

The Example of Epaphroditus

We're pretty serious about the **Bible** around here. I pretty much stick to the Bible on Sunday mornings when I'm talking. Our kids are devoted to the Bible in the things they do, especially on Sundays and Wednesdays. We have lots of opportunities to study the Bible together throughout the week.



But what is the Bible?

- Theology
- History
- Prophetic Predictions
- Wisdom
- Worship Book

It is all of those things, and more... and it is a book about **people**.

We are back in our study of the New Testament Book of Philippians, a series we started back in May, and it has been a few months since we have been back to it... but we're back.

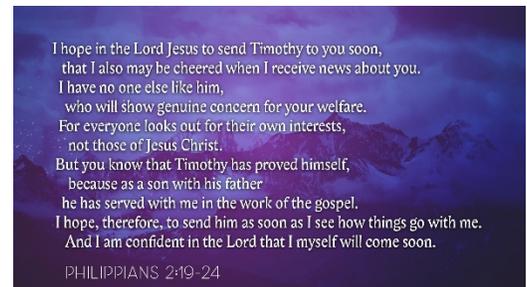
Today's short passage, the last dozen verses of Philippians 2, is about **people**... in addition to the Apostle Paul (who penned this letter to the church in Philippi while he was in Roman custody) there are two specific people: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

I'm glad for the theology and history and all... but I am especially glad for the way that people, *real people* like you and me, are woven throughout God's book. It reminds us how each of us, and all of us, are woven throughout God's story.

So at the end of Philippians 2, there is first Timothy:

¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.

This is the same Timothy that we see elsewhere in the New Testament, the same Timothy to whom Paul wrote about matters of church leadership that are in our New Testaments as the Books of 1 and 2 Timothy. Timothy is a famous coworker, protégé, and friend of Paul.



When Paul talks of sending Timothy to the Church in Philippi, he is talking about **communication**. There was no *FaceTime* or *text messaging*, no phones, or even reliable *snail mail*. The best, most reliable way to communicate over distances was through the travel of trusted emissaries... representatives who would often bring letters and other gifts, as well as their firsthand knowledge of the state of things on both sides of the communication.

Have you noticed how this method of communication has been in the news recently? Much to the surprise of many, our President and North Korea's dictator are talking. When they are not face-to-face in a summit, they apparently communicate via letter delivered by trusted officials (such as our own Secretary of State, or more recently the President of South Korea). It seems sort of *quaint*, doesn't it? I know this isn't how it is usually done these days; I've watched *Madame Secretary*. Perhaps this really old-school way of communication with North Korea demonstrates how truly *in the dark ages* the North Koreans remain (sort of amazing that they can piece together a nuclear weapon).

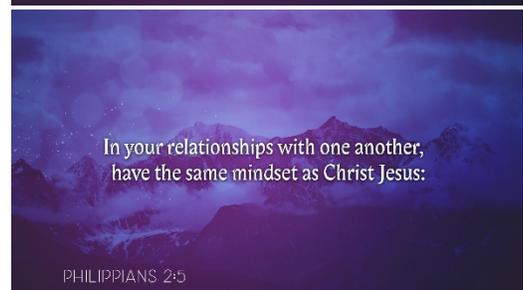
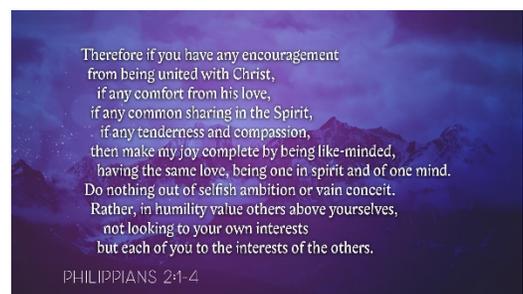
This sort of couriered letter seems old-school today... but it was the way things were done in Paul's day. What Paul is describing is sending Timothy back and forth, from Rome to Philippi, to keep the *lines of communication* and relationship open between the church and their beloved founding pastor.

²⁰ I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. ²¹ For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.

This is high praise for Timothy: "no one else like him." What Paul says about Timothy echoes what Paul wrote at the beginning of Chapter 2. Perhaps you have it open and can see it.

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:



⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;¹

To be Christian, to be *Christ-like*, is to be
humble... considering **others** above one's self.

When we want to measure how we are doing as a Christian, consider this aspect,
perhaps above all others. Are we *looking out* for **ourselves**; or are we *looking
out* for **others**? Selfish Christians, it seems, are barely Christians at all.

Paul said that Timothy was exemplary in
humility; there was no one like him.

Notice how Paul mixes this all up... these
matters of “genuine concern for *your* welfare”
(the welfare of **others**) and for the interests “of
Jesus Christ.” It isn't that Paul is *confused* or
contradicting himself, because interest for the welfare of others (valuing others
above ourselves) is precisely the interest of Jesus Christ (demonstrated by Christ
and His Cross). When we consider others above ourselves, we are considering
Jesus.

Paul concluded his words about Timothy, saying:

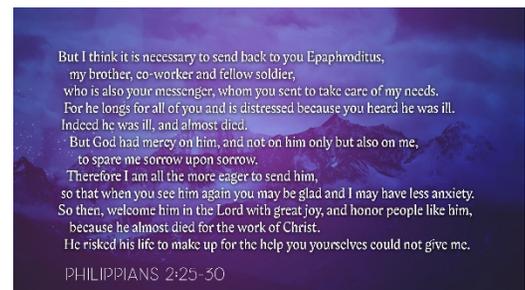
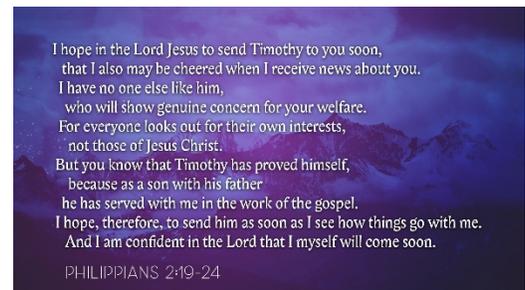
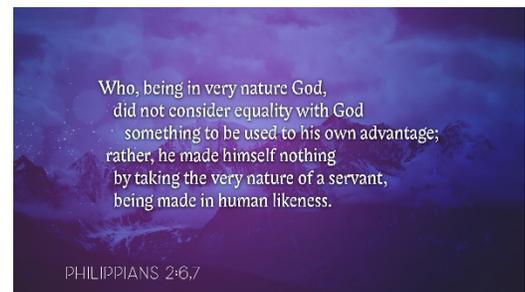
²³ I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. ²⁴ And I am confident in the
Lord that I myself will come soon. ²

From what we know from other sources, it seems that Paul never did make it
back to Philippi... but was rather unjustly found to be a threat to the Roman
Empire because of the subversive religion he was promoting, and was martyred
in Rome. Things did not go as well for Paul as he had hoped and prayed,
nevertheless God's work and will was accomplished.

Then Paul spoke of Epaphroditus:

²⁵ But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus³

It is funny... in our experience, **Timothy** is a
common name, but have you ever met an
Epaphroditus?



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:2–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:19–24). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I looked around on the Internet, and couldn't find anyone named Epaphroditus other than this guy... but perhaps I didn't look hard enough.

While it is an obscure name today, it would have been a fairly common name in the Roman Empire. It translates as "one favored by Aphrodite."

Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love and beauty. I have only her face pictured here since most images of her are naked... and this **is** the *family friendly* service.

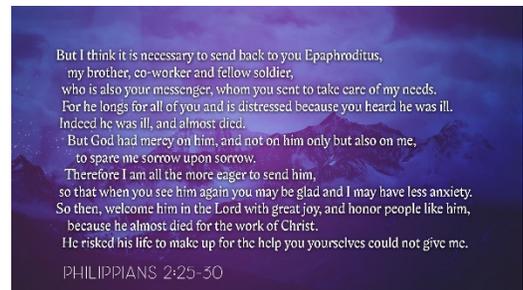


It is likely that, before Paul brought the Gospel to Philippi, Epaphroditus worshipped Aphrodite and a myriad of other Greek gods and goddesses.

But now Paul describes Epaphroditus as:

my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.⁴

Who was Epaphroditus? Paul uses two words to describe his **roles** (although this NIV translation leaves the second implied). The two words are *messenger* and *minister*.



It is interesting that most English translations choose the word *messenger* when translating this, considering the original Greek word. We all speak a bit of Greek, you know. I'm pretty sure you can translate this Greek word that is listed as *messenger* in our Bibles; the word is *apostolos*.

Paul described Epaphroditus as an *apostle* and *priest* from the Church in Philippi... but that isn't how we translate it into English. I suppose I know why; because we have turned the word *Apostle* into a **title**, generally reserving it for those first twelve Disciples-turned-Apostles plus Paul. And, for whatever reason, we don't use the word *Apostle* for anyone else... even if Paul used it for one like Epaphroditus.

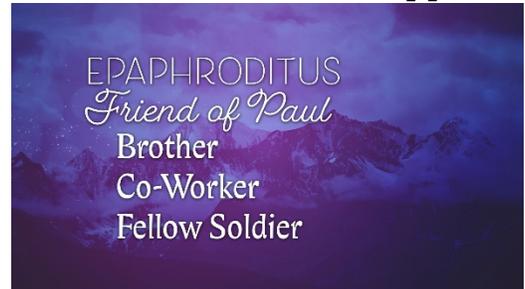
I'm inclined to agree with Paul, that Epaphroditus was an apostle, a messenger of the Gospel. Church history and tradition says that Epaphroditus continued to serve the Church as bishop and one engaged in spreading the Gospel and planting churches.

⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Even though we have turned words like *Apostle*, and even *Pastor*, into **titles**... for Paul (and the Bible for that matter) these words were less *titles* and more *job descriptions*. It wasn't about the position that people were elevated to... but rather the job through which they served. I suppose that is why I seldom use the word **Pastor** as a *title*, but more of a *job description*. You can call me Pastor Dan if you like. I suppose I'll call you Mechanic Chris or Teacher Marnie or Nurse Shannon.

While Epaphroditus was an apostle and minister **from** the Church in Philippi, what was he **to** Paul? More than anything, I think it is clear that Epaphroditus was Paul's **friend**... and Paul describes the friendship in three ways:

- Brother
- Co-Worker, and
- Fellow Soldier



First Paul describes his friend as **brother**. This was Paul's way of saying that they were *of the same Spirit*, and *brothers in faith*; they were brothers in Christ.

Brothers and sisters in this way can become fast and deep friends. With this sort of spiritual commonality, there comes unique bonds of unity. Not that we can only be friends with those who share our faith (in fact I would say that we should, of course, be friends with those who do not believe)... there is something special and wonderful in a friendship where there is this sort of *family of faith*, with brothers and sisters.

Second, Paul describes his friend as a **co-worker**. That one really resonates with me; work is a great catalyst for friendship. I like to work with my friends, and those with whom I work usually become my friends. I find that the best way to get to know, and appreciate someone, is to **work** with them. If you would like to really get to know me as a friend, let's work together.

I started working with my father in the summers when I was thirteen, and continued to work with him on weekends and during summers and such for several years. I always felt like I had a great relationship with my dad, but didn't feel like I really **knew** him best until we worked together.

Thirdly, Paul describes his friend as a **fellow soldier**.

We, rightly, hold our soldiers in high regard, along with all of our military and first responders. What distinguishes the commitment of a soldier? It is willingness to *put it all on the line*, even to risk one's life for the cause.

It is the sort of commitment that we understand when Jesus uttered these words:

¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.⁵

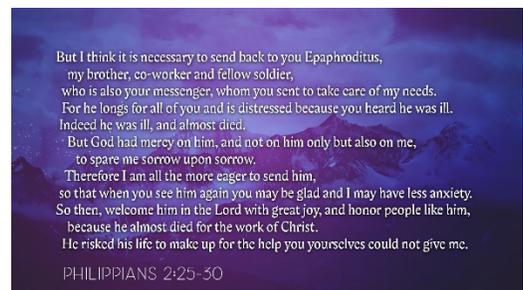
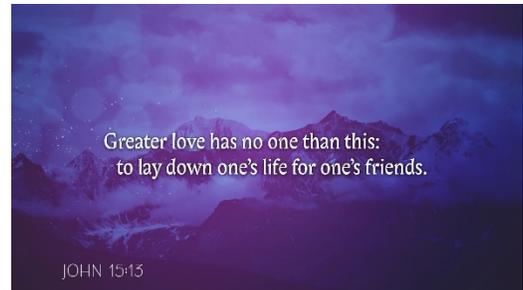
Love of country and fellow man motivates our soldiers and first responders to put their very lives at risk.

This is the kind of commitment displayed by Epaphroditus; Paul wrote about it saying:

²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed 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. ²⁸ Therefore 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. ²⁹ So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, ³⁰ because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. ⁶

We don't know precisely the circumstances, but it appears that during the travel from Philippi to Rome, Epaphroditus became terribly ill. Perhaps it was some disease, or infection related to some wound. While we don't know precisely what it was, we do know that it was very serious.

While our Bible's say that "God had mercy on him," it was likely more spectacular than just that; Epaphroditus was miraculously healed. We can make that assumption by the nuance of the words, but also by the practical circumstances. In those ancient times, it was very rare that anyone "almost died." Without what we enjoy with modern medicine, it was nearly impossible to get close to death and come back. There are a number of people here that almost died... some a couple of times. But in those ancient times, it was rare to know anyone that *almost died*.



⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Jn 15:13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:26-30). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It was clear that Epaphroditus was beloved in Philippi, and hearing about his illness was cause for sorrow. We can assume that Epaphroditus likely traveled with a group, and that once in Rome (or even along the way) some returned to Philippi with the news. Having Epaphroditus back, a living and breathing miracle, would be cause for great joy... and also a great example of sacrificial service, dedication to the task, and perseverance.

Piecing together all that we know from the Book of Philippians and Paul's circumstances, it is likely that Epaphroditus not only brought greetings and letters and such to Paul, he likely brought a good amount of cash. The justice systems in that ancient culture were different than ours. One significant difference is this: in those days and in that culture, the state provided no support to prisoners. In our day, we are sure to feed and provide basic care to prisoners. But in that day, prisoners relied on friends and family to provide food, clothing, and care. It wasn't a mere friendly visit to bring cheer brought by Epaphroditus; he brought what Paul needed to survive.

So here is the big question, the **so what** for today.

Wouldn't you like a friend like Epaphroditus?

Do you have a friend like that? Had a friend like that? Want some more friends like that?

Here's some of the best advice I have ever had, and I'm glad to pass it along.

If you want a friend, be a friend.

It isn't exactly in the Bible... but maybe it should be. I say that it isn't exactly in the Bible, but the meaning is there... it is in the text at the beginning of the chapter.

Being a friend is a matter of

value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁷

Being a friend is, in humility, valuing other above ourselves. Being a friend is having that sort of commitment, taking those kinds of steps, first.

I would go so far to say not to bother at all with **wanting** friends; rather be about the work of **being** a friend.



⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:3-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Be a friend like Epaphroditus.

Bring your **faith** to friendship. Being a friend is holy work, a high calling, the sort of thing demonstrated by Jesus; when we are being a friend, we are being like Jesus.

When our friends share our faith, do so wholeheartedly, encouraging one another, even provoking one another to holiness and good work.

And when faith is not shared, bring your faith to the friendship (but don't be a jerk about it). Consider friendship a ministry. Making friends for Jesus most often starts with us, his people, being friends to others first.

Be a **co-worker** in friendship. Our culture might teach us to choose our friends based on what we can **get** from the friend. But the *Epaphroditus way* (and the Jesus way) is to be a friend not because of what we can get, but what we can give. Be a maker in friendship, not a taker.

And be a **fellow soldier** in friendship. Be loyal. Put it *all on the line*, even if it might bring harm or loss for the sake of a friend.

We are called to be those kinds of friends, and to enlarge our circle of those kinds of friends.

I've said, from time to time, that Northshore should be more than a mere club; this isn't merely a place to find friends and such. But, of course, friendship is an important element of what happens here. Let's be great friends, brothers and sisters, coworkers, fellow soldiers. And let's make more friends.

We are called to serve one another in these sorts of ways, and we are called to bring others into that circle of friendship. When it comes to enlarging the circle, and building God's Kingdom through friendship (perhaps the best and most enduring way to build God's Kingdom), friendship is going to precede faith. In most cases, friends lead friends to faith... so if we are going to be about the work of leading friends to faith, we're going to need more friends... real friends with the kind of work and commitment of Epaphroditus.

God help us in this holy work of friendship.

