

25–26 But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.

Paul now gives insight to his own longing and care for the believers in Philippi, knowing that they were concerned about one of their own, Epaphroditus, whom they had sent to look after the needs of Paul. Rather than allow them to be overly concerned about Epaphroditus, he is sending him back to Philippi so that both he and the community there would be encouraged by the manner in which the Lord had brought healing to Epaphroditus as well as receiving an updated report on Paul's own condition.

According to Reumann, the name "Epaphroditus" is not an uncommon masculine name in the Greek world of the first century CE, based upon the goddess Aphrodite (Latin, "Venus").¹ In the Apostolic Scriptures, he is mentioned only here and in 4:18. Some would suggest that he received this name most likely because he came from a family devoted to the Aphrodite cult.² If so, we see yet another example of how the power of the gospel and faith in Yeshua transformed a life from idolatry to serving Yeshua and the *ekklesia* founded upon His saving work.

...*my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier* – Paul not only identifies Epaphroditus as his "brother" in the Lord, but also as a "fellow worker" and "fellow soldier" with him. When Paul refers to Epaphroditus as a "fellow worker," this is easily understood, for he had come to aid Paul in his imprisonment and thus to join him in the duties of discipling others in the truth of the Scriptures. We find the same Greek term, *συνεργός* (*sunergos*, "fellow worker") applied to Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3), Urbanus (Rom 16:9), Timothy (Rom 16:21; 1Thess 3:2), Clement (Phil 4:3), Philemon (Phileman 1), and Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Philemon 24). Moreover, John indicates that all who work together for the furtherance of the gospel and support those who are teachers, are likewise "fellow workers in the truth" (3John 8). Here we see the apostolic emphasis upon community: a group of people united together in the Lord and who are thereby enabled to accomplish what they could never do individually. It is no wonder, then, that the enemy

1 Reumann, John, *Philippians in The Anchor Bible* (Yale Univ Press, 1974), p. 424.

2 Ibid.

will make believing communities a target of his warfare and do all in his power to disrupt, cause division, and seek to weaken their effectiveness for living and proclaiming the gospel, centered as it is in the saving work of God through the redemption wrought by Yeshua and applied by the Ruach through the gift of faith.

We ought therefore to be greatly encouraged in our resolve and efforts to promote unity within the local assembly of believers, and to view one another as “fellow workers,” all with the singular goal of being living and vocal witnesses for Yeshua and the salvation He has procured for all who are called to Him.

But note well that Paul also refers to Epaphroditus as a “fellow soldier” (συστρατιώτης, *sustratiōtēs*). Paul uses “fellow soldier” only twice in his epistles: here in our text and in Philemon 2 where he identifies Archippus as “our fellow soldier.” That such a military title is used by Paul regarding Epaphroditus reminds one of what he wrote in the opening chapter of this epistle, where he characterizes living for Messiah in this fallen world as very often to experience opposition and even attempts to discredit those who are seeking to evangelize others. He recognizes that the Philippian believers would also have opponents who were combative toward the followers of Yeshua and he admonishes them not to be alarmed but that their steadfast resolve in living out their faith would itself defeat those who stood against them.

For to you it has been granted for Messiah’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me. (Phil 1:29-30)

All too often, in our modern world, many who claim to be followers of Yeshua have been taught that the life of faith is one of joy and happiness, where needs are met in abundance and the woes of this fallen world have been taken away and replaced with abundance. Surely it is true that to walk in the ways of Yeshua as empowered by the Ruach brings great joy and true satisfaction, but this does not mean that the battle is over and we will never again face true battles in our lives. Yeshua Himself teaches us:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (Jn 16:33)

How is it that Yeshua promises “shalom” but likewise teaches us

that we will inevitably experience “tribulation” in this world? What we learn from this is that true shalom or peace is not to be understood as the absence of tribulation but rather as full assurance that God has already enabled us to persevere through the times of trial and thus to have courage that ultimately the battle has already been won.

Paul himself, along with Timothy and Epaphroditus, stand before us as demonstrating what it means to be laborers for God’s truth and soldiers in the battlefield of truth. Let us resolve to stand firm for the truth of God’s word and to live out our faith to a watching world for the glory of God and the proclamation of the gospel in Yeshua.

... *who is also your messenger and minister to my need* – Epaphroditus was a servant, both of the believing community in Philippi as well as to Paul himself. He carried that which the Philippian community had provided for Paul’s needs while imprisoned and thus conveyed the love and support of the whole community to Paul. Surely Paul was greatly comforted and encouraged by receiving their gift through the hands of Epaphroditus.

Here we see a very important truth: Epaphroditus is a sterling example of someone who gave himself to the task of being a servant to carry important communication as well as provisions for Paul’s physical needs, and in this capacity is extolled for his faithfulness and the vital role he performed both for his assembly as well as for Paul. And what is the lesson we learn from this? It is this: even what many might consider “common” or even “mundane” tasks, when done for the Lord and thus for the good of His people, are important, necessary, honorable, and blessed of the Lord. In the family of God, everyone has been gifted to serve and when we serve each other as serving the Lord, we fulfill our role as a servant of the Lord Himself.

...*because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.* – Paul has chosen to send Epaphroditus back to the Philippian community, not only because he had proven himself to be a faithful servant of the community, but because news had traveled back to Philippi that Epaphroditus had fallen ill, and it was important for them to know that he was over the sickness. Epaphroditus himself was concerned for his community in Philippi, that they not think he had passed or was still struggling under the sickness.

Thus Paul makes it clear in the letter he sent with Epaphroditus, that he was sending him back and that Epaphroditus was not abandoning him and leaving before the task for which he was sent had been completed. Here, once again, we see an excellent example of the genuine love and caring concern that ought to characterize a community

that professes to have Yeshua as their Lord and King. May we, in our own communities, strive for unity and for a genuine love and caring for each other. Just as Paul wrote to the Galatians:

Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the Torah of Messiah. (Gal 6:2)

27 – For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.

... *For indeed he was sick to the point of death* – Exactly what the sickness was which Epaphroditus had contracted is not given and remains unknown. All that Paul wanted to convey, then, was that it was a sickness which was acute and which could well have ended his life. The phrase “sick to the point of death” utilizes the Greek word *παραπλησιος* (*paraplēsios*), which carries the sense of “coming alongside or near, coming near, resembling, similar.”¹ Thus, “he was so ill that he nearly died.” The wording would indicate that all visible signs indicated the sickness would end the earthly life of Epaphroditus.

Consider what Paul must have felt in this situation. Here was a servant of the Lord who traveled to bring Paul necessary, life-sustaining food, etc., and who in the course of his service nearly died. As if Paul did not have enough sorrow being wrongly imprisoned and suffering the woes of Roman incarceration, and then this took place. His fellow servant of the Lord who brought the help Paul so much needed appeared to be dying himself. Yet we surely know that Paul turned to God in prayer, seeking God's almighty hand of healing for his fellow servant in the gospel.

...*but God had mercy on him.* – Here, as always, God is the One Who overcomes the woes of death and brings healing to Epaphroditus. Note carefully that God is not spoken of as obligated to heal but that He does so out of His mercy. The idea that some special kind of prayer or some “formula” of “spiritual healing” is what secures God's healing power is wrong. All that God does is in accord with His sovereign will and for bringing about His purposes. Does He receive our prayers and answer them? Yes, of course! But we must always have in our hearts and minds to order our prayers with “according to Your will.” Prayer is not a way of manipulating God or drawing Him to do what He otherwise would

1 BDAG, “παραπλησιος,” p. 770.

not, but rather seeking the work of His hand in our lives in order that He would receive the glory. As Martin notes regarding our text:

He mentions neither faith nor prayer nor the laying on of hands any more than he does the effect of medicines or of a doctor. It goes without saying that these various procedures are more or less taken for granted, yet what concerns the apostle is not the healing itself but its significance. He sees it as a sovereign, merciful act of God Himself.¹

...and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow. – The mercy of God was not only experienced by Epaphroditus who was healed from a sickness which apparently could have ended his life, but also by Paul. One can only imagine how Paul would have mourned had his “fellow worker and soldier” died, the very one who so willingly came as currier of the gifts from the Philippian community to sustain Paul’s life.

But did Paul experience joy even in the midst of such sorrowful circumstances? We find Paul describing his own joy in the Lord a number of times in Philippians.

...always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all.... (Phil 1:4)

...make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (Phil 2:2)

But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me. (Phil 2:17-18)

So how do we reconcile the fact that Paul writes of his joy yet in our current verse he expresses the fact that had Epaphroditus died, it would have simply been “sorrow upon sorrow”? Here, once again, we learn an important lesson from Paul, and it is this:

Joy does not mean the absence of sorrow, but the capacity to rejoice in the midst of it.²

1 Ralph Martin, *Philippians* in *WBC* (Zondervan, 2004), Vol 43, p. 165.

2 Gordan Fee, *Philippians* in *IVP NT Commentary* (IVP, 1999), p. 124.

And what is it that enables the believer in Yeshua to find settled joy even in the midst of sorry? It is a firm belief in what the Bible teaches us about God's sovereign love, revealed in Yeshua and expressed by the Ruach HaKodesh in the lives of all those He indwells. For God, in His infinite sovereignty and His love for all whom He redeems, brings about that which He deems proper and necessary to conform His children to the very image of Yeshua. This is divine wisdom and love.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom 8:28)

28 – Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you.

Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice – The opening “Therefore” (οὖν, *oun*) hearkens back to v. 27 and gives Paul’s reasoning for sending him back to Philippi. Surely Paul would have liked to have Epaphroditus stay and continue to be a help to him as he endured the woes of prison, but he thought it necessary to send him back in order to comfort the Philippian community which in turn would enable Paul not to have added sorrow. For if the Philippian community received no word about the condition of Epaphroditus, it is conceivable that the sorrow they would experience may have been overwhelming.

There is a question about how the word “again” in the phrase “when you see him again you may rejoice” is to be understood. The NASB has it modifying the verb “see” (ἰδόντες αὐτὸν πάλιν) but it is very possible that the adverb πάλιν (*palin*) actually modifies the verb “rejoice.”¹ The adverb *palin* almost always precedes the verb it modifies and this is the case in our verse. Though the choice is somewhat ambiguous, if it does indeed mean “rejoice again,” it is in line with Paul’s emphasis on believers “rejoicing” in the life given to them by God.

The phrase “all the more eagerly” translates a single word in the Greek, σπουδαίως (*spondaiōs*), which gives the sense of “with special ur-

1 See Gordan Fee, *Philippians* in *WBC* (Zondervan, 2004), Vol. 43, p. 125.

gency.”¹ Some have suggested that emphasizing this to be of “special urgency” may indicate a change of plans. It may well have been that Paul and the community of Philippi expected Epaphroditus to remain with Paul indefinitely and if he had not succumbed to such a serious illness, Paul might not have had the sense that he should send him home. But given the fact that the Philippian community was aware of his illness but yet had not been informed of his healing, Paul recognized the deep sorrow they were experiencing. Such sorrow could best be overcome by having Epaphroditus with them once again.

... and I may be less concerned about you. – Here, once again, we see the heart of the Apostle Paul for those he was commissioned to teach and lead. Putting his own needs as secondary, he sends Epaphroditus back to his community in order to comfort their sorrows, perhaps many of them thinking it possible that he had died from his illness.

Paul is here a model for all who are in leadership positions within believing communities, for he shows a valid concern for the people of God in their respective communities, even being willing to put his own needs as secondary to the needs of others. In this case, he wanted the Philippian community to rejoice and to continue to rejoice in the mercy of the healing God gave to Epaphroditus.

In the Greek, the final phrase, “concerned about you” actually does not contain the words “about you” but simply has “that I may be less concerned.” Surely context would naturally have “about you” as that which Paul means, but some have translated it leaving out the implied “about you” and understood the phrase to mean “I may be less concerned.” The verb “concerned” translates the Greek word *ἄλυπος* (*alupos*) which is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. Though it can surely mean “free from anxiety,”² as found in non-biblical Greek texts, it seems to me that the ESV’s translation of this final phrase is a bit unfortunate. It translates the phrase “and that I may be less anxious.” If one is reading only the English translations, then there would seem to be a conflict when one comes to Phil 4:6, where the ESV, along with many other English Bibles, translates a different word (*μεριμνάω*, *merimnaō*):

... do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

1 BDAG, “σπουδαίως,” p. 939.

2 So BDAG, “ἄλυπος,” p. 48.