

## Epaphroditus: A Friend in Need

[Philipians 4:15-20](#); [Philipians 2:25-30](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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Paul was in jail when he wrote this letter, and he was in jail simply because he was a well-known Christian leader. Rome had begun to take notice of the Christian movement, and it didn't like what it saw. Every person in the Empire was required to pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord. Failure to do so was considered treason and was punishable by death. Believing that Jesus alone is Lord, Christians refused to take that oath. And since by now there were far too many Christians to arrest and put on trial, the authorities struck at their leaders. If they could force men like Peter and Paul to recant, perhaps the rank and file would follow suit and knuckle under to the imperial authority.

So Paul was in jail, and it was no bed of roses. Some of you have seen the Mamertine Prison in Rome. It consisted of a vast network of dungeons under the city's main sewer, and with the inevitable seepage you can imagine the filth and stench in which Paul was forced to live.

Into this sickening state of affairs steps a young man named Epaphroditus. We Presbyterians would call him a Volunteer in Mission, a man who willingly embarked on a seven-hundred mile journey to bring Paul a care package from the congregation at Philippi. And not only a care package: they intended Epaphroditus to stay at Paul's side for the duration, to serve the aging apostle as a personal aide, a gofer, a friend in need. But Epaphroditus fell seriously ill in Rome. "He was so ill that he nearly died," Paul writes. So Paul is sending him back home to Philippi, and in the letter that he sticks in the young man's backpack, Paul heaps high praise on Epaphroditus: He is "my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need. Welcome him in the Lord with all joy; and honor such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me."

There are five laudatory terms in that brief commendation. First, Epaphroditus is "my brother." However their ages may differ, whatever their disparity in education or experience, no matter the prominence of Paul and the relative obscurity of Epaphroditus, Paul treats his young friend as his brother because in Christ there can be no hierarchy where one is better than another. We use a lot of titles in the Presbyterian Church, pastor, elder, deacon, trustee, for example, but God forbid that the bearers of those titles should put themselves on a pedestal. Our titles are not for status; they are for service. Church officers are servants of the congregation, not lords of the manor. So as you submit recommendations for next year's officers, remember that one of the first qualifications is that the person behaves as a brother or sister in Christ.

And Epaphroditus was more than a brother; he was a "co-worker." The Greek term is "synergos," from which we derive our word "synergy." These two men got along well together. There was synergy there, harmony of mind, solidarity of spirit, and unity of purpose, and you and I both know that that isn't always the case even among brothers and sisters in Christ. Differences of personality, of outlook, and of deeply held convictions sometimes make it difficult for even the most dedicated persons to work together. Paul and Barnabas reached such an impasse when they sat down to plan their second missionary tour. The issue was John Mark who had deserted them midway through their first missionary tour. Barnabas forgave Mark and wanted to give him another chance. Paul adamantly refused to forgive Mark and would not allow him to join them on their second tour. So Barnabas and Paul, devoted Christians both, split up and went their separate ways. And that was okay. We don't have to get along with everyone just because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to pray for each other and love each other, but we don't have to be everyone's bosom buddy. Fortunately for Epaphroditus and Paul, their personalities meshed. They were "synergoi," co-workers for Christ.

And, writes Paul, Epaphroditus is my "fellow-soldier." So closely did he identify with Paul that he enlisted

in Paul's battle with the government. It was as if he said to the federal prosecutors, "Look, if you're going to attack Paul, you'll have to deal with me as well." A good friend served as a volunteer care giver to an older woman who was all alone in the world and seriously ill. On one of her visits her older friend told her that a few days earlier her doctor had refused to respond to her cries for help. My friend drove her straight to that doctor's office and said to the man, "We're not leaving here until you take care of my friend." The doctor caved in and treated the woman right away. My friend, you see, was a fellow-soldier; she fought for the rights of her ill friend. Is there someone you know who needs that kind of caring for? And are you willing to be their fellow-soldier, to enlist in their battle, whatever the risk?

Then, Paul tells his Philippian friends, Epaphroditus is "your messenger." "Messenger" translates the Greek word "apostolos" (apostle), which means "one who is sent." In other words, Epaphroditus wasn't acting on his own. Unlike many would-be apostles and preachers and evangelists who are responsible to no one, Epaphroditus was sent out with the full backing of his congregation. That's how we do things at National Presbyterian. We commission apostle-messengers to carry care packages and to preach the Gospel all over the world. Here are some of their names: John Wagner and Chris Campbell, Peggy McCracken and Mary Lou Lyons, John Bernbaum and Keith Patman, Robert and Carla Rose, Drs. Rosalina and Roberto Martinez, Steve and Janice Quakenbush. Even if you personally cannot serve as an apostle-messenger, it is through your support of these missionaries that thousands the world over are hearing the Good News, many for the very first time.

Finally, Paul says, Epaphroditus is your "minister to my needs." The Greek word for "minister" contains overtones of sacrifice. There was a cost attached to this mission. The trip itself must have exacted a price. You and I can drive seven hundred miles in a couple of days, over ribbons of concrete, in air conditioned cars, with rest stops, restaurants, and motels liberally sprinkled along the way. It took Epaphroditus at least six weeks to cover those 700 miles, traveling by foot and boat, under scorching sun and driving rain. Perhaps that's why he lost his health. Or perhaps it was the notorious Roman fever that sometimes swept the city like a scourge. Whatever the cause, Epaphroditus "nearly died" to minister to Paul.

Now Epaphroditus is going home to Philippi, and I think I know how he felt. He was so pumped up when he first left Philippi, so full of enthusiasm and so determined to serve well. Now he is heading back to Philippi, leaving his work unfinished and no doubt feeling like a failure. How many times have you and I raised our hands and said, "I'll be there, I'll do the job, you can count on me," only to have some unforeseen circumstance throw a monkey wrench into our plans. And perhaps we staggered away under a black cloud of guilt, wondering if God would ever give us another chance to serve. But Paul won't let this young man hang his head! Because even though Epaphroditus was frail, he did not fail. We fail when we take the path of least resistance, not when the path becomes too steep to climb. We fail when we are lured away by some seductive decoy, not when we are overwhelmed by a superior foe. We fail when we choose to abandon our commitments, not when our frailties force us to stay home. Epaphroditus didn't fail, and Paul won't let any cloud of criticism rain on his homecoming parade.

Over the years I've heard countless Christians say, "I wish I could do more, but I'm confined to bed, I'm laid up with a bad back, I'm over my head with work or family, with my studies or caring for my aging parents, and I just don't have time and energy to take on anything more." The fact is, there are times when you cannot take on one more thing, and Paul and Epaphroditus want you to know that's okay. To be frail is not to fail. "God knows how we are made," says the 103rd Psalm, "he remembers that we are dust." And I want you to remember that God was on the scene long before you got here, and God will be at work long after you're gone. So when you have done all you can, leave the rest in the hands of God. You may not consider yourself anyone special, but I assure you that when you have done what you can, your picture will hang alongside Epaphroditus in God's Hall of Unsung Heroes and Heroines, and the inscription will read, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your master."