

Heroes of the Faith: Those Who Risk for God

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²⁶since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.

²⁷For 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.

²⁸Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful.

²⁹Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem;

³⁰because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me. (Philippians 2:25-30)

Here is a general knowledge experiment. I am going to read out a list of names, and you see how many of them you recognise or know.

Donald Trump, Beyonce, Elon Musk, Justin Bieber, Kim Kardashian, Taylor Swift, Ronaldo, Messi, Tiger Woods, Jeff Bezos, Samuel Rutherford, Nate Saint, Balthasar Hubmaier, Anne Askew, Henry Martyn, Adoniram Judson, Amy Carmichael, John and Betty Stam, Gladys Aylward, Darlene Deibler-Rose.

How did you do? The first ten were names of politicians, singers, sportsmen, and businessmen. Maybe you knew many of them. The second ten were names of Christians who either died to take the gospel somewhere, or risked everything to do so. But unfortunately, I think many Christians would know more of the first ten names than the second ten. That can be excusable, given how we're bombarded by the media today. But what is less excusable is if you're a Christian and the first ten are more interesting and attractive to you than the last ten. The first ten sell their bodies and good looks to the camera, or perform exceedingly well at games, or have made huge amounts of money and have power. For those reasons, the world loves them, because they become symbols of what the world wants: money, power, fame, good looks, success. But the world is not interested in John and Betty Stam, who were killed in China for the gospel, or Henry Martyn, who died at 32 taking the gospel to India. The world does not value what these people valued, therefore it does not value them.

Whoever you admire reveals the things you admire. If those first ten are heroic to you, then they embody the things you treasure, and where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. But if you treasure, and have set your affections in things above, then you will treasure the kinds of things that God values, and therefore the kinds of people that embody those things. So, here then is a simple test of your heart: who are your heroes? Don't dodge the question by saying that you don't hero-worship anyone. Very simply, who is in your top-10 list of the people you admire, and either aspire to be like, or follow in some sense? Who is in that list, and what things do they embody to you?

The Bible does not tell us to hero-worship people, but it does tell us to reserve special honour for some people. It does tell us to look up to certain kinds of people, to admire them, and hold them in special regard. It tells us to follow and imitate some kinds of people, to have certain kinds of heroes. If we are God's people, and belong to His family, and live within His culture, then the icons, the heroes, the symbols we should be seeking should be the kind of people in the second list of ten.

So whose face would you put on a T-shirt you'd wear, or on your Desktop? Whose life would you pick up a biography to read?

Here in Philippians 2:25-30, we are going to meet a true hero of the faith, and have Paul explain why he is a hero. He is going to exhort us to esteem this man in a special way, to make him one of

the people we look up to, and give the reasons. In short, Paul is going to challenge us to make the celebrities and stars in our eyes those men and women after God's own heart.

I. His Description

Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need; (Philippians 2:25)

Let's remember the story here. Paul went to Jerusalem and there was seen in the Temple and accused. He began preaching, and was set upon. After a series of trials, knowing that he didn't have a chance for a fair trial in Israel, he used his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar. He was then escorted to Rome as a person awaiting trial, but one who would be put into a kind of house arrest. Once there, Paul now had a serious need. When under house arrest, you needed money and food, because Rome didn't supply it to you. And an appeal to the emperor was no small thing: you needed a lawyer to represent you. Paul had arrived there with Aristarchus and Timothy. He then sent Aristarchus to the churches in Macedonia to make them aware of his need. It seems the Philippians were the only church that really rallied to Paul's need. They decided to send a gift back with Aristarchus, along with one of their own leaders, Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus means charming or handsome. It was a pagan name, that comes from the name of the goddess Aphrodite. He was apparently a fully Gentile church leader, not Jewish like Paul, or half-Jewish like Timothy. There is another man named Epaphras mentioned in Colossians who is likely not the same person.

Paul had obviously known Epaphroditus from his previous time in Philippi. He here uses five descriptions of the man, three of them toward Paul, and two of them towards the Philippians.

In the first place, Epaphroditus is Paul's brother. That is, he is a fellow believer, and part of God's household. He is family, and that means care, and affection, and warmth. He is a Christian, and so the first description is a term of endearment. Are your heroes fellow-believers? Can you say of those you admire most, he or she is, or was (when they were alive), a Christian?

Second, he calls him my fellow worker. The description goes from family to function. Epaphroditus is a partner, a co-labourer, a colleague in ministry. He is spreading the gospel, discipling the saints, preaching the truth, caring for believers. He is not, as we saw last week, merely a VNP. Epaphroditus serves, gets involved, works, labours for the Lord. He is productive in the things of God, building something for eternity.

Third, Paul calls him my fellow-soldier. This was actually a term of honour, given to the brave soldier who was now equal to the Commander-in-Chief. Here is not just a fellow Christian, not just a productive and serving fellow-Christian, but a Christian in the trenches with me. This is a leader, willing to face enemy fire, willing to endure deprivation, willing to wage war and come up with strategies to defend the faith, and attack the enemy. A soldier, as Paul says to Timothy endures hardness, and does not entangle himself in the affairs of this life. A fellow soldier is someone who is not soft when it comes to the things of God, nor embedded in worldly affairs. He is deliberately mobile, flexible, waiting for his mission, wanting to do exploits for God. Here is a balance of love, service and leadership. As a brother, Epaphroditus fellowships with you. As a worker, Epaphroditus serves and works with you. As a soldier, Epaphroditus fights and conquers with you. You need all three: family, farmer, fighter, son, servant, soldier. Anytime your Christianity, or your church has only one emphasis, it becomes lopsided. We need the warmth of fellowship, the work of service, and the war of contending for the faith.

There are two more titles here:

your messenger and the one who ministered to my need

The word for messenger here is *apostolon*. The Greek word just means sent one, emissary, one sent out. Does this mean Epaphroditus was an apostle? No, remember, in the New Testament, when it comes to church offices there is a way that a word is used as a common noun, an every day descriptor, and a way it is used to designate an office. For example, the word *diakonos* is a normal word for servant, and it is used of many individuals in the New Testament. But when Paul is describing the qualifications of a *diakonos* in 1 Timothy 3, and saying that they should be tested and examined first, he obviously means the office of deacon. In fact, even the word elder, *presbuteros*, means older man, and in 1 Timothy 5, Paul tells Timothy not to rebuke an older man, that means the common noun. But later on he talks about giving double honour to worthy elders, and speaks of the public ordination or rebuke of an elder, he clearly means the office. The same is true of the word apostle. It can mean a messenger, a representative, as it does here, or it can mean one of twelve unique men to occupy the office. That office meant you had to have seen the risen Lord, you were endowed with unusual signs and wonders, you were instrumental in ministering the new covenant both in its practical and its written form, and you have a special place in Heaven.

But Epaphroditus was the messenger of the Philippians. He was responsible enough and reliable enough for them to send him out and trust him with the money and the ministry.

Added to that, he was the one who ministered to Paul's need. The word for ministered is *leitourgon*, which means worship service. Paul saw the money they sent as the equivalent of a sacrifice being offered to God, and Epaphroditus was the one bringing it.

That's quite a CV: a true Christian, a productive worker, a brave fighter, a reliable representative, and a humble servant. Now remember, this was Philippi, where titles mattered a great deal. In fact, two of these two titles were prized not only by Christians but by pagan Romans – the title fellow-soldier and priestly servant. Paul is training these honour-centric Philippians to honour the right kind of people for the right kind of reasons.

How does your top 10 list of important people compare to Epaphroditus? What are they known for?

That's the overall description. But now Paul gives us an insight into the heart of this man: his attitude, his whole posture towards other Christians.

II. His Disposition

²⁶since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. ²⁷For 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. ²⁸Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful.

Paul is explaining why he sent Epaphroditus back to the Philippians. If you remember, on his way to bringing Paul the gift of money, he fell sick, possibly with malaria. The sickness was bad enough that Aristarchus probably told him to turn back. Instead, he likely sent word back to Philippi that he was sick so they could pray, but then pressed on to Rome to meet Paul's need.

Verse 27 tells us that his sickness was close to death. But apparently Paul and his companions nursed him back to health, God having mercy on Epaphroditus and all his friends. Had Epaphroditus died, Paul would have had added sorrow on top of his current suffering. The moment Epaphroditus was well, Paul sent him back to his home church.

Why? Verse 26 tells us: “Since he was longing for you all”. Longing. This is a word which means to greatly desire, to miss. “For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ” (Php 1:8)

greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, (2 Timothy 1:4)

This brother-worker-soldier-ambassador-servant genuinely cared for and missed the saints in his church. Just like Timothy, he sincerely cared for their state. Being away from them for such a period of time made him concerned, burdened, anxious for their spiritual state. Paul wanted to send him back as soon as he was fit and able. This was not a man who was going to laze about and enjoy the sights of Rome. He wanted to get back to Philippi.

In fact, it goes even further. Paul says he was distressed because you had heard he was sick. It doesn't say he was distressed because he was sick. It says, he was distressed because you heard he was sick. In other words, he was greatly worried (this is a word used only two other times in the NT, to refer to the distress of Jesus in Gethsemane), about your worry! He was worried that you were worried! Now how often do we find that? When we are sick, we are mostly pleased to hear that people are worried about us. But one step beyond that is being concerned that the Philippians would panic, or do something unwise or react wrongly to his sickness.

There was real love between Epaphroditus and this church, and Paul predicted in verse 28 that when he gets back there will be real joy in the Philippians.

So he wanted to get back to them to see their state and re-assure their hearts. And Paul also wants them to know that Epaphroditus didn't shirk his responsibility. By the time Epaphroditus gets back to them, he will be well, and Paul wants them to know his illness was very real and very severe. For indeed he was sick almost unto death

Paul seems to be saying: welcome him back as a hero, not as a failure. He was torn between serving me and serving you, and he has done well. This man's disposition was the same mind of Christ Paul is teaching through this book: selfless service of others.

Now here is a theological detour we should take for just a moment. There is no word here that Paul healed Epaphroditus. But we know Paul had the gift of healing, and indeed the apostolic power to heal. In fact, just before arriving in Rome, when Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta, we read in Acts 28:9: “And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.”

Paul had the apostolic gift of healing. Paul had healed people in the recent past, people with no direct connection to Paul. Why then didn't Paul heal Epaphroditus? The words *God had mercy on him* strongly suggest a normal, providential healing that took place as Paul and others prayed for him, nursed him back, gave him food and water and what medicine they had.

What this tells us that the gift of healing and even the apostolic power to heal was primarily a sign to others, not a power to just bring general health to family and friends. Those who teach that health is the normal state of the believer and that all you need is faith need to answer a simple question: why didn't Paul heal Epaphroditus if he had that power on tap? Surely we wouldn't claim, as people will, that it was the fault of Epaphroditus, that he lacked faith. If anyone had faith, it was this man. It seems even the apostolic gift of healing was not a power available at will and at all times. Matthew Henry comments: “And perhaps they had not that power at all times, and at their own discretion, but only when some great end was to be served by it, and when God saw fit. It was

proper to Christ, who had *the Spirit above measure*”

It also shows us that sickness is not always because of sin, nor is the healing always guaranteed or instant. The healing was a mercy.

The disposition of Epaphroditus was sincere selfless service, genuine pastoral care for the souls of others. Think of your heroes. Do they care for others selflessly? Would they cross oceans to care for one person, while being burdened about others, worried about their worry?

But now we come to the heart of what made this man a hero.

III. His Deeds

³⁰because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.

For the work of Christ, Epaphroditus nearly died. He took on a long and dangerous journey for the sake of missions. Paul needed assistance; the Philippians provided the money, and Epaphroditus was willing to take it to him. Epaphroditus was burdened for missions. He didn't just contribute to the offering – he carried the offering. When Paul says that Epaphroditus supplied what was lacking in your service to me, he doesn't mean there was something faulty in their service or offering. He means the thing the Philippians couldn't do was be with Paul personally, and that is what Epaphroditus was willing to do.

To take care of their missionary, Epaphroditus faced his own death. And not merely accidentally. He didn't ask for the sickness, but when it came, Paul that Epaphroditus still sought to complete his mission “not regarding his life”.

This word is used only here in the New Testament, and it means exposing oneself to danger. In fact, in the early church, there were those who came to be known by this Greek word – the *parabalani* – those who took great risks for the cause of God. For example, during the plague of Cyprian, Christians who were willing to minister to those who had fallen sick, who might fall sick themselves. Christians who were willing to visit prisoners, or make sure martyrs received a burial. In doing so, they exposed themselves to danger, because if you buried a martyr or visited a Christian in prison, you were quickly identified with him, and could be arrested or executed on the spot.

Epaphroditus embraced the danger of the voyage, the possibility of sickness taking his life on the voyage, and the danger of being associated with Paul.

There is still a place for Christians willing to take risks for God. It is natural and normal for us to build up a great wall of securities and assurances, and certainties to depend upon. And you can live your life just insuring yourself against any possible loss, or danger, or exposure, or disappointment. And you may succeed, and finish your life, having successfully avoided danger, sickness, poverty, and death your whole life. And then?

Is it your life's goal to die in a warm nursing home, having been careful to never do anything risky for Christ? Do you want to raise children who want to do nothing more than be comfortable, safe, and risk-free?

Churches are not planted, nations are not reached, false teaching is not refuted, evil is not pushed back, Christian schools and universities are not started and maintained by risk-free living. And once again, Covid-19 has been a real test of what we regard as acceptable risk.

Are your heroes known for self-sacrificing, risk-taking service of others?

So what should we do with a man like Epaphroditus?

IV. His Due

²⁹Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem;

Paul says, when he gets home, welcome him as a brother, with fullness of joy. He deserves a hero's welcome; he deserves your best kind of celebratory welcome. Paul says, you Philippians have a gem of a leader; he's unusually good, make sure you bless him when he comes back.

And then Paul says, hold him, and people like him, in esteem. The word means regard as precious, highly honourable, worthy of great esteem. Put Epaphroditus on the shoulders of your admiration.

This takes nothing away from the fact that Christ gets all the glory. But though God alone deserves glory, His servants can be honoured, there is no contradiction there.

¹²And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13)

For they refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men. 1 Co 16:18

This was a culture all about honour, all about fame, and becoming a hero. Here Paul says, this is a real hero. Re-orient your minds to have the mind of Christ. Honour those who humbly serve others at great risk to themselves. Don't honour those proud men who serve only themselves and live and breathe pride and vainglory.

Most Sundays, I give book recommendations. More often than not, there is an Epaphroditus-like person mentioned every Sunday, a hero from the recent or ancient past, who risked greatly for the work of God. But as I mention the name of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, John Knox, Nate Saint, John Owen, John Wesley, Samuel Rutherford, I see the lazy bored expressions of people who look like these are the ads and trailers before the movie really begins. I wonder what would happen if I announced, "This book is Kim Kardashian and Christ" "Kate Middleton's Personal Faith" "The God of Donald Trump" "Tim Cook, Apple, and Faith", "365 Daily Devotions with Kanye West". Sad to say, I think some of those glazed eyes would suddenly sparkle into life.

Philippi also had heroes and celebrities. You've never heard of them, and never will. The heroes and Roman celebrities of Philippi are long dead, and no one knows who they are. I can tell you with some confidence, that if the Lord tarries another 2000 years, those first ten names I mentioned won't be remembered by anyone in the year 4021, let alone Christians. But I think the second ten will be known and remembered by Christians in 4021, because believers who understand Philippians learn to honour what God honours, and find glory where God finds it.

Who are your heroes? Your answer explains what you find worthy of high esteem, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Tonight God says to us of Epaphroditus, and of every person like him: hold such people in esteem.