

# Timothy and Epaphroditus



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We have only a fraction of the heroic and complex stories of the early days of the church. But the individuals we do know, drawn against a backdrop of peril and opposition, reveal the leading of God's Spirit and the faithfulness of people like us.

The New Testament chronicles how God works in the lives of both women and men, servants and leaders, people from all backgrounds of life. The words we study today were written by Paul from a prison cell in Rome. His life is in jeopardy, he longs to be with the churches he had planted and he is praying God would continue to raise up people like Timothy and Epaphroditus to carry the good news to the edges of the empire. No self-pity or fear – hope in God fills Paul's heart.

Paul references several imprisonments (2 Corinthians 11:23), and we know he was imprisoned for two years in Caesarea (Acts 24:27). Paul is obviously concerned about the church in Philippi, which was located inland from the Aegean port city of Neapolis on the Gangites River. It was a city of commercial importance because of its location on the major Egnatian Way, the Roman road across northern Greece connecting the Aegean and Adriatic Seas. The first convert to Christ in Philippi was a successful dealer in high-dollar purple cloth named Lydia. Her home was the original meeting place for the church at Philippi. The wording of Paul's letter to this strategically located church reveals his love for that congregation as well as his gratitude for sending Epaphroditus to minister to him in prison.

Timothy and Epaphroditus are very different figures. Timothy was much like Paul's son in ministry and is mentioned in Acts, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and 1 and 2 Timothy. Epaphroditus is only mentioned in Philippians.

Timothy first appears in Acts 16, with Paul in Lystra. His father was Greek. His mother was Jewish, a follower of Jesus and a strong supporter of Paul. Timothy had not been circumcised, but when Paul enlisted him as a partner in ministry, Paul made sure Timothy experienced that rite. This was in contrast to Paul's stance that circumcision was not required for a follower of Christ. We believe Paul made this decision in order to eliminate any barrier to his reaching Jews across the empire with the message of Christ. You will find Timothy ministering in Beroea (Acts 17), Macedonia (Acts 19), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3), Corinth (1 Cor. 16), and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). Paul often referred to Timothy as his "son" (Phil. 2:22) or "a child in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2).

While Epaphroditus is only mentioned in Philippians, notice how Paul describes him as "co-worker and fellow-soldier" (Phil. 2:25). He was sent by the Philippian church to deliver a gift to Paul in prison, where Epaphroditus became seriously ill while fulfilling that task and nearly died. But Epaphroditus recovered and was one of the messengers Paul sent back to Philippi with this letter. The church was to welcome their messenger with joy because of the risks he took for Paul and the cause of Christ (vv. 29-30). Epaphroditus is mentioned again near the end of this letter, where Paul confirms the church's gift was delivered. For Paul it was "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (v. 18).

Here are two very different individuals who both serve God in vital ways, but there is no sense of ranking with their ministries. Instead, there is praise for their service to God. We tend to focus on standing or position, as in pastor ... deacon ... committee chair ... church member. Paul extensively deals with the idea that all believers stand on level ground before the throne of God in 1 Corinthians 12 when he asserts we are all gifted in different ways by God's Spirit (v. 4) and that the church is like

the human body, each part necessary to its wholeness and functions (vv. 7, 12). While we focus on the significant doctrinal truths of the New Testament, we must not ignore Jesus' consistent directive: to love God is to live daily to serve God. Paul teaches the same lesson. For all our abilities to strategize and organize, there is tragic failure when God's grace is not our foundation.

What gifts has God given you? I remember church youth camps when the evening services were focused on decision time and the altar was crowded. The camp decision card had several options: salvation, rededication, call to ministry, missions and other. The "other" choice was to be sure nothing was left out.

Looking back, I suspect we should all check "other" periodically, because "other" is the ultimate life choice. It is the understanding that life's situations change, jobs change and opportunities are varied. However your stage of life is unfolding, God opens up opportunities for you to serve him. Consider Timothy and Epaphroditus as having checked the "other" box on their decision cards.

Think about your personal resources: family background, education, experience, abilities, interests, resources and relationships. When and where is there a possibility to serve God? I think of a hard-working farmer who encouraged me when I was a young pastor trying to stay in school on very limited resources. There was Mrs. Wilhite, a Sunday School teacher to the youngest children, dressed in her Sunday outfit of dark skirt and jacket, hat and gloves; adored by children and parents, and an example of faithfulness and love in everything during my seminary days. Like Paul, I have a long list of people who stood with me, encouraged and taught me, and invested in my life.

You are the Timothy, the Epaphroditus, the other who can make a difference in someone's life, bringing them encouragement and hope.