

## Epaphroditus

I almost died a few months ago. If I pass out at least once while talking to you, don't be too shocked. I've been doing that every so often since...the incident<sup>1</sup> Of course, sometimes, I have a seizure instead, but don't let that bother you either. Just give me a few minutes to recover, and I will resume my story.

You have no idea what it is like to almost die when you are with Paul. He prays and prays. And prays. As I floated in and out of consciousness, I kept wondering why he didn't heal me miraculously like he had so many others. But, I also remembered that there were many people that Paul was not led to heal. Then, one morning, I began to get better, and was soon completely healed. Well, except for these occasional fits I warned you about.

We didn't know the medical cause for my illness, I contracted it in the swamps surrounding Philippi as I went to Rome to be with Paul. Oh, I think you call it malaria. If you go to Philippi today, you don't see those swamps, only beautiful farm land. But long ago, the swamps west of Philippi were famous, because they changed Roman history.

42 BC, about a hundred years before I got sick, the Battle of Philippi determined the future of Rome. Octavian and Mark Antony's forces fought the forces of Brutus and Cassius. If Brutus and Cassius win, the Roman Republic will stay intact. If Octavian and Mark Antony win, the Republic will be dismantled and Rome will become an empire under Octavian. Each side had about 100,000 soldiers.

Mark Antony brilliantly used the swamps to his advantage and defeated Cassius. This led to the victory of Mark Antony and Octavian. As you know, Octavian eventually battled and defeated Mark Antony and became the first emperor of Rome, Emperor Augustus. He was the emperor in power when Jesus was born. Got it? Good. Moving on.

Philippi was a major city in Macedonia, named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. He conquered the city to attain its nearby gold mines and establish a fort at its strategic position.

Paul came to Philippi on his First Missionary Journey, and converted Lydia and her household to Christianity. Under the guidance of Timothy and Luke, a church was established, and it

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:27

flourished. Luke had a special fondness for Philippi because of its excellent medical school. I can't remember for sure, but that may have been where he became a doctor.

In 62 AD, Paul had been in prison in Rome for over a year. He frequently received reports about the various churches throughout Greece and Macedonia. I brought him news from Philippi and many other churches in Macedonia. The church there had sent me to Rome to take him money so he could continue to afford to stay in a private house while under arrest.

The news about Philippi was good. The church was growing, and most of its leaders, such as Lydia and Clement, were doing great. We had a little contention going on, but it was mild compared to the problems that Paul had to deal with in Corinth. It was contention that caused the opening to the letter to the Philippians be slightly different than Paul's other letters to churches.

The letter is sent from Paul and Timothy. We all know that Paul dictated most of the letter, but Timothy is beloved in Philippi and his name gives the letter a friendly tone. Paul describes themselves as servants, so everyone knows that all Christians are on the same level, and that none have any special rights. He addresses the letter to all the holy people at Philippi, along with their leaders. He points out the leaders so everyone knows Paul is not exempting them from any of his coming criticisms.

As usual, Paul opens his letter with thanksgiving and prayers for the Philippians. Since he knows many of them, you can tell that he means every word. He says that the Philippians are partners with him in the gospel, and that God will enable them to complete their work. His prayer for them is simple – that their love will grow and grow.

It may be a little difficult for you to understand the importance of Paul's next statements without a little historical context. Emperor Augustus, the first Roman emperor, established an elite unit of personal body guards known as the Praetorian Guard, or Palace Guard. Although Paul is allowed to live in a house, it seems that one or more of the Guards are assigned to oversee Paul.

Rather than complaining about being under house arrest, Paul uses it as an opportunity to evangelize. Apparently, the soldiers rotate their guard, so over a period of time, Paul is able to share the Gospel with the entire Palace Guard. This show of bravery encourages the other Christians to share the gospel without fear. Paul sees his circumstances as an opportunity to advance the Gospel. The important thing is that the Gospel is preached in every way so that people can experience the freedom Christ offers

Paul considers his dangerous situation and ponders his dilemma – is he better off staying alive and helping others come to Christ, or dying to be united with Christ? After consideration, he concludes it is best for him to stay alive so he can be an encouragement to the Colossians. He knows they will be subject to suffering in the future, just as he is suffering in the present.

Knowing the stress that the Philippians will endure, Paul returns to a theme that he often uses – be united in Christ. He encourages them to be so united that their minds will be alike and their spirits will be alike. He admonishes them to do nothing out of self-centeredness, but to value others above themselves, just as Jesus did. Because Jesus acted as a humble servant, God exalted him above everything. From that position, someday everyone will bow down to Jesus. No exceptions. Everyone will bow down to him, and acknowledge him as Lord.

Paul writes several passages in his many letters that set the stage for confusion and disagreement among Christians throughout the ages. In this case, Paul writes for the Philippians to, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

We don’t have time to discuss that passage to the satisfaction of everyone, but I do recommend that you spend time to study that passage. The next lines are not nearly as mysterious. Paul says for them to do everything without grumbling or arguing. Not much room for multiple interpretations of that! In any time in history!!

Seeking to reaffirm his relationship with them, he tells the Philippians that he wanted to send Timothy back to them, but in the mean time he needs Timothy to stay with him. Instead, he is sending someone else they know...me! I am to be the messenger carrying the letter in person, so they can be reassured that I am healed from my near-death situation. Paul is excited to send me because he knows I will be happy to be with them again.

The first major problem confronting the church was whether Christians had to follow the laws of Moses or not. Even a decade and a half after it was decided that Christians did not have to follow the laws of Moses, there was a remnant of the Jewish Christians who boasted that they were better Christians than others because they had been circumcised. Paul negated their claim and then gave a little new information about himself. Classic Paul.

Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin, had been a Pharisee, and followed the law faultlessly. Though that was so, in hindsight he considers all of his former way of life to be like garbage, manure. He considers everything a total loss, because in contrast he has an invaluable relationship with Christ.

Have you ever considered the relative value of your relationship with Jesus versus all of the things the world has to offer? No matter how valuable the world says things are, if you view them as garbage, they are garbage to you! Manure, even!

Okay? Okay. Not dead. didn’t pass out. Good. Great.

If you truly view your relationship with Jesus as invaluable, you will act like it.

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:12-13

## Euodia

That late evening is burned into my memory. Our little church was meeting in the house of Philemon. It was dark and only a couple of oil lamps were burning. Epaphroditus was at the front reading the letter from Paul to us. He had been reading for about ten minutes, and I was in total synch with everything he said.

I thought to myself, “Yes, we should be unified. Yes, we should be humble. Yes, we should consider the things of the world as garbage. We mostly do that. We have a few little problems, but doesn’t every church?” Smug and self-satisfied. That was me.

Paul’s letter continued with something else I agreed with. He said there was one thing he did – he forgot the past and strained forward toward the future. He pressed on toward the goal to win the prize for which God had called him. Amen, I thought. I do exactly that myself. He continued to encourage us to model our lives after true Christ followers, and not set our minds on earthly things. He reminded us that we are citizens of heaven, not citizens of earth. That our bodies will be transformed. Amen, Amen, I thought. I have not set my mind on earthly things.

I could not wait to hear more...Until I heard more.

“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” My world crashed. I couldn’t hear another word. How did Paul know about the drama with Syntyche? My contentious relationship with her, I thought, was not public knowledge.. How did he know? We who had been as close as sisters could not even talk to one another? Smugness collapsed in a fearful crash.

When Epaphroditus looked at me, I knew I had two choices. I could continue my proud, self-centered life. Or, I could repent, ask forgiveness of Syntyche, and work to unify our church again. I looked at Syntyche, and could tell she was having the same exact thoughts. Sisters. That was it. We walked toward each other, hugged, cried, and experienced the forgiveness of each other and those around us. Amazing.

I guess Paul must have known we would react like that, because his following words were written as if to only Syntyche and me. Here is what I remember from that night, “Rejoice in the Lord always! Let your gentleness be evident to all. Do not be anxious about anything...whatever is true, noble and pure, think about those things and the God of peace will be with you.”

That is what I remember from that night. Later, I got to read the letter myself, and many of Paul’s words were burned into my memory. Read the letter yourself, and let Paul’s words burn into your memory, too. Then you will feel like I do...Paul wrote the whole letter of *Philippians* just to you!