaphroditus had? The word in v.27 (ἀσθενέω) can mean ‘to be weak, feeble, frail, without strength’ ... but when you combine that together with how Paul writes in v.30, - Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me, - I

wonder if this sickness was associated with suffering for Christ, almost to the point of death and martyrdom ... for it was specifically *for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death*. I wonder if this *sickness nigh unto death* was because he risked his life in Rome for being a Christian, and being associated with Paul. ... At the very least, he was making himself a target by being with Paul?

Paul explained, *not regarding his life* ... That is not unlike how Paul wrote about himself, **Phil. 3:8** *I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ* ... or those last words he said to the elders in Ephesus as he made his final journey to Jerusalem where he would be arrested and eventually taken to Rome, **Acts 20:24** *neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.*

C.T. Studd wrote,

Only one life, yes only one,  
Now let me say, "Thy will be done";  
And when at last I'll hear the call,  
I know I'll say "twas worth it all";  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Epaphroditus is a great encouragement because he was simply a man who loved the Lord and the Lord's people. He demonstrated that love by travelling all the way from Philippi to Rome with a gift for Paul in prison. Paul enjoyed and benefitted from his commitment to the Lord. And he went back home again to the Lord's people in Philippi, and settled into the work again. ... He could have written an epistle, he could have gone around the churches, making a name for himself and telling of his time with Paul ... but he simply returned to the work in Philippi, which the Lord had laid on his heart. The last words we read about him are these ... Paul wrote, **Phil. 4:18** *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.* ... Epaphroditus had done his work as unto the Lord ... and he is an example of what we also should be doing, simple and ordinary as we are. Amen.