

Philippians 2:17-30

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phil/phil-2/philippians-217-30/>

Paul plans to send Timothy to the Philippians to teach them and minister to them, but he is first waiting to hear the verdict of his court case before Caesar. If he is set free, Paul plans to follow closely behind Timothy to visit Philippi. The messenger from Philippi, Epaphroditus, became sick and nearly died, but has been spared by God, so Paul sends him back to the Philippians so that they won't worry about him anymore. He is an example of the type of man believers ought to admire, because he risked his life in service to Christ.

Paul continues with his admonition to adopt the attitude Jesus had, leaving the comfort and pleasure of heaven in obedience to His Father, then learning obedience, even to death on a cross, trusting that the reward from His Father would make it worthwhile. Paul has just stated a hope that the Philippian believers would continue in their obedience, in his absence, that he might glory in their success in the day of Christ.

Paul has expressed hope that he will be released from prison and come to them, but realizes he might die instead. Paul is waiting for his appeal to be heard before Caesar (Nero), and one of the possible outcomes is his death (Acts 28:19). He now states *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.* The picture of a *drink offering* being *poured out* is a picture of Paul's life ending. Drink offerings were poured out upon the altar, as an offering of gratitude. Once poured out, they can't be put back into the cup. If Paul is martyred for his faith, he will be poured out *upon the sacrifice and service of the faith* of the Philippians. In this, Paul is picturing the Philippian believers' obedience as an animal sacrifice laying upon the altar in the temple, and his own life as a *drink offering* being poured out upon that sacrifice.

Paul uses the sacrifice imagery of believers' obedience to God in Romans 12:1-2, where he states:

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”
(Romans 12:1-2)

Paul's picture here of the Philippians seems consistent with his picture in Romans 12. A believer living a faithful life, with a renewed mind, is living life as a “living sacrifice.” A sacrifice's life is given wholly to please another. In the case of an animal sacrifice, it is offered to please God, then usually consumed for the pleasure of those involved in the celebration (barbecue). In the case of living an obedient life, lived with the same attitude as Jesus, we are a living sacrifice, living our lives for the good pleasure of God (Philippians 2:13).

Paul stated that *I rejoice and share my joy with you all* even if he is going to be killed for his testimony. He rejoices because he is glad to die for the cause of Christ. And that is a joy that he shares with the Philippians. Paul expresses that he hopes *You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me*. Paul admonishes the Philippian believers to be ready and willing to give their all for the cause of Christ, and in doing so share that with Paul. They would then *rejoice in the same way* by hoping to gain glory from pleasing God through obedience. If they do this faithfully, they will then *share their joy* with Paul.

Now Paul wraps up this section with some practical details that will allow Paul to continue to mentor these believers and children of God whom he loves as his spiritual children. Paul says *I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition*. This letter is co-authored by *Timothy*, possibly to bolster Timothy's credibility (Philippians 1:1). Paul is under house arrest, so cannot travel. But *Timothy* is apparently with him. Paul now states that he plans to send Timothy because *I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare*. This is quite interesting, since Paul had a number of other ministry partners.

This could indicate that all his other ministry partners are tied up, unavailable to travel. It could also indicate that Timothy had a unique *kindred spirit* toward the Philippians that no one else could match. It also could mean that Timothy alone, out of all the people Paul could send, had the background and relationship with the Philippians to encourage them in the way Paul believes they need to be encouraged. Given the Philippians' pattern of faithfulness, it could be that most other people Paul could send to Philippi might not have the stature to minister to them. The Philippians might instead minister to whomever Paul sent. Whatever the case, Timothy was the best man for the job.

Paul now lets us know that his other options to send to the Philippians *all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus*. Paul spent considerable time admonishing the Philippians to have the same attitude of obedience, trusting in God's reward as did Jesus, rather than being self-seeking. Now Paul states that his other options for ministering to the Philippians are, in fact, self-seeking people who don't seek the *interests of Christ Jesus*. "Full time" ministers can also be self-seeking. Everyone needs to heed the admonition to obey as Christ obeyed.

Paul continues to build up Timothy, saying that the Philippians *know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father*. Apparently the Philippians had observed Timothy faithfully serving together with Paul. So here Paul appeals to their personal observation.

Paul states *Therefore, that I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me*. It seems Paul is expecting his case to be heard shortly. The phrase *see how things go with me* probably refers to his pending hearing before Caesar. Paul of course hopes he will be let go, so he says *I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly*. It seems then that the plan is to send Timothy as soon as Paul gets a verdict. And if Paul is let go, he hopes to follow *shortly* after Timothy arrives in Philippi. And of course if Paul is given the death sentence, and is "poured out" as a drink offering, then he is deputizing Timothy to minister to the Philippians alone.

Paul then states *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.* It seems likely that *Epaphroditus* carried this letter to the Philippians, as Paul refers to him as *your messenger*. Was Paul throwing *Epaphroditus* under the bus, when he says the other ministers he can send to Philippi *seek after their own interests*? It does not seem so, as Paul has good things to say about *Epaphroditus*. He was a *minister to Paul's need*, in addition to being the *messenger to Philippi*. Paul will later exhort the Philippians to hold men like *Epaphroditus* in *high regard*.

The word translated *messenger* is the Greek word "apostolos," which is often translated "apostle." Paul introduces himself as an "apostolos" of Jesus Christ in many of his letters. Here, *Epaphroditus* is an "apostolos" of Paul. "Apostolos" means delegate, or representative. So it seems *Epaphroditus* represents Paul, but is not sufficiently equipped to *be concerned for the Philippians welfare* in the particular manner Paul has in mind for Timothy to care for them. It seems likely Paul here has in mind for Timothy to encourage them with teaching resulting in obedience, in the same manner Paul is encouraging them in this letter. To admonish them to walk in the same radical obedience as Jesus did, expecting that whatever they might endure or lose will be made more than worth it by a benevolent Father.

Paul sent *Epaphroditus* in part *because he was longing for you all (the Philippians) and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.* Apparently, *Epaphroditus* was concerned that the Philippians would worry about him, and wanted to show them that he was okay. There was ample cause for concern, because *indeed Epaphroditus was sick to the point of death.* But he had recovered, and now likely has visited the Philippians in person, as a representative of Paul, carrying this letter.

Perhaps *Epaphroditus* was originally from Philippi. In Chapter 4, it seems that *Epaphroditus* was sent as a messenger to Paul to deliver the financial gift they had collected for him (Philippians 4:18). Perhaps he is a Philippian himself, and was sent to Rome to give Paul the gift, then fell deathly ill while in Rome. Now, having recovered, he is sent back by Paul so they can know he is alive, and have their fellowship restored with him. It could be that the Philippians had intended for *Epaphroditus* to remain with Paul and minister to him, which could have been a part of the financial support they had intended to offer.

Paul's perspective on *Epaphroditus'* recovery is that *God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.* Paul did not view the healing of *Epaphroditus* as an obligation required of God. Rather he viewed it as a matter of having *mercy on him*. But not only upon *him*, but also upon Paul. Paul would have had *sorrow upon sorrow* had he lost *Epaphroditus*. Paul does not list what sorrows he had in mind that would have been heaped upon him. But it seems likely that the *sorrow* Paul was already enduring included the possibility of being executed after his hearing with Caesar, as well as having a scarcity of kindred spirits like Timothy whom Paul could entrust with his ministry.

So then, because of *Epaphroditus'* sickness and recovery, Paul states *Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice.* Paul is anxious for the Philippians to be consoled that their brother *Epaphroditus* is alive. Paul has exhorted them to have the attitude that Jesus had, which includes a willingness to die. Paul is, at the moment he

writes this letter, facing the possibility of death on account of his witness. But Paul has no interest in bringing sorrow upon himself or others, and embraces every opportunity to experience joy in this life.

When the Philippians rejoice at the return of Epaphroditus, Paul *may be less concerned about* them. It appears that Paul wants the Philippians to choose to adopt the attitude that Jesus adopted, which results in the type of radical obedience that can lead to death for their witness. But along the way, Paul attempts to alleviate suffering whenever possible. Paul sends Epaphroditus back for their benefit. Perhaps Paul is also saying this for the benefit of Epaphroditus as well as the Philippians. It seems likely the Philippians intended for Epaphroditus to remain with Paul and minister to him for a season. Now, perhaps, Epaphroditus has returned to Philippi prematurely. Perhaps Paul is making clear that sending Epaphroditus back should be in no way interpreted as a rejection of Epaphroditus' service. Neither should it be interpreted as a lack of gratitude on Paul's part. Paul is returning Epaphroditus simply because he loves them.

Therefore, Paul exhorts them to *Receive Epaphroditus then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard*. Epaphroditus is to be held *in high regard*. Paul did not return him to Philippi because he lacked the aptitude to serve. It does however seem apparent that he is not sufficiently equipped to fulfill the ministry to the Philippians that Paul has entrusted to Timothy. Perhaps Timothy is equipped to teach and lead them in the sort of radical obedience to Christ that Paul admonishes. The other teachers he knows appear to be self-seeking, perhaps looking to build a following for themselves, rather than building up the believers to follow the example of Jesus. Earlier, Paul mentioned that many in Rome where he is imprisoned were preaching the gospel from "envy and strife" and "selfish ambition" (Philippians 1:15-17).

The specific reason Epaphroditus is to be held in *high regard* is *because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me*. The phrase *complete what was deficient in your service to me* likely refers to the resumption of financial support that the Philippians gave to Paul. Paul uses similar phrasing in Chapter 4, when he says:

"But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity" (Philippians 4:10).

Since the Philippians now had picked up their financial support of Paul, they required sending a messenger to deliver the gift. Epaphroditus risked his life to *complete* their generosity, and *came close to death* through disease. Accordingly, he should be held in *high regard*. This message is consistent with Paul's teaching about the Body of Christ. Epaphroditus was simply a messenger, apparently ill-equipped to teach. Perhaps he was a servant, a slave that someone had dispatched to serve Paul. But Paul states that anyone is to be held in high regard if they risk themselves in service of the gospel, no matter how menial the task might seem.

In elevating Epaphroditus, who is apparently just a messenger, perhaps even a servant, Paul provides an example of applying his own teaching. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul states:

“...those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor...” (1 Corinthians 12:23).

Paul goes out of his way to honor someone who the world might not consider to be worth much. But in the Body of Christ, every member has great value. It is important to go out of our way to honor those who would normally not receive honor from the world.

Biblical Text

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ You too, *I urge you*, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

¹⁹ But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. ²⁰ For I have no one *else* of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. ²¹ For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. ²² But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child *serv*ing his father.²³ Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things *go* with me; ²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly. ²⁵ 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; ²⁶ because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. 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. 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*. ²⁹ Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; ³⁰ because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.