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Philippians #13

Sermon Summary #13

The Healing of Epaphroditus and Healing Today Philippians 2:25-30

My first experience with divine healing came quite suddenly and unexpectedly and with remarkable results. I was 10 years old. We had just moved into our new home in Midland, Texas. I had gone to bed somewhat early that night because of a terribly painful headache. I didn't know anything about migraines at that young age, but I suspect that's what I was suffering from. It was debilitating, almost paralyzing.

I was lying in bed trying not to move, as even the slightest of changes in my physical position would cause the pain to intensify. I don't know what prompted me to pray the way that I did, but perhaps it was the desperation I was feeling. I hadn't taken any medication up to that point. So I prayed.

Now, you need to remember that I was 10 years old. This is the way 10-year-old boys pray when they are desperate. I said, as simply as I knew how: "O.K., God, I'm going to count to three. I need you to heal me. One, Two, Three!" And it happened. I'm not talking about the slow diminishing of pain. I'm not talking about a partial alleviation of discomfort. When I spoke the number three, every last vestige of pain instantly disappeared. I was suddenly and completely healed of that horrible headache.

I honestly can't say that I had any expectation or hope that God would heal me. I had never prayed like that before. I had never witnessed a miraculous healing of any sort. All I knew is that I was in considerable pain and I needed God to help me.

The memory of that experience is indelibly imprinted in my mind. I doubt if many of us, at least those who have reached my age, remember a lot from the time they were ten. But I remember that night. I remember that shockingly instantaneous relief. I remember saying to myself, "Don't move Sam. The pain might come back." But I moved anyway, and I was fine. No pain. And then I fell asleep.

I wish I could say that this happens every time I get a headache. But it doesn't. And yes, in case you're wondering, I have on occasion prayed, "O.K., God, one, two, three!" Sadly, though, the results have not been what they were that night in 1961.

Healing is one of the greatest mysteries in the Bible. Why God heals one and not another is a mystery to me. Why God heals any at all is a mystery to me. Why God doesn't heal everyone is a mystery to me. Why God heals some who have no faith and others because of their faith, is a mystery to me. Why the non-Christian is sometimes healed and the faithful believer dies prematurely, is a mystery to me.

But I came to a conclusion a long time ago about healing. ***Whether or not I ever understand God's ways or reasons for healing or not healing, I will pray for it. Whether or not I ever again witness or personally experience a healing, I will pray for it. In other words, the conclusion to which I came is that I can never justify disobedience to Scripture on the basis of my experience or lack thereof.***

There are a lot of healing stories in Scripture, but few more instructive for us than that of Epaphroditus in Philippians 2.

Some will find it strange that I would choose to speak about Epaphroditus in a sermon on healing. After all, this episode in Philippians 2 is one of the favorite passages of those who deny that healing is for today. Cessationists invariably point to what they interpret as Paul's failure or inability to heal Epaphroditus to prove that healing was in decline even as early as midway through the first century. So what am I doing looking at it with you today?

- First of all, may I remind you that the story of Epaphroditus is in *our* Bible too! If the experience of Paul and Epaphroditus is a problem for healing today, then we need to be honest enough to face up to it and deal with it with integrity.
- Second, and more important, I am convinced that the story of Paul and Epaphroditus actually *supports* our expectations for healing today and ought to be a tremendous source of *encouragement* and *faith* when we pray for the sick.

As I've mentioned to you on several occasions, Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the Philippians, either in Rome or in Caesarea. Although earlier in our series I suggested that it was likely Caesarea, I've changed my mind. I won't share with you the reasons, but those who argue for Rome have convinced me. If you're wondering what this could possibly have to do with our story about Epaphroditus, the answer is: a whole lot. But more on that later.

What we do know for certain is that Epaphroditus was sent by the church at Philippi to the apostle Paul bearing a substantial financial gift (cf. 4:18). Upon fulfilling his commission, he stayed with Paul to minister to him in whatever way proved necessary. Either on the journey to Rome or more likely while serving at Paul's side in Rome, Epaphroditus became ill and almost died. He is now being sent back to Philippi as the bearer of this epistle.

Paul's praise of Epaphroditus is effusive. One author said that "Paul introduces Epaphroditus with a *fanfare of complimentary language*" (Thielman, 154). He speaks of him in v. 25 as "my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need."

Last week we learned something about Epaphroditus when Paul wrote of him in v. 26 that "he [Epaphroditus] has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you [Philippians] heard that he was ill". Rather than wallow in self-pity, ***Epaphroditus was worried lest the Philippians worry about him!*** Far from feeling gratified that he was the object of so much concern back home, Epaphroditus was driven to mental torment with the thought that he might be a source of grief to his Christian brethren.

Paul's praise continues. He tells the Philippians to receive him back with all joy and to "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" (vv. 29-30). Epaphroditus was a courageous man, willing to put himself in personal jeopardy in order to come to the aid of Paul and the advance of the gospel.

This is the kind of man, says Paul, whom we should honor. He is the epitome of the selfless, loving, sacrificial servant of Jesus Christ.

But why is the character of Epaphroditus and this story about him important for us today? Cessationists like to point out that evidently Paul was unable to heal Epaphroditus. "Where is the gift of healing?" they loudly and triumphantly shout. Doesn't this prove that healing was on the wane? If not even the apostle Paul could heal him, doesn't this prove that healing as a gift was on its way out as early as the middle of the first century a.d.? No, it proves no such thing.

Six Observations

1) ***It's important to keep in mind that evidently Epaphroditus was ill for a lengthy period of time.*** We know this from the fact that the Philippians had heard of his illness and he had heard that they had heard (v.26). If Paul wrote this letter from Rome, as I now believe he did, considerable time would have elapsed while word of Epaphroditus's illness was taken back to Philippi, not to mention the time it took for a messenger to return to Rome with news of how the Philippians had responded to their brother's illness. Rome was over 800 miles from Philippi. Certainly several weeks, if not months, would have passed from the time Epaphroditus fell sick to the time he received word that the Philippians were grieving over his condition.

I should point out that some have tried to get around this. First, some have argued that Epaphroditus probably traveled with several companions in his journey from Philippi to Rome, and that he could have

fallen ill along the way. One of his companions might then have immediately returned to Philippi with the news of Epaphroditus's condition.

But of course all this is pure speculation that finds no basis in the text. The point of the passage is to inform us that Epaphroditus was aware of their reaction to his illness. That is the only thing that could account for his distress. But how could he have known their reaction unless someone first returned to Philippi with news of his illness and then returned yet again to Rome to inform Epaphroditus and Paul of how they had responded?

Others think of the scenario this way:

- Epaphroditus travels to Rome and falls ill upon his arrival
- A messenger departs from Rome for Philippi with news of his condition
- Epaphroditus is healed immediately after they leave
- By the time the Philippians hear of his illness they are unaware that he is already fully recovered
- A messenger returns to Rome and tells Epaphroditus how upset they are at news of his condition
- Epaphroditus is distressed that they are distressed, especially given the fact that they shouldn't be; after all, he is now fully healed

The problem with this view is that we read of no such reaction from Epaphroditus or Paul when the messenger from Philippi arrived back in Rome. If Epaphroditus had been healed much earlier, wouldn't we have expected Paul to say something like: "When Epaphroditus heard that they were upset about his sickness he said, 'What a waste of energy! I'm fine. Too bad they don't know I'm fully recovered.'" But as I read the passage it seems more likely that Epaphroditus was still suffering when news reached him that the Philippians were upset.

Some of you have been sick for a long time. Worse than Epaphroditus, some of you have been suffering for years. You've grown weary of it, weary of the pain, weary of the inconvenience, frustrated with not being able to do what you want to do. Like Epaphroditus, who went to Rome to help Paul and then found himself to be the one who needed help, you have wanted to serve and minister only to find that you are the constant focus of other people's prayer and concern. Perhaps you've grown to doubt God's goodness. Perhaps you've become secretly suspicious that maybe those cessationists are right after all. I wonder if Epaphroditus had those same thoughts and doubts and fears and frustrations? Can you identify with Epaphroditus?

2) ***Epaphroditus was not sick because of some personal sin or the lack of faith.*** If he had sinned so grievously as to become deathly ill, ***would Paul have held him up as the epitome of the godly, selfless servant?*** Look again closely at v. 29. Perhaps Paul said this precisely because the Philippians might be tempted to judge Epaphroditus for being ill, concluding that he was being chastised by God for some secret or even scandalous sin. Paul says, No. We simply don't know why Epaphroditus was so sick, aside from the statement in v. 30 that "he came close to death *for the work of Christ*."

Just as there is no evidence for some particular sin he committed to explain his life-threatening illness, neither is there any indication of a lack of faith in Epaphroditus.

Nor is there evidence of a lack of faith in Paul. This scenario unfolded in spite of what must have been robust and lively faith in both men.

Is it possible to suffer illness as a result of sin? Absolutely. We see this in both 1 Corinthians 11 and James 5. ***Is it possible to suffer illness that is unrelated to personal sin? Yes.*** Epaphroditus is a case in point. ***So too is Timothy!*** Look with me at 1 Timothy 5:22-23.

"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Timothy 5:22-23).

Evidently Timothy practiced total abstinence, perhaps in deference to those who sought to bring some accusation against him. Others believe that Timothy's enemies in Ephesus were given to drunkenness and

that he deliberately gave up alcohol in order to distance himself from their sinful excess. We can't be certain of this, but what we do know from this passage is that ***Timothy, Paul's spiritual son, one of the godliest of men in the NT, suffered from lingering "ailments" and especially from stomach problems.*** There are several things we can learn from this.

First, Paul's counsel is that he drink a "little" wine, not a lot. The rule of Scripture, whether one drinks for pleasure or because of pain, is ***moderation***. Of course, if you choose not to drink at all, that too is perfectly fine.

Second, wine obviously had beneficial medicinal effects. J. N. D. Kelly explains:

"The beneficial effects of wine as a remedy against dyspeptic complaints, as a tonic, and as counteracting the effects of impure water, were widely recognized in antiquity, and modern travelers in Mediterranean countries have confirmed its value for the third at any rate of these purposes. The author of Proverbs (xxxi.6) advises its use for maladies of both body and soul; Hippocrates recommends moderate draughts of wine for a patient for whose stomach water alone is dangerous; and Plutarch states that wine is the most useful of drinks and the pleasantest of medicines."

Third, ***there is no indication that Timothy's stomach problems and "frequent ailments" (v. 23) were the result of personal sin.*** Indeed, if Timothy was such a repeat offender, so to speak, that he was ***frequently*** ailing, why did Paul select him as his apostolic legate and representative? Why didn't Paul rebuke him for his sins and call him to repentance? Paul repeatedly commends Timothy's performance and character in the epistles addressed to him.

Fourth, clearly Paul did not want Timothy to acquiesce to his physical problems. He believes it is right for Timothy to experience health and wholeness and thus recommends an accepted medical remedy.

The important point to remember from the examples of both Epaphroditus and Timothy is that God can heal you regardless of the cause of your illness. You may *never* know why you were sick. The issue is: will you seek the Father's touch for your healing?

3) ***Illness and death are not to be viewed with indifference or accepted stoically or unemotionally.*** Paul's response to his friend's illness and near death was "sorrow upon sorrow" (v. 27). The apostle Paul knew that nothing befalls God's children without passing through his loving hands. He knew that God works all things according to the counsel of his will. But this did not lead him to write off Epaphroditus's illness as unchangeable or beyond healing. Paul's belief in the sovereignty of God did not lead him to cease interceding for Epaphroditus or give up hope for his healing. There is urgency in Paul's words, a passion, a commitment to pray for Epaphroditus's healing until either divine revelation or death indicates otherwise.

Now, could it have been the will of God that Epaphroditus suffer in this way and even ultimately die from it? Yes. But Paul had no knowledge of such.

As I have said to you many times before, or more accurately as my friend Jack Taylor has said to *me* many times before: ***always assume it is God's will to heal unless shown otherwise by divine revelation or death.*** If God doesn't say "stop praying," or if the person doesn't die, keep on praying. Have some of you given up? Have you passively resigned yourself to live with your affliction? Have you embraced it as your cross to bear? Don't!

4) ***Not even the Apostle Paul could heal everyone at will.*** Few doubt that Paul had a "gift" for healing. But his prayers for Epaphroditus were not answered, at least not at first. ***Paul could not heal at will.*** But so what? Aside from Jesus, no one else could either! And there is doubt if even Jesus could (read John 5:19; Mark 6:5-6).

This story is an excellent example of how I believe healing operates in the body of Christ. I spoke to you about this when we were in 1 Corinthians 12-14, but it deserves to be closely considered again.

The significant thing about 1 Corinthians 12:9,28 is that both “gift” and “healing” are plural and lack the definite article. In other words, **Paul doesn’t say, “the gift of healing,” but rather “gifts of healings”**. Evidently Paul did not envision that a person would be endowed with one healing gift operative at all times for all diseases. His language suggests either many different gifts or powers of healing, each appropriate to and effective for its related illness, or each occurrence of healing constituting a distinct or separate gift in its own right.

I’ve had the opportunity on numerous occasions to meet people who have what appears to be a healing anointing for one particular affliction. Some are able to pray more effectively for those with back problems while others see more success when praying for migraine headaches. This may be what Paul had in mind when he spoke of “gifts” of “healings”.

One of the principal obstacles to a proper understanding of healing is the erroneous assumption that if anyone could *ever* heal, he could *always* heal. But in view of the lingering illness of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30), Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23), Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20), and perhaps Paul himself (2 Cor. 12:7-10; Gal. 4:13), it is better to view this gift as ***subject to the will of God***, not the will of people. Therefore, a person may be gifted to heal many people, but not all. Another may be gifted to heal only one person at one particular time of one particular disease.

When asked to pray for the sick, people are often heard to respond: “I can’t. I don’t have the gift of healing.” But if my reading of Paul is correct, ***there is no such thing as the gift of healing, if by that one means the God-given ability to heal everyone of every disease on every occasion. Rather, the Spirit sovereignly distributes “a” charisma/gift of healing for a particular occasion, even though previous prayers for physical restoration under similar circumstances may not have been answered, and even though subsequent prayers for the same affliction may not be answered. In sum: “gifts of healings” are occasional and subject to the sovereign purposes of God.***

Try to envision this scenario. A friend comes to you and asks that you pray for them to be healed. God looks on this situation and, in effect, says: “My desire is that your friend be healed. Here, I am providing you with a gift for a healing.” In response, you pray effectively and the person is healed. That’s wonderful! But if another friend comes to you immediately thereafter and asks for prayer, there’s no guarantee that the result will be the same. God may provide you with “a” gift for the healing of one but choose not to provide you with “a” gift for the healing of another.

Everyone talks about Epaphroditus in this story, but how do you think Paul felt while this was going on? Was he confused, in doubt, or frustrated? After all, toward the end of his life, in Acts 28:9 he healed everyone on the island of Malta who came to him. If Paul was distressed that Epaphroditus was ill, almost unto death, and that initially his prayers for him were ineffective, I doubt seriously if the apostle would have drawn the same conclusions that modern cessationists do. Paul understood the occasional nature of gifts of healings. Thus I’m sure Paul persevered in his prayers for his friend.

5) ***God did heal him!*** The delay in responding to Paul's prayers was not to be interpreted as ultimate denial. I'm amazed that the opponents of divine healing would appeal to this story to support their case. After all, **Epaphroditus got healed!** Far from suggesting that healing was no longer operative in the early church, this verse proves it was!

Some cessationists will respond by saying, “Oh, we *do* believe God still heals. We just don’t believe in divine healers.” But neither do I! As I just pointed out, there never was any such thing as a “divine healer” if by that you mean someone who was gifted to heal anyone at any time. Furthermore, doesn’t it make sense to conclude that Epaphroditus was healed by God *in response to the prayers* of either Paul or the Philippians or all of them combined?

6) ***Paul attributes the healing of Epaphroditus to divine mercy.*** Two things are of importance here.

- The fact that healing is an expression of divine **mercy** (v. 27) means that it should never be viewed as a “right”. Healing is not the payment of a debt. God does not *owe* us healing. We don’t deserve healing. I believe we should have faith for healing. But ***there is a vast difference between faith in divine mercy and presumption based on an alleged right.***

- The word translated "mercy" is the same one used in the gospels to describe why Jesus healed people while he was on the earth. The point is that God's motive for healing hasn't changed! The primary reason God healed through Jesus prior to Pentecost was because he is a merciful, compassionate God. And the primary reason God continues to heal after Pentecost is because he is a merciful, compassionate God. God is no less merciful, no less compassionate, no less caring when it comes to the physical condition of his people after Pentecost than he was before Pentecost.

So why doesn't God heal more than he does? I don't know. But I'm not going to allow my ignorance or the silence of Scripture or the mystery surrounding healing to justify disobedience to the word of God.

So let's pray!