

# Two Outstanding Christians (2) - Epaphroditus

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn again to read God's Word in the letter to the Philippians. Philippians chapter 2 and at verse 25.

Philippians 2 and verse 25. I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier and your messenger and minister to my need. For he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill near to death. But God had mercy on him and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

I am no more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men, for he nearly died. For the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. Now we looked at Timothy last time as we find that in the previous verses.

[ 1 : 13 ] And we mentioned then how both of these men are described by Paul to the Philippians as examples of the kind of life that he was calling upon themselves to follow and indeed patterned upon the example of Jesus himself in the middle part, as we saw of this great chapter.

And as he comes here to Epaphroditus, he mentions him again as one who is with him at that time. But he actually belongs to the Philippian people, to the Philippian church.

And so he's going to go back to Philippi to let them know how things are with Paul and to bring them an up-to-date, an update, if you like, of the situation.

Now he has an interesting name, doesn't he? He's named in such a way that reminds you of his Greek or pagan background. Because Epaphroditus really is made up of two different words. Aphrodite being the goddess Venus, as we know her in English. Very much a main deity of that particular area.

[ 2 : 25 ] And also the first part of his name really means someone who is devoted to Aphrodite or taken under the care of Epaphroditus, as would be the case when he was born.

His parents would have named him after the goddess and given an additional part that would show that they were dedicating him to her care, as they saw it, of course, with pagan eyes.

And it's such a contrast, isn't it, to Timothy, whose name is a Hebrew name, which has theos at the end of it, for God, and timi at the beginning of it, meaning honoured or precious.

And, of course, Timothy came from a Christian background, at least on his mother's side. His mother was a Christian, and his grandmother was a Christian, as you find in Paul's second letter to Timothy, reminding him of the privilege that he had in being brought up by a godly mother and also a grandmother.

And so there's the contrast between those two, Timothy with his background in a Christian setting, and Epaphroditus coming from a pagan background, probably converted through Paul's visit, first visit to the town of Lystra, you find it in the book of Acts.

[ 3 : 44 ] But in any case, here's the great point, isn't it, between the two of them. Here's a man brought up as a pagan, contrasted with a man who was brought up in a Christian setting, and yet they're both servants of the Lord, they're both valuable to Paul, and they're both really, in that sense, on the same level as the apostle.

There's the power of grace, the power of Christ, the power of God's work, as he sets about taking someone who was devoted at his birth to the goddess Aphrodite, and now is devoted to Jesus, and is devoted to the service of Jesus.

That's really what you see, isn't it? We live in days when the word conversion, I think I mentioned in prayer, is in many ways in our society a dirty word. And we have all of this debate these days about conversion therapy.

And there's a certain bad side to that, I'm sure. We don't force people against their will. We don't try and force things on anybody, whatever kind of lifestyle they choose to live for themselves.

It's a different thing in a Christian setting when you actually seek to present the gospel. You're not forcing the gospel onto anyone. That's the caricature of the Christian church and of the Christian message, of course, that's current in the world.

[ 4 : 58 ] And conversion therapy in the bad sense is something we don't agree with. But if you start including things like trying to counsel people into coming to know the Lord, or helping them in a Christian way, helping them in a biblical way, if you're going to actually have that as part of the definition of conversion therapy, then we won't have it.

Because it's not right that we shouldn't have the liberty as Christians to present tactfully and lovingly and faithfully the point of view that comes from the word of God in order to try and help people in their lives to try and develop things in a proper way, morally and spiritually.

Well, here is the man Epaphroditus who was a pagan and came to know the Lord, was converted through the apostle.

And here he is with the apostle and the apostle sending this message to the Philippians. I have thought it necessary to send you, Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow soldier, fellow worker, fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need.

I want to look at the man himself as he's described in these few words, in these few verses. And as you find I've described there, Paul mentions three things, really in a sense they're almost titles to this man Epaphroditus just to show the kind of character that he was and how his service for the Lord was a notable one because of the way that he was engaged as Paul's brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, and the Philippians' messenger and a minister to his need.

[ 6 : 43 ] And then we'll look, so that's the manner of the man himself, the man himself, and then we'll look briefly to conclude with at the manner in which Paul wants them to receive him back from Paul back to Philippi, to the congregation there.

Receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service. To me, it doesn't mean by that that the Philippians were not forward enough in looking to Paul and praying for him, simply that the opportunity hadn't come until Epaphroditus brought this gift that he mentions in chapter 4 to the apostle to supply his need.

Well, what does he say about this man? What does that mean for ourselves tonight as we look at the Epaphroditus as he's described, the kind of person he was, the man himself? First thing Paul says is, he is my brother.

I thought it necessary to send you Epaphroditus, my brother. He means that, of course, spiritually. He means my brother in Christ. And what a different way Paul would have spoken about this man if it had been 20 or more years ago.

Paul would certainly not have said, when he was Saul of Tarsus, prior to coming to know the Lord, the last thing he would have said about someone like Epaphroditus, he is my brother. But he's now his brother because the Lord has changed both Paul himself and Epaphroditus so as to bring them to be of the same spiritual family.

[ 8 : 16 ] He's already mentioned Timothy as his son in the faith. In verse 22, you know Timothy's proven worth how as a son with a father, and that's an allusion at least to the fact that they both belong to the same spiritual family.

As we saw, there's more to the description than that. But here is Epaphroditus. He is my brother. Christ changes people. How do you know that Christ changes people? Where does the change actually show itself?

Well, it shows in their attitude, and it shows in their manner of life. Here is a man who would never have countenanced Epaphroditus as a brother, nowhere near on the same level as him, and indeed will come across, God willing, that kind of attitude Paul had in chapter 3 where he's giving his testimony.

How he used to think as Saul the Pharisee. And now he's saying, Epaphroditus, my brother. You see, they have the same spiritual DNA.

They belong to the same family. He's already said in chapter 14, do all things without grumbling or question that you may be blameless and innocent. Children of God.

[ 9 : 30 ] A family of God. And he's referring here to Epaphroditus as his brother within that family. As they share that same spiritual DNA, so do all others who are in Christ.

Doesn't matter where they live. Doesn't matter where they've come from. Doesn't matter how they've been brought up. It doesn't matter how they differ in terms of culture. Doesn't matter what differences otherwise there may be.

As they are in Christ, they belong to that same family of God. And that has so many valuable and important connections in the way that we relate to other people.

In Galatians chapter 3 verse 26 mentions there that, I see Paul, the same Paul wrote to the Galatians, you are all one.

You are all sons of God, children of God, through faith in Christ Jesus. And the change that's taken place in Paul's life as it connects with the change that's taken place in the life of Epaphroditus comes to be manifested, comes to be seen, comes to be actually witnessed, in the way they relate to each other as brothers in Christ.

[10:38] How they treat each other. How they think of each other. How they commend each other to the Lord and to the likes of the Philippian congregation. Epaphroditus, my brother.

It's in many ways a remarkable description coming from the mouth of the man who was so zealously against Jesus and sought to persecute the people of Jesus until he came himself to be changed.

And in other words, that's what we focus on as we come to think of the spiritual family of Christ. Once you're converted, once you come to know the Lord, once the Lord has changed you inwardly, that's the family you then belong to.

You have brothers and sisters then in the Lord. Some of them you may not have regarded even at all, just like the apostle, as worthy of your attention. But when God changes us, whatever we thought of people, whatever personalities they have, and even sometimes, however difficult it is to get along with them, God is saying, you're part of the same family.

See to it that you treat each other properly, properly, lovingly, patiently, in a Christ-like manner. Because that's really, as we've seen, what the chapter is about, isn't it?

[12:03] It's about being like Christ as far as that's possible in this life. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus. As we saw, he then goes on to describe the mind that was in Jesus that manifested itself in the way in which Jesus gave himself to the service in which he served the Lord, his Father, to the death of the cross.

Now he's saying, these are the examples of that same Christ-likeness. Here is this Timothy. I'm going to speak of him to you, he's saying. I hope to send him as soon as it shall go, for I have no one like him.

All seek their own interest, but not Timothy. He's like Jesus. And I'm also going to send you Epaphroditus, and he's my brother. He's of a like mind with myself.

He belongs to the same family, and therefore, you Philippians, he belongs to your family as well. We're part of the same group that share that spiritual DNA. Secondly, he describes him as my fellow worker.

Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker. Now the emphasis there is on being a co-worker with the apostle, and that itself is actually quite telling and quite remarkable because the apostle had no illusions about his apostleship.

[13:25] He actually had to stress his apostleship when he wrote to the Corinthian church because they were questioning, or a group at least, they were questioning the validity, the authenticity of his apostleship.

So it's something that he stressed more than once to the Corinthian church and elsewhere as well, that his apostleship was genuine, that he had the authority of an apostle, the group of people that Jesus had endowed and particularly endowed above others with authority in the church, with authority to set the foundations of the New Testament church in their own generation.

And here is an apostle, here is this man who knows his apostleship, who knows that he's uniquely positioned through the blessing and through the will of Christ, and he's saying about this Epaphroditus, this former pagan, he's not only my brother in Christ, he's my fellow worker.

He's not a rival to me, he's not inferior to me, he's not under me in the sense in which I'm more important than he is, I'm an apostle and he's just an ordinary fellow Christian.

What he's saying is my fellow worker, he's my co-worker. He's not inferior to Paul as a worker in Christ, as a Christian, as a practicing Christian.

[14:43] He is with Paul, and Paul is with him, they're together. And again, that's such an important element in our own context all the time, and the context of the church as it always has

been in this case, in the world, in every generation, because all of us have within ourselves that sense of self-importance that you've got to deal with, that sense of pride that's got to be killed off, that sense that somehow or other we are more important or matter more than others in the church.

It's a great danger in the ministry. It's a great danger whatever prominent gifts outweigh the ministry God may have given to people, because that pride is never far below the surface, and it's got to be something every single day we bring to the Lord and say, Lord, give me humility.

Give me practicing humility. Kill my pride. Help me to deal with it. For this really important man, Paul the Apostle, here he is saying of Epaphroditus, he is my fellow worker.

You see, whatever role we have in the church, whether it's prominent for people to see it very easily, or whether it's something that's largely unnoticed, if we are co-workers in Christ, then we are co-workers.

We have to say that we work together, we work in harmony with each other, and each one contributes what is important in its own right to the work of the kingdom.

[16:25] I've mentioned this chapter previous times probably more than once, but Nehemiah chapter 3 is a wonderful chapter. It consists largely of a list of names.

It's a list of names of those who are engaged in repairing the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership. And as Nehemiah goes through that list, again and again in the chapter, you find him saying, and so-and-so was next to them, and so-and-so was next to him, and so-and-so was beside him, and so-and-so was next to him.

And he goes through all of these family groups and these community groups as they went right round the wall and had their own place in repairing the wall. And this is what Nehemiah is saying about them. So-and-so was next to him, and so-and-so was next to them.

And he mentions one group, the Decoites, who would not, the nobles of the Decoites, they wouldn't bow themselves, they wouldn't lower themselves to work that work of repairing the wall.

But what's really interesting, as well as the fact that they say they were next to each other, trying to make sure there weren't any gaps in the repairing work of the wall, what's interesting is you find descriptions of the kind of people they were, the kind of vocations they had in life, the kind of work they did ordinarily.

[17:42] He mentions the likes of goldsmiths, perfumers. Can you imagine? Somebody whose life was about producing perfumes, taking a shovel and starting to shovel rubble?

That's what they were doing. Hands that weren't used to hard work in that sense, because they had that sort of very intricate work such as goldsmiths or perfumers, and there they were, sharing the work with those who were joiners, those who were stonemasons, those who were just labourers, clearing away the dirt of the walls that had been in disrepair for so long.

But there is never a sense, as you read through that chapter, that any one of these was out of place, that any one of these was unvaluable or unwanted. They all had their own share, they all had their own work to do, and they did it together.

As I look out over this congregation tonight, that's what I see. I see all of these different gifts that God has given to yourselves, the different ways in which He has endowed you to be in the work of His kingdom, work that differs largely, one person from another perhaps.

Some of you hardly prominent at all as you choose yourselves to be, and you don't want to be prominent, you don't want to be famous, but you do want to be faithful. And as we do set about the work of the gospel, that's always what we have to remember.

[19:06] Each person has their own place, their own share, their own valuable position on the walls of Christ's kingdom. I mentioned this morning in Gaelic the practice, if you're watching a stonemason at work, and a stonemason coming to dress large stones, they'll just cut off in order to dress it properly, they'll cut off bits here and there, slivers, some large slivers, some small slivers that fall to the ground, but they don't throw them away, they actually keep them because they're valuable in their own right.

When you look at a lintel, massive stone lintel, that's on top of an opening, whether it's a large door or an opening of some kind, but as you look at that lintel, and especially lintels that have inscriptions on them, your eye is drawn to the inscription, but an expert stonemason will actually look at that and say, you know, these little stones underneath, these slivers that were cut off the main stones, they're now placed underneath the lintel in order to make sure that it doesn't move, in order to make sure it's tight, that it's held in place.

And there's a sense in which the little slivers are actually far more important than the large stone itself because the large stone would not be held in place properly and solidly without the little ones being slipped underneath and bashed in.

And you'll find that, of course, as you look at a wall that an expert stonemason has put together, that's what you'll find. The large stones are obvious, but the little ones are there in their own place around about them to keep them tight.

That's what you find here spiritually in the congregation of God's people. The little stones, the slivers that support those who are more prominent may seem less important, but they're not.

[ 21 : 00 ] Whatever you do for the Lord tonight, don't ever think of it as unimportant. Don't think of it as less important than the work of those who are more prominent and more to be seen and more visible in the work of the kingdom.

We are co-workers together. We fit together as God has blessed us with various gifts in order to be engaged in the work of his kingdom.

My brother, my fellow worker, my co-worker, the one who works alongside of me. And it doesn't matter what your work is in the congregation tonight.

Whether you're looking after a children's group, whether you're engaged with teenage age groups, whether you're working cameras, whether you're actually producing literature, whatever it is in the work of the kingdom, it is supportive of the gospel, supportive of the preaching of the gospel, supportive of the advance of this congregation in terms of its witness and testimony in our community.

don't ever think of yourself as unimportant. Think of yourself, and I must think of myself as unimportant in the sense that we mustn't take pride in anything that we have because everything we have is from God ultimately.

[ 22 : 26 ] That's useful and good. But don't think that you're unimportant to God or to the church or to the work of the church. You have your own place.

You have your own work. You have your own contribution. And together, let's continue as co-workers together to serve Jesus.

He is, he says, my brother and my fellow worker. Then he says, my fellow soldier. Now the imagery changes from that of being a co-worker to being a co-soldier with him.

My fellow soldier. And Paul, of course, uses military imagery very frequently in his letters. Just cast your mind back to chapter 1 where we saw verses 27 and 28.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel that whether I come and see you or not, I may hear of you standing firm in one spirit with one mind. You see, there it is again striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

[ 23 : 31 ] And all of that is really of military language striving side by side. Co-soldiers together in Christ's army. And now he's really, in a sense, he's really sending this brave soldier Epaphroditus because he's going to mention that he nearly died for the work of Christ.

He's somebody who went so far in his service for Christ that he put his own life in danger. He was ill, very ill. And though Paul doesn't say much about it, he does mention it to that extent.

And now, in a sense, he's sending him back to the Philippians and saying, well, here is my fellow soldier, a brave brother in arms as well as a brother in Christ.

And as he mentions this co-soldier, it reminds the Philippians that Paul and Epaphroditus and they themselves are engaged in a warfare, engaged in a spiritual warfare.

They're in the king's service and they're in the king's service, the king being the one who gave himself to die for them, who gave his life for them in order as his commander that he would go before them into battle and that he would provide for them the life that they could not produce themselves through his death on the cross.

[ 24 : 52 ] And now they're in his service. That's what I'd like for you as a Christian, isn't it? Your commander has already gone ahead of you. You know, the word pioneer is used in Hebrews to describe in one passage Jesus and his work through the death that he died on the cross.

He is the pioneer who's gone ahead of his people into eternity. And a pioneer is somebody who goes into a journey where he's taking the lead where those who are following him have not been before but they're following him into it.

That's what your eternal life is. It's something that Jesus has gone ahead of you to produce for you, to open up for you. He's pioneered the way and now you're following him as his servants.

What a great privilege to enlist in the army of Christ, to be a soldier in the army of Christ and it's probably significant that Paul mentions a number of times in his letters to Timothy the same military metaphors that he uses to describe the life of a Christian.

Fight the good fight of faith. Be a good soldier of Christ Jesus. What a privilege to actually sign up to be in the army of Jesus because it's not something in which you're conscripted.

[ 26 : 18 ] It's something where you volunteer. You're not conscripts as Christians. You're not forced into it. It's not something that's imposed upon you against your will. It's something in which you are made willing by the grace of Christ to give yourself to his service.

volunteering willingly under Christ's grace and direction to serve him in his army in this world in conflict with those who have ranged against him.

And we ask the question have you enlisted fully? Are you still in the reserves that haven't seen regular action? Are you content just to remain in the reserves without actually coming to enlist fully in the regular troops?

It's a great thing to be part of the gospel in the sense of being part of the people who worship God belong to them and to actually have an esteem for the gospel and esteem for those who serve in the gospel for those who preach the gospel.

We're so grateful for that. We're so grateful for the support and for your encouragement. But this is something that we all need to make sure of that. We're fully enlisted. That we have actually come and embraced Jesus as our commander.

[ 27 : 39 ] That we've given ourselves through his grace voluntarily and willingly to serve him and not to be content with something less than that however good that might be.

Friends, the truth of God tonight needs needs defending and it needs promoting. And when we preach the gospel there's a danger in which we just confine things to a personal salvation and that that's the only thing that's necessary for us to think about in terms of our relationship with Jesus.

That of course is in many ways the primary thing. But you never forget that our own personal salvation means we have to meaningfully come to be part of a group of people who are themselves as we've seen the family of Jesus, the family of God.

But in addition to that it's not just for your own salvation or for the good of your fellow Christians that you come to enlist in the army of Jesus. It's because the truth needs your support and the truth needs your support as much as you can because that truth out there tonight is despised, it's trodden underfoot, it's cast aside.

That truth is set up as something that's completely outdated, something that ought to be just gotten rid of altogether, especially from public bodies, from public life.

[ 29 : 09 ] Remember in the first world war Kitchener's great poster your country needs you. Well there's a sense of course in which in the ultimate God doesn't need any of us.

He can do things without means as easily as he can through means. But there's another sense and the gospel makes it plain that Jesus has need of you. Jesus' cause has need of you.

The church of God has need of you visibly and willingly and openly to actually come to be part of this enlisted army of Christ. Will you not do that if you haven't done it already?

Will you not give yourself now to the service of Christ if that's not already the case with you? Will you not see for yourself that it's not just for your personal benefit but that you're serving the Lord in a wider sense as well as one of his people in this world?

Do you not want to be prominently or otherwise? It's not important. What's important is that you are actually part of that number of people that know him, that serve him, that love him, that want his name to be further promoted.

[ 30 : 21 ] He's my brother, he's my fellow worker, he's my fellow soldier, but he's also, he said, your messenger, your messenger, he's actually one of the Philippians, he was sent with what's mentioned in chapter 4, verse 8, the gifts that they sent to help Paul practically in his ministry.

So he is your messenger and all we need to say about that, I won't have time to go into it further, but it means that in a sense the Philippian church is present there in the representative Epaphroditus.

So that when Paul is saying he is your messenger to me, he is saying I can see that you by the gift that you sent through him, you are actually present as if you were here actually physically with me. And so Paul is so grateful for that. And again it expresses that wonderful spiritual unity that crosses many, many miles geographically and culturally for the one family of God to be together spiritually in

Christ.

And finally he calls him minister to my need. The minister to my need. Now that word minister, again in the New Testament is very often used of someone who actually serves in a worship context such as the Old Testament priesthood for example and indeed the New Testament priesthood is the people of God.

[ 31 : 50 ] You remember in 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 4 to 5 where he says as you come to him a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And in Hebrews chapter 13 the writer there in some ways remarkably refers to the work of those who were faithful to Christ. Hebrews 13 and verse 15 he says through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. You see the way that Paul and also the writer of the Hebrews is using the word sacrifice even of things like giving support practically to fellow Christians.

He is saying that is your spiritual sacrifice and whether it is money or our own contribution in terms of labor or work it does not matter again together what we are engaged in is in a spiritual sense offering to God.

Offering ourselves offering our work offering our labor because that word offering or sacrifice describes it in these passages that I have referred to.

[ 33 : 25 ] And it is always important just to stop and think of what we are actually doing even in terms of a financial contribution to the church to the support of the gospel it is our offering.

What does that mean? It means that we are giving it primarily to Jesus to God. We are doing it in devotion to him. Our work that we do whatever group it is we are involved with whether it is preaching like we are preaching whether it is in your own service in the gospel in the congregation whatever you are doing it is your offering.

it is given as a spiritual sacrifice to God and God is pleased with it when it is done in the name of Christ. That word offering sacrifice in that spiritual sense in the wider sense this is what he is saying he is minister to my need.

He is one who is your offering to help me in the gospel. There is the man the man Epaphroditus. We haven't really time to look at the rest of it but let me just briefly refer to it because I want to just wind the chapter up at this point.

The manner in which they are to receive him. Well firstly they are to receive him in the Lord. That really governs everything. How am I going to look upon other people?

[ 34 : 58 ] What sort of spirit am I going to look at them in? It has to be in the Lord if they are Christians especially. That is how I look at them. Even if they are not Christians if I am in the Lord then the fact that I am in the Lord governs how I think.

Governs how I speak. Governs how I act. Because in the Lord is the setting of my life. That is where my life is rooted as a Christian. And as a Christian that is what governs every other aspect of my life.

In the Lord. Receive him in the Lord. In other words he is really more or less saying receive him as you would receive Christ. Receive him because he is in the Lord and you are to receive him in the Lord.

The same Lord that you all have. And with esteem esteem him highly because he nearly died for the work of Christ.

But then also with all joy receive him in the Lord with all joy and esteem such men. well with all joy because he had been yearning for them.

[ 36 : 05 ] You see how he mentions him in the first part of the chapter first part of the passage rather. Verse 26 he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard he was ill.

There is a very strong word. He has been longing for you all. Friends we live in difficult times when there are many challenges to us being together.

Many challenges as we try and get back into the way of things as they used to be in a physical sense and we fully understand the fear that exists among people when there is so much still in the news and in the headlines about COVID and about the various aspects of that.

