

Prayer

Glory be to You, Lord of all. In ancient times, You chose Your people Israel to be Yours, and now You accept all who believe that Jesus is Your Son! So come, in saving and redeeming power, and give Your people new hearts, new strength, new minds and new life. We are blessed to be Yours, O God, and we are willing to be a part of Your glorious Kingdom, here on earth: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray your prayers out loud today, as is possible given your circumstances. Take the time to listen in silence as well

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the air transport industry** *Pray for those who design the planes of the future, for safer and more economical transport*
- *Give thanks to God for the faithful love of Jesus*
- *Pray for the critical situation in Afghanistan at this time*

Meditation

Getting closer.

The more someone draws near to us,
The more we feel their presence.

The more someone gives time to us,
The more we can share with them.

The more someone works with us
The more we know about them.

The more someone befriends us
The more we are at ease with them.

The more someone offers help to us,
The more we give them in return.

The more someone shows real love to us
The more we are willing to give all.

How close is Jesus?

Bible passage - Philippians 2:25-30

Paul commends Epaphroditus, a man who had already brought Paul a gift from the Philippian church, but who would now go home, with Timothy, bearing this letter.

²⁵ I nevertheless think it is important that I send Epaphroditus to you, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, and also your messenger and minister to my need, ²⁶ since he has been missing you all, and was upset because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed, he was so ill he nearly died. But God had mercy on him; not only on him, but on me also so that I would not have to add one sorrow to another. ²⁸ I am therefore all the more eager to send him, so that you may be glad to see him again, and that I may be less worried. ²⁹ Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour men such as him, ³⁰ because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life in order to minister to me on your behalf and in a way that you could not directly do yourselves.

Bible Study

Review

Today's passage contains some fascinating insight into the life of the early church and the ministry of Paul. It constitutes a reference for a man named Epaphroditus, who is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture, except here and in 4:18. He had been asked by Paul to take the letter he was writing to Philippi, together with Timothy (see yesterday's reading – 2:19-24), and so Paul wrote this commendation as a form of written authority. Fraud was possible in ancient as well as in modern communications, and the apostle's written authority was important.

Whilst Paul's main intention was to provide written authority, he also mentions a number of things that had happened to himself and Epaphroditus. For example, Epaphroditus had recently been ill (2:26,27), having risked his life in some missionary task (2:30). Of course, these snippets were common knowledge to the people who received the letter, but we do not know the full picture, so these are our only window onto what happened, together with Paul's other comment about Epaphroditus, in 4:18. So we should read this before we try to put the story together.

I have been fully paid; more than enough. I am well supplied now that I have received the gifts you sent through Epaphroditus. They are a fragrant offering, a sacrifice which is acceptable and pleasing to God. (Philippians 4:18)

From these texts we can just about reconstruct a story line like this. Epaphroditus was from Philippi, and he had been sent by the church to give a gift to Paul, to help him in his ministry and whilst he was in prison. At some point on the journey to Paul (and it remains uncertain exactly where), Epaphroditus became ill and nearly died, but recovered and was able to fulfil his commission by bringing the gift to Paul (2:26,27). News of this, including Epaphroditus' illness had reached the Philippian church, and as a result of communication delays, and it seems that Philippians became concerned about what had happened to Epaphroditus and Epaphroditus himself was upset that his home church knew about his escapade (2:26,30), but he could not reassure them of his health! Paul then became worried for Epaphroditus and decided to send him home to Philippi with his letter, together with Timothy, where he would have the opportunity to reassure his friends and tell them the truth about what had happened to him and the gift (2:29).

There is enough here to spark the imagination, and by guessing at one or two other things, it would be possible to concoct a very interesting story about Paul's missionary endeavours, with the help of Timothy and Epaphroditus! Nevertheless, it is good for us to have these scraps of a very human story within a letter that is otherwise very theological. We read here about suffering, risking death, illness, bravery, sorrow, and sympathetic feelings between Christians. But more than this, the passage is written with a conviction that God was in control of what happened. God was providentially merciful to Epaphroditus in saving him from death (2:27), and Paul was absolutely confident that what had been started by the Lord would be finished (2:29,30). Paul and his colleagues knew for sure that they were doing the work of God's Kingdom, and they rejoiced to do the Lord's will (2:29)

If you were to read some of the books that have been written about Philippians, then you would find that many of them spend some time discussing who Epaphroditus was, and whether he took the letter to the Philippians or Timothy, or perhaps both together. All this is really of little consequence because we cannot resolve these things from what Paul has written here. The passage is enough, however, to tell us something about the quality of fellowship found in the early church. This is a one of only a few New Testament passages that gives us a glimpse into the lives of early Christians, and it reveals all the human feelings and rich details of a true story. In the end, this passage does a great deal to persuade critics, if there are any, that this letter is no gimmick and its message is no fraud. The Philippians needed to know this just as we do today.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these words within the passage:

- Epaphroditus
- Brother - 'adelphos'
- Fellow worker - 'synergos'
- Fellow soldier - 'sustratiotes'
- Messenger - 'apostolos'
- Minister - 'leiturgos'
- Mercy - 'eleisis'

- Welcome - 'prosdexeshe'
- Close to death - 'paraboleusamenos'

Going Deeper

This passage reads like an ordinary story, which indeed it is. However, there are a few words, particularly in verse 25 describing the 'ministry' of Epaphroditus which are especially interesting. The main Bible study today takes the form of a series of brief word studies. These will guide our understanding, and each word helps us get to know something of the fascinating story of Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus The name Epaphroditus is very interesting because it is a name which comes from the Greek Goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty (equivalent to the Roman Venus) and also the goddess of gambling and luck. Born into a pagan family, he was therefore most likely to have been 'dedicated' in some way to Aphrodite. We might imagine that a Christian would receive a new name upon baptism to symbolise their new life, however, all the evidence is that this was a later practice of the church, and that early Christians kept their original names. They accepted that the new life they received was spiritual and of the heart, and having been baptised they did not need to express that with any other outward sign, such as a new name.

Brother ('adelphos') This is the first of three words that Paul uses to identify personally with Epaphroditus (2:25). It was a word that Paul used frequently to identify those who were baptised members of the Christian family (Rom 1:13, 1 Cor 1:10 and many more) and which emphasised the equality of all believers before God. Some have suggested that Paul described Epaphroditus as his 'brother' in order to send a message to those at Philippi who thought of him as a mere servant, perhaps even a slave. As in the famous case of the slave Philemon, Paul uses all means to tell those in the church who thought more highly of themselves that everyone was the same before God.

Fellow worker ('sunergos') This is the second identification Paul makes with Epaphroditus (2:25). It is a word that Paul used mainly about those who worked with him in evangelism, bringing the Gospel into new parts of the known world (e.g. 1 Cor 3:9; 1 Thess 3:2; where the Greek word sunergos is used and translated in different ways, but with the same core meaning). This was Paul's distinctive pioneering work, and there was no higher commendation of Epaphroditus to his home fellowship than that Paul should call him a 'fellow worker'.

Fellow soldier ('sustratiotes') Paul used a third term to identify with Epaphroditus (2:25) which was used in Greek for soldiers who fought side by side, and therefore shared in the hardships as well as the glories of battle. Paul used this word when talking of those who had shared his fight against enemies of the Gospel (Rom 16:3,9; 2 Tim 2:3; Philem 2), and in each case, significant suffering was involved. Depending on how you read these verses, it may seem that Paul makes much of Epaphroditus' illness and suffering whilst bringing him a gift from Philippi. However, the reason for this could well be that some had criticised Epaphroditus for almost failing in his task, and Paul sought to emphasise that it was completed (2:30) and his suffering was that of a 'fellow soldier'.

Messenger ('apostolos') We looked at this word yesterday in relation to Timothy; and we saw the importance of the word as meaning 'one who is sent'. At this point in our passage, Paul began to talk of Epaphroditus according to what he had done for the Philippian church which sent him, rather than from his own personal point of view. He was their 'apostle', sent by them and bearing a gift to Paul, whereas Timothy was Paul's 'apostle', sent by him to Philippi (see note on Philippians 2:19-24), and although they were apostles on the Lord's business, the difference was in who sent them. Again, the way Paul uses the word appeals to a sense of equality. One is an apostle, sent for this reason, another is apostle sent with a message or gift from someone else. So why, he seems to say, do we reserve these titles for certain people only? The term 'apostle' or 'missionary' is reserved for special and trained people today, but that is not the New Testament use of the word.

Minister ('leitourgos') The second word Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus' work for the Philippians is not common in the New Testament. This same word, 'Minister', is used widely today, however, to refer to a clergyman. It comes from a word which is used in the Old Testament for the more ordinary work of priests, and reflects their service of the Lord and of the people (see 1 Chron 6:17, for example). Jesus Himself is described as 'a minister in the sanctuary' in Hebrews 8:2. The word really reflects the nature of work done for other people rather than any title or role, and in this scripture, Paul talks twice of the 'ministry' of Epaphroditus (2:25,30) which has been of great personal help to him. The way we use the title 'minister' has, of course, evolved over many hundreds of years, both in the church and in society, but it is good to be reminded by scripture that the word reflects the work of one who has been exclusively commissioned for the service of others, as Epaphroditus was.

Mercy ('eleisis') In verse 27, we read that Epaphroditus was healed from the disease or illness that had beset him on the course of his mission to offer the 'ministry' of a gift to Paul. There is so much talk of people being worried about Epaphroditus we might wonder whether some at Philippi were more concerned for the safety and delivery of the gift rather than Epaphroditus himself. Paul certainly spends a great deal of time in his letter defending and accounting for his actions. In the course of this, he describes how Epaphroditus nearly died, but does not describe the 'healing' in the way we might expect. He says that God had 'mercy' on him, and the mercy of God is always a matter of His sovereign will. Epaphroditus was not healed by the laying on of hands or through anyone's prayer, but by God's direct intervention. In saying this, Paul emphasised the importance and significance of what Epaphroditus did. As he went on to say at the end of the verse, this action of God spared Paul not only the sorrow of the loss of a servant but of the gift he brought from the Philippians which was a blessing to him in prison. Some suggest that the gift was of money and resources which would have kept Paul in reasonably good conditions in prison (see also 4:18ff), perhaps even kept him alive.

Welcome ('prosdexeshe') Paul emphasised to the Philippians that they were to welcome Epaphroditus back to their fellowship. Surely this would happen anyway? Why emphasise this? Paul went on to tell the Philippians to honour Epaphroditus and those like him who had acted in the service of the Gospel and nearly lost their lives, so why was this necessary? Epaphroditus, as we have suggested already, was probably just a slave or servant, commissioned to do what those who had power over him in Roman society told him to do, and may not have been prepared to do themselves. Yet Paul, by this call to the Philippians to welcome him back with the highest love and affection, sought to ensure that Epaphroditus had a place of honour and respect within the church to which he returned. Yet again, this tells us of Paul's concern that people in the church of God be treated as equals. Have you noticed that the way people greet each other can reflect the relative social standing they have? Paul would have none of it!

Close to death ('paraboleusamenos') At first sight this word in verse 30 simply tells us information we already know (see v27), so why repeat it? The Greek word is a gambling word for 'placing a stake'. In other words, Epaphroditus 'staked his life' on the Gospel through his obedience. More than this, Paul may have used this word to draw attention to Epaphroditus in a special way. We saw above how his name came from that of the God 'Aphrodite'. We know from other documents and records of the day that as a gambler cast the highest bet of a game, he would shout 'Epaphroditus!' calling on the god Aphrodite to bless the bet (meaning something like 'on the god Aphrodite!'), and yes, this was exactly the name of the man who had served Paul and been sent from Philippi! Epaphroditus' name was indeed a gambling term, he had 'staked his life' not on the gaming table, but on the Gospel. There is no way that we would spot such a word-play in English, or even be able to translate it; but it is clear in Greek! Paul concluded by stating plainly to the Philippians that Epaphroditus had done this on their behalf and had done what they were not prepared to do themselves by risking himself for the Gospel. It is probably the highest commendation he could offer.

Application

Equality is something it is easy to talk about and agree upon, but is profoundly hard to put into practice in a world in which each of us are born into a state (relative to the world) of either having a great deal or very little. Within each society of the world there are divisions between people historically derived from colour of skin, so called 'racial' physical features, and variously perceived status or class. These divisions are exacerbated by the complex and multicultural nature of the big cities of the world today, which by their nature demonstrate a wide range of inequalities, sometimes of the most extreme kind. The notes I have given today speak frequently and unashamedly of Paul's constant verbal onslaught against this perversion of humanity. Whilst we cannot escape the reality into which any of us are born, the heart of the Gospel and the heart of God express the equality of all people without exception. You cannot read the scripture and bend it to mean anything else except a perversion of truth. The question we are therefore left with is about how to express that fundamental equality of all people within the life of our churches and the Gospel we preach. Because Satan will always seek to divide people in order to dilute the Gospel we preach, there is a need for constant vigilance on this issue. Those in leadership must treat all as equal or their Gospel credentials are fatally flawed.

How easy it is to criticise others. You could say that what I have said is critical; but of whom? Those who cannot treat everyone as equal? Can anyone in the church defend this? Truly destructive criticism within the church happens when people fail to treat each other as equals and become more strongly tied to their own views and interpretations of issues. The more we read Philippians, the more we realise this is probably what was happening at the church there. Paul sought within almost every sentence of his letter to emphasise in some subtle way that equality was at the heart of the Gospel. This is what we must accept if we are to receive Christ, and be united with others who believe in Him.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How important do you think it is for people to be given a 'baptismal name'?
2. Read the passage again, and discuss in your group what you believe scripture says about Epaphroditus and his mission, and what is presumption or suggestion.
3. Did Epaphroditus knowingly risk his life for the Gospel? Does his credit go up or down according to the risk he thought he was taking?

Personal comments by author

It is hard to sit down and question ourselves about issues of equality. Each of us will find that in some way we have not treated those around us with the Gospel equality they deserve. Some people we come across are hard to deal with and some are easy, but that is not the issue; where is our heart? What is our attitude to them? A few moments thought and reflection is helpful for all of us as we consider those with whom the Lord has placed us at home, church or work. However we deal with them, we need to be sure that our motives are pure before the Lord.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down a list of those who do most in the life of your church, as far as you can see. Is there any hierarchy implied within the offices and the duties of people, or is everyone seen as equal? The exercise may well help you gain a better insight into the life of your church.*
- *Go and worship at a different church and observe how things are done there. How different are they from what you know in your own church? What can you learn?*

Final Prayer

Bring me close to You through what I do this day, Lord Jesus. May I understand the things that You would have me do, and so do them. May I take hold of each challenge You bring me, and not avoid them. May I embrace a right attitude to all things, and take joy in being Your servant; through Your Name I pray, AMEN
