

[there and back again]

:: philippians 2.26-30 ::

Last time we were in Philippians we saw the example of Epaphroditus the brother, the worker, the soldier. When we learned about him it was inspiring to see that God's desire is that all of us would rise to the level of spiritual fullness that we see in him.

These characters and situations are given to us as examples. The New Testament points out that Sodom and Gomorrah are to be an example to us of what happens to the wicked. Jesus explained that His life was an example to us of how to live. Paul did so as well. James called Elijah a man of like passions, using him as an example to us for application and understanding.

So, when we see these figures in the text of Scripture and see how God worked in their lives, we should understand that in those situations God is giving us a diagram and an example of spiritual principles that He's delivered to us that we might receive more of what He wants for us.

Today, we get a chance to dissect Epaphroditus a little bit. We get to take a look at some of the spiritual principles which lock us into a life lived for God's glory which is a life that is full of spiritual abundance.

So, beginning in verse 26 and heading through to the end of chapter 2, having already seen that Paul was sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi to minister to the church there, we read:

Philippians 2.26-30 - ...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. 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.

The very first insight we see is that Epaphroditus was longing for the Philippians and was distressed because word had gotten back to them about his very serious illness, which almost killed him while he was ministering to Paul in Rome.

These words 'longing' and 'distressed' give us a foundational view of what we know about our 'calling.' Your calling, simply put, is the plan of God for your life. Whatever His will is for where He wants you to go and what He wants you to do, that is your calling. And every single one of us has been called by God to do something specific with our lives.

Epaphroditus demonstrates to us that our calling is always accompanied by a burden for a people or a place or a work. *Longing* there means intense craving and *distressed* means full of heaviness. Epaphroditus had an intense burden for the people of Philippi. He had gone on their

behalf to bring financial and physical help to Paul and to assist him in the work of the Gospel, but his heart was fixed upon the people of his city. It was a God-given burden to see them receive the Gospel and be built up in the faith.

But it wasn't just that. It wasn't just about his ministry goals. He was also distressed when he heard that *THEY* had heard he was sick. Part of his burden for the people was that he did not want to **BE** a burden to them. He wanted to be a person of encouragement and help to them, not a source of distress or discouragement or difficulty.

And this is the foundation of calling. God places a burden within our hearts for a specific place or a specific people or a specific work and He transforms our desire to a point where what we want is for people to be helped, people to be saved. We want to take on what needs to be done so that others might be lifted up toward God. It's a blessed weight as we take on the yoke of ministry with Christ Jesus.

Epaphroditus had a heavenly burden for the people of Philippi, so Paul was sending him back to where he was called.

He writes:

Philippians 2.27 - 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.

Not only was Epaphroditus a man who was burdened to serve the Lord and minister to others, but he was incredibly sacrificial. He was following in the example of Jesus Christ,

Philippians 2.8 - (who) being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Christianity is about sacrificial obedience to the Lord.

Epaphroditus sacrificed himself for the work that God had set before him. He did not count his life dear to him, but followed God's will obediently, even when it took him to Rome where he contracted a serious illness.

Interestingly, when we were first introduced to this guy, Paul pointed out that Epaphroditus ministered to his need. It doesn't seem like he quit serving the Lord or serving Paul in the midst of his illness. Not that he was able to do all of the things he could when he was in full health, but Epaphroditus shows us a real example of being humbly obedient to whatever point God asks of us. Not counting his own life dear, but embracing the road and the task that was set before him.

And in that example we see a wonderful instance of the mercy of God. Paul, no doubt, pleaded with the Lord for the life of this Philippian brother. God, in His mercy, spared his life.

What is noteworthy in this text is that the mercy of God for them was to spare life, not to fully heal. Epaphroditus did make a recovery, but there's no plain indication that he was miraculously restored in a gift of healing. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. The point is, often God's mercy is different than what we would order up for ourselves at the spiritual drive-thru.

He *IS* a God of healing. He *IS* a God of miracles. We should petition Him for those things. But sometimes Christians die. Sometimes they aren't healed. That fact should not change our willingness to serve or obey Him, nor should it taint our understanding of His mercy, especially when we find ourselves in a humbling or dangerous or suffering situation.

Philippians 2.28 - Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful.

Paul was the reason that Epaphroditus had traveled to Rome, and now he was sending him back home to encourage the Church he had come from.

It seems like in a lot of our studies recently we've been seeing this idea of sending and going, Sending others out with our help or being sent out ourselves to accomplish the work of God. Paul's part was to send out this man as an encouragement and a help to others. And he sent him out eagerly.

We already saw that Epaphroditus was eager to get home to edify and assist the believers, but Paul also shows that he was eager to do the sending. This participation in the Gospel that Paul's been talking about for 2 chapters is something we should be eager to do. And if we look within and find no eagerness to serve or to give or to minister or to send or to reach, then perhaps we've lost focus on the heart of God and His purposes in this world.

Philippians 2.29-30 - 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.

Paul's part was to send. Epaphroditus' part was to be sent. The Church at large in Philippi had a part as well, it was to receive him and participate together in the work that God wanted to accomplish through them.

Paul's teaching us here that we need to value ministry. We need to value reaching out with the Gospel. We need to value those who are willing to work the harvest and we need to value the calling God has placed on each of our lives.

And when there are gaps in our service, we need to pray and see who God will call to supply what is lacking.

As we pointed out before, every one of us has a calling. Some will be called to peoples and places near to here, some will be called far from here. But each of us has a part to play in the work of God, the work of the Gospel in this life.

What we can see in this text is that the work of God begins with simple things like encouraging others, not complaining, being glad and joyful when it comes to serving God. As we set our hearts on those things we find that God places a heavenly burden on our lives to accomplish specific tasks. From that burden we begin participating in sending out of ourselves or actually being sent. These are the parts that Christians are to play when it comes to ministry.

But, not only do we see what we are to do, we also see in the example of Epaphroditus what it *requires* to be a man who follows after the Lord in dynamic, full service.

First, it requires willingness. Being willing to put faith into action and go where needs going.

Second, it requires regarding not your life. Being full of trust in the Lord. Understanding that God goes with you to accomplish what He desires. Understanding that He's preparing a work and bearing fruit as you go. Having the confidence that God cannot fail and His intent is to complete not only what you do but who you are. But because of that, we must relinquish ourselves to Him, regarding not our lives.

If God wants to give me Roman fever, I should praise His name. If God wants to imprison me for His glory, I should praise Him still the same. If God wants to set me before kings or before lepers, that is His decision. My part is to accept the personal call He has given me and follow where He leads. Nothing more. The rest is up to Him.

1 John 3.16 - By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

That's Christianity. To whatever degree God calls us to lay down our lives is up to Him. And, to whatever degree He asks us, He will equip and empower us.

Matthew 10.38-39 - And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

Interestingly, this message from Jesus is repeated in all 4 Gospels. This is the fundamental point of the Christian life. That we surrender self and receive the call of God, which has been crafted specifically by the Lord that your life might glorify Him and accomplish specific parts of His will.

For Epaphroditus, the call was to take a trip to Rome, serve a man there, then return home to encourage and build up the church.

For Abraham, the calling was to have a son and watch God work in his family.

For Moses, the calling was to save a nation and lead them to the promised land.

For Peter, the calling was to feed God's sheep.

For Stephen, the calling was to wait tables.

To us these men are heroes of the faith. But to the Lord, they are examples to all believers of what God wants to do in and through each of us.

The callings of God are all different because they're specific. He knows you personally, so He calls you personally to something that He has set apart just for you.

What's required of us is two-fold.

Number one, that we pick up the call and receive what God wants for us. Often times I think we let God's calls go to voice mail, right? But when God calls us, will we send? Will we go? Will we obey? That's the first part.

The second part is this constant principle we see in the examples of Scripture of dramatic sacrifice. The idea that we are actually, actively laying self on the altar and dramatically relinquishing ourselves to the merciful and powerful plan of God.

So the question is, what is your calling? Have we any burden to see lives transformed here or elsewhere?

Have we received the signal from God to send or be sent? And, if so, have we obeyed and trusted Him to do more abundantly with our lives than we could do ourselves?

This is Christian life. And this type of effectiveness is available to us today, if we're willing to shed the weight that would hold us back from following Jesus.