

Shalom AZ Ministries

In Pursuit of Israel's Redemption



“A Hero Returns with a Purple Heart”

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Devotion and Discussion Questions

Key Texts (TLV): Phil. 2:25-30; Phil. 2:1-8; Phil. 2:17-18; Phil. 1:29; Phil. 3:17

We usually picture a hero returning home in victory—standing tall, strong, celebrated, with the battle behind him. But sometimes a hero comes home wounded. A Purple Heart tells a story. It says that someone went where they were called to go, stood where they were called to stand, and bore wounds because they were willing to put something greater than themselves ahead of their own safety. That is something like the picture Paul gives us at the end of Phil. 2. Epaphroditus is coming home, and he is coming home as a kind of wounded comrade-in-arms. He had been terribly sick—so sick that Paul says he came close to death—and yet he had completed the mission entrusted to him. He is a hero returning with a Purple Heart.

At first, these verses can almost seem like a travel update tucked between the “important” theological parts of Philippians. Paul has spoken about the mind of Messiah, about putting others before ourselves, about Yeshua humbling Himself “*to the point of death*” (Phil. 2:8), about working out our salvation together, shining as lights, and being poured out as an offering. Then Paul begins talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus. But this is not peripheral. Paul is giving us living examples how everything he has just taught actually looks when somebody lives it. Timothy is one example, and now Epaphroditus is another. This is the mind of Messiah with flesh on it. This is what it looks like when someone refuses to live “me-first,” puts the interests of others ahead of his own, serves sacrificially, and is willing to suffer for the work of Messiah.

1. HONOR THE ONES WHO HAVE LEARNED TO SERVE

Paul begins, “*But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, as well as your messenger and aide to my need*” (Phil. 2:25). Before Paul explains why Epaphroditus is returning, he tells the congregation who this man has been *to him*. He is “my brother,” the basic language of family in Messiah. He is “my co-worker,” one who has labored alongside Paul in the work of the Good News. And then Paul calls him “my fellow soldier.” That military language would have carried particular weight in Philippi, a Roman colony with a strong military history. Epaphroditus is like a wounded comrade coming home from the battlefield. And then Paul describes who Epaphroditus is to the Philippians: their messenger—their *apostolos*, their sent one—having ministered to Paul’s needs on their behalf. They could not all go to Rome, so they sent Epaphroditus. He stood there as their representative.

There is something beautiful here about Paul’s willingness to honor someone openly. He does not seem worried that honoring Epaphroditus will somehow take glory away from God. In fact, Paul understands that when we honor what God has produced in a person, God receives glory through that honor. He is essentially saying, “Let me tell you who this man has been to me.” We should learn to do that. Tell people what they mean to you. Recognize faithfulness. Give words of affirmation while people can still hear them. Honor those who quietly serve, sacrifice, carry burdens, and put the needs of others before themselves. Paul’s commendation also honors the Philippians, because Epaphroditus was their messenger. They had sent him with their gift and their care. In honoring Epaphroditus, Paul is also honoring them. The kingdom of God is not

built by people scrambling for vainglory; it is built by brothers, sisters, co-workers, fellow soldiers, messengers, and servants who faithfully do what the Lord has placed before them.

2. JOY DOES NOT MEAN THE ABSENCE OF SORROW

Paul tells us that Epaphroditus had been longing for the Philippians and was distressed because they had heard he was sick. Then he makes the seriousness of that illness unmistakable: *“He certainly was sick, close to death. But God had mercy on him—and not only on him but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow”* (Phil. 2:27). Epaphroditus had been on death’s door. In the ancient world, without the medical resources we take for granted, that was an especially frightening reality. Yet Paul does not merely say, “Thankfully, he got better.” Paul sees the hand of God in his recovery. And then he says that God’s mercy reached farther than Epaphroditus himself. In healing Epaphroditus, God also had mercy on Paul, sparing him “sorrow upon sorrow.” Prison was sorrowful enough. The suffering Paul was already carrying was real enough. Losing this beloved brother on top of everything else would have been another heavy grief piled upon the grief he already knew.

That little phrase, “sorrow upon sorrow,” helps us understand something important about all the joy we have been reading about in Philippians. Joy does not mean the absence of sorrow. Paul is not pretending that prison is pleasant, that suffering does not hurt, or that losing someone he loves would not break his heart. Biblical joy is not putting on a happy face and denying what hurts. It is the capacity to rejoice in the Lord in the middle of sorrow because our perspective remains fixed on Him. Paul can have genuine sorrow and genuine joy at the same time. And because he cares for the Philippians, he sends Epaphroditus home urgently so that *their* anxiety can be turned into rejoicing. Imagine that moment: the last news they had received was that he was deathly ill, and then suddenly Epaphroditus himself walks through the door carrying Paul’s letter. “You’re back! You’re here! You’re well!” Their joy would have been spontaneous. God had shown mercy, and Paul wants them to recognize it, rejoice in it, and let that mercy lift some of the heaviness they have been carrying.

3. HOLD PEOPLE LIKE THIS IN HONOR

Paul then gives the congregation a direct instruction: *“So welcome him in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard, because he came close to death for the work of Messiah, risking his life to make up for what was lacking in your service to me”* (Phil. 2:29–30). “Receive him with all joy.” And then, **“People like this—hold them in honor.”** Why? Because Epaphroditus had nearly died “for the work of Messiah.” The wording at the end of verse 30 can sound harsh in English – (*“risking his life to make up for what was lacking in your service to me”*), as though Paul is accusing the Philippians of failing him, but that is not the sense. Their “lack” was their absence—they simply could not all be present with Paul in Rome. Epaphroditus filled that gap. He came as their representative and ministered to Paul where they could not. He put his own life at risk in order to complete the service they had entrusted to him.

And there is an important phrase in verse 30 that ties the entire chapter together. Paul says Epaphroditus came *“near to death”* (μέχρι θανάτου, *mechri Thanatou*). Earlier in the chapter, Paul used the same language when he described Yeshua, who *“humbled Himself—becoming obedient to the point of death”* (μέχρι θανάτου, *mechri Thanatou*), *even death on a cross*” (Phil. 2:8). Paul is deliberately placing Epaphroditus’ life beside the pattern he has already shown us in Messiah. Epaphroditus is walking in the pattern of Yeshua. He has learned and demonstrated

the mind of Messiah: not selfish ambition, but self-giving service that puts others ahead of self. Paul had already written, *“For to you was granted for Messiah’s sake not only to trust in Him, but also to suffer for His sake”* (Phil. 1:29). Now they have an example standing right in front of them. Epaphroditus is one of their own, and he has lived it. That is why Paul says people like this should be honored—because their lives draw attention to Messiah.

CONCLUSION

Paul’s mention of Timothy and Epaphroditus is not here by accident. They are living demonstrations of everything Paul has been saying. He told the Philippians to have the mind of Messiah, and then he pointed at Timothy and Epaphroditus and essentially said, “Look—this is what I’m talking about.” Later he will say, *“Brothers and sisters, join in following my example and notice those who walk according to the pattern you have in us”* (Phil. 3:17). Pay attention to people who live this way. Scope them out. Notice the pattern. Follow those who follow Messiah.

Is the mind of Messiah becoming visible in the way we actually live? Is the Holy Spirit putting His finger on selfish ambition, on our hunger to be noticed, on our unwillingness to serve when it costs us something, or on our tendency to protect our own comfort before considering the needs of others. Bring that to the Lord. Ask Him to form in you the same mind that was in Messiah Yeshua. Ask Him to make you the kind of brother or sister, co-worker, fellow soldier, messenger, and servant whose life can become a pattern for someone else.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Paul places this lengthy commendation of Epaphroditus immediately after teaching about the mind of Messiah in Phil. 2?
2. What do Paul’s descriptions—“brother,” “co-worker,” “fellow soldier,” “messenger,” and “aide”—teach us about the different ways believers serve one another?
3. Paul speaks honestly about “sorrow upon sorrow” while repeatedly calling believers to rejoice. How does this help us understand the difference between biblical joy and simply trying to stay positive?
4. Who in your life has displayed the kind of selfless faithfulness that Paul honors in Epaphroditus? Have you expressed to that person what their example has meant to you?
5. Where might the Lord be asking you right now to move away from “me-first” living and put the interests of someone else ahead of your own comfort, recognition, or preferences?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, thank You for giving us living examples of what the mind of Messiah looks like. Thank You for people demonstrate who that following Yeshua is more than knowing the right words—who demonstrate a life of humility, service, faithfulness, and willingness to put others before ourselves. Teach us to honor those who serve You faithfully, to rejoice in Your mercy even when sorrow is present, and to recognize Your hand at work in the people You place around us.

Spirit of God, search our hearts and expose every place where selfish ambition, comfort, or “me-first” thinking is still ruling us. Form in us the mind of Messiah Yeshua. Make us faithful brothers and sisters, co-workers, fellow soldiers, messengers, and servants who are willing to spend ourselves for the work of Messiah and for the good of others. May our lives become a pattern that points people—not to us—but to Yeshua.

B'Shem Yeshua, In the name of Yeshua, amen.