

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

### SERVICE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

Read Philippians 2:19-30

#### **Introduction**

Before we study this passage in Philippians, let's look briefly at the background of the two Christian workers mentioned in these verses of the bible starting with Timothy.

Timothy's name means in Greek, "one who honours God." He was a native of Lystra, where Paul and Barnabas had visited in their First Missionary Journey (about 41 to 47 AD). Miracles took place and "they preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples" (Acts 14:8). One of these was apparently Timothy, then a young man. Paul considered himself Timothy's spiritual father, calls him "my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:17) and "my true son in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2). By the time Paul and Silas returned to the area for the Second Missionary Journey (about 47-51 AD), "the brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him" (Acts 16:2). He had developed a good reputation in the Christian community. Paul asked him to join them on the missionary journey as an assistant (Acts 16:3).

Like all of us, however, Timothy was a person who partnered with God working in him directly and through Paul. Paul has to encourage him against timidity (2 Timothy 1:7) and people despising his authority because of his youth (1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Corinthians 16:10). Sometimes Paul has to urge him to be diligent in spiritual matters and to persevere in the Christian ministry (1 Timothy 4:12-16; 2 Timothy 1:6; 3:14-15). Paul also instructs him how to behave towards various kinds of people (1 Timothy 5), controlling his passions (2 Timothy 2:22-23), dealing with error (2 Timothy 3:1-18), and keep himself from godless myths and speculations (1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7). Paul encourages by his own example to love, faith, and purity (1 Timothy 4:12), to fight the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 1:18), and to keep the faith and a good conscience (1 Timothy 1:19).

Now let's move from Timothy to Epaphroditus, a believer sent by the Philippian church to assist Paul in prison. His name means "charming." Epaphroditus faithfully delivered the gift from his home church and then went above and beyond the call of duty. In his fervour to serve the Lord by serving Paul, Epaphroditus became seriously ill and, in fact, almost died. God graciously granted Epaphroditus health, and Paul sent his friend back home with the newly penned book of Philippians.

To the Philippians, Epaphroditus was a messenger who delivered a package. To Paul, however, he was so much more: a "brother" (belonging to the same family), a "co-worker" (labouring toward the same goal), and a "fellow soldier" (sharing the same trials). Epaphroditus was a man of obvious devotion, faithfulness, and self-sacrifice. He put "the interests of others" before himself and so modelled the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:4-5). He laboured on Paul's behalf until his own health broke, and, even when he was sick, Epaphroditus took no thought of himself; rather, he was distressed because his church had heard of his illness, and he didn't want them to worry.

#### **Timothy's Selfless Love**

*"But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus." (vv19-21)*

Timothy was a great comfort to Paul in his imprisonment. Paul is seeking recent news of the Philippian church, but even more he is seeking news that their divisions and bickering had ceased. Paul didn't expect problems from the Philippians, as if they were one of his problem churches. Instead, he expected that he would be encouraged when I know your state. Contrast this with the attitude Paul conveyed to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 13:2-3. The Corinthian church had much worse problems than the Philippian church had.

When Paul sent Timothy, he sent his best, a man who showed a pastor's heart and had greater concern for his sheep than for himself. Look at what makes Timothy an effective leader: He "sincerely care for your state." He isn't self-absorbed. He doesn't have a hidden agenda. He cares about those he ministers to.

Paul has had lots of experience with church leaders by now. Paul says, "I have no one else like him." How sad, when you think of it – a person with rareness of genuine concern, which is a synonym, of true agapē love.

### **Proving Oneself**

*"But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel." (v22)*

Timothy has proved himself. "Proved/proof" (NIV/KJV) or "worth" (NRSV) is the Greek noun dokimē, "test, ordeal." This is like "gold refined in the fire," tested, purified, proved.

Timothy has worked with Paul "as a son with his father." What does that mean? The way boys learned to farm, or to be a carpenter, or a tentmaker, or whatever trade? They generally worked alongside their father for years, learning not only the skills, but the attitudes and values that are necessary to perform the work successfully. Timothy was an apprentice.

### **Slaving in the Gospel**

There are several words in Greek for serving. One of the most common is diakoneō, "to serve," from which we get our word "deacon." But the word "served" in this verse is remarkable. It is the Greek verb douleuō, "to act or conduct oneself as one in total service to another, perform the duties of a slave, serve, obey."

When we use the phrase, "slaving away," we use it in a negative sense of menial, unremitting, undesirable labour. But Paul means it as a humble privilege, to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as his willing slave is a high honour. Is it an honour for you or a chore? A lot has to do with the quality of our love for this Jesus. If we are just doing "church work," that can get old. But Paul tells slaves in his day,

*"Serve (douleuō) wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free." (Ephesians 6:7-8)*

In your church or your daily occupation, whom are you serving? Get this right and you can be a leader. Get this wrong and you will hurt the church of Christ.

Paul uses an interesting phrase, "He has served with me in [the work of] the gospel." "Work of the gospel" (NIV, RSV) is the Greek noun euangelion, "good news as a proclamation." What we are about is the vital work of proclaiming the Good News itself to a darkened, dying world!

### **Epaphroditus the Man**

*"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" (v25)*

This undoubtedly meant that Epaphroditus took this letter to the Philippians. It seems that Epaphroditus came to Paul from the Philippians as a messenger and became sick while he was with Paul.

Look at the ways Paul describes Epaphroditus:

**Brother (*adelphos*).** He's part of the Christian family, the church family. "My brother" also speaks of a relationship to be enjoyed.

**Fellow worker (*synergos*).** Paul is in prison. There are no cities to take for Christ. No glorious mission to the heathen but Paul doesn't trivialize his time in prison. He doesn't see it as wasted. So Epaphroditus is a worker, a fellow worker with Paul. No matter that Paul is the famous apostle and Epaphroditus a humble layperson come to help. He has made a valuable contribution to the mission. He is a fellow worker in the great work of the Gospel.

**Fellow soldier (*systratiōtēs*).** Paul has no illusions about his situation. He is not comfortable in some church that seems to fit like an old shoe. He is a soldier in Christ's army. He is at war and does not hesitate to remind the troops of their status too. As he wrote to Timothy in a later letter:

*"You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier." (2 Timothy 2:3-4)*

We are not to be complainers or slackers. We are soldiers who expect to endure difficulty and hardship. To achieve the mission no matter what the personal cost. Epaphroditus is a fellow soldier.

**Messenger (*apostolos*).** Though the Greek word is *apostolos*, this doesn't mean that Epaphroditus is an official apostle. The word was commonly used of "messengers without extraordinary status, delegate, envoy." He is a messenger of the Church of Philippi sent on a mission to help Paul. Epaphroditus is a messenger, the church's messenger, Christ's messenger.

**"Minister" (NRSV) or "priestly minister" (*leitourgos*).** The word can mean "one engaged in personal service, aide, assistant." But it can also carry the idea of priestly service, though it may not have that connotation here. Epaphroditus is a minister, an aide-de-camp, an assistant.

### Epaphroditus was sick

*"... since he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. 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." (vv26-28)*

Epaphroditus was concerned because the Philippians learned of his sickness and worried about him. The return of Epaphroditus would give them peace of mind that their valued brother was in good condition.

The sickness of Epaphroditus was no small thing; it was almost unto death. Yet God had mercy on him, and he recovered. There is nothing in the text to indicate that this was a miraculous healing, but Paul still saw God's hand of mercy in Epaphroditus' recovery.

God's mercy to Epaphroditus was also mercy to Paul. If Epaphroditus had died, Paul would have had sorrow upon sorrow because a valued brother, worker, and soldier for Christ was no longer on this earth. He would also have sorrow upon sorrow because Epaphroditus became sick when he came on behalf of the Philippians to minister to Paul's material and spiritual needs while Paul was in prison in Rome.

## Honour Such Men

*“Therefore, I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness and hold such men in esteem; 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.” (vv28-30)*

Whatever the reason, Paul's letter to the Philippians is designed to ensure that his church will honour him for his work rather than consider him a failure and washout. That is the reason for the words describing his service – brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger, and minister. Paul commands the Philippians concerning him: "Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness and hold such men in esteem" (3:29)

It is quite appropriate for churches to especially honour those who have served in ministry as pastors and missionaries. Sometimes they return to a home church at retirement. We should honour them! But sometimes they return to a home church after a debilitating illness or emotional burnout. Sometimes they return following a divorce that the stresses of ministry contributed to. Dear friends, we aren't to be their judges but their brothers and sisters and friends. We are to buoy them up and heal them by our love. We are to honour them and their families for Christ's sake and for their service to Christ, no matter what the outcome.

When our servicemen and women returned home from an unpopular war, they were often dishonoured and forgotten. When they suffered injuries both physical and mentally, we tended to disregard them. We cannot afford to do this to our pastors and missionaries and Christian workers when they return from service. Let us outdo one another in honouring them!