

*EPAPHRODITUS AND THE GIFT FROM PHILIPPI.*

IN this paper I shall endeavour, by expounding a few verses of the Epistle to the Philippians, to reproduce a most interesting and instructive episode in the Church life of the first century, and to pay a deserved tribute of honour to a little-known but very admirable contemporary and friend of the Apostle Paul.

The letter bears marks of the prison in which it was written (Phil. i. 7, 13). That St. Paul refers twice to his *bonds*, that he does not tell his readers that he is in prison, but assumes that they know it and speaks only of the results of his imprisonment, suggests that it was no passing incident, but had lasted for some time. That in vers. 20-26 he lingers over the alternative of *life* or *death*, suggests that his life then hung in the balance. Ver. 26 reveals a good hope of release. And chapter ii. 23, *So soon as I shall see how it will go with me*, suggests that a crisis was at hand.

The implied length of the imprisonment compels us to suppose that the letter was written not later than St. Paul's arrest at Jerusalem. For we have no hint of any long imprisonment earlier than that event. The probable reference in chapter i. 13 to *the Prætorian Guard*, and the mention in chapter iv. 22 of *Cæsar's household*, support strongly the universal tradition that the Epistle was written from Rome.

We shall find that not only had news of St. Paul's imprisonment reached Philippi, but that after some delay a contribution for him had been made and sent to Rome; that the messenger had been seriously ill; that the Philippian Christians had heard this; and that he knew that they had heard it, and was therefore anxious to return. All this implies a lapse of at least several months between

the Apostle's arrival at Rome and the writing of this Epistle.

That the Epistle was an acknowledgment of a gift sent from Philippi to St. Paul at Rome by the hand of Epaphroditus is placed beyond doubt by chapter iv. 10, 14; and especially by ver. 18, *Having received from Epaphroditus the things from you*. News of the Apostle's arrival as a prisoner at Rome would easily and quickly reach Philippi. For between Rome and this Roman colony there was good communication along the Appian Way and Trajan's Way to Brundisium, across the narrow straits, and then along the Egnatian Way; and travellers on this familiar route were many. The words *now at length* in chapter iv. 10 imply delay. But the delay was by no means the fault of the Philippian Christians: *Ye did take thought, but ye lacked opportunity*. The lack of opportunity reminds us of the difficulty of sending money in ancient days. From St. Paul's words we learn that the news of his imprisonment and want at once filled the Christians at Philippi with solicitude on his behalf, and with an eager desire to help, but that difficulty of communication prevented for a time this desire from taking practical form. This mental activity on his behalf is accurately described by the Greek word *φρονεῖν*, a favourite with the Apostle, and in the New Testament with him only, and a note of the genuineness of this Epistle. (See Rom. viii. 5; xi. 20; xii. 3 twice, 16 twice; xiv. 6 twice; xv. 5, etc.)

At length an opportunity of sending help occurs. A good Christian man, whose name we never meet except in this Epistle, is going to Rome. Whether he undertook this journey simply in order to carry the gift his brethren had long and vainly wished to send, or whether other business led him to the metropolis, we have no means of knowing. In any case, Epaphroditus is going to Rome. And the Christians at Philippi resolve to send by him help for the

great teacher to whom they owed so much. From chapter iv. 18 we infer that the gift was large: *I have all things, and abound: I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the things from you.* Certainly it was as large as St. Paul needed. If, as is probable, the Christians at Philippi were as poor as the others in the province of Macedonia, and if these were as poor at this time as, in 2 Corinthians viii. 2, St. Paul says they were a few years earlier, their *deep poverty* would immensely increase the significance and worth of this abundant gift. We may suppose that the contribution was quickly made, and that Epaphroditus was soon on his way with it to the prisoner at Rome.

The gift filled St. Paul with joy: *I rejoiced greatly,* (Phil. iv. 10). And his joy was *in the Lord*; i.e. it was no ordinary human gladness, such as that caused by supply of bodily need, but a joy which had direct relation to the Master whom he served, the Master's personality being, as it were, the surrounding element of the servant's joy. The money sent from Philippi revealed the genuineness and strength of the Christian life of St. Paul's converts there, the power of Christ to change the hearts of men, and the truth of the Gospel which St. Paul preached. It thus gave to him a firmer confidence and richer joy in Christ.

Similarly, as he tells us in chapter i. 14, St. Paul's imprisonment gave to the more part of the Christians at Rome a fuller confidence in Christ; they were *trusting in the Lord through my bonds.* For so close is the relation between Christ and His servants, that whatever they do or suffer in obedience to Him reveals to themselves and to others His presence and glory.

It has often been noticed that among all the Epistles of St. Paul that to the Philippians is pre-eminently marked by joy. Although written in the gloom of a dungeon, and under shadow of the gallows, it is at many points irradiated by a brightness Divine. So chapter i. 4, 18, 25;

ii. 2, 17, 18, 28, 29 ; iii. 1 ; iv. 1, 4 twice, 10. And we can well conceive that this vein of gladness was prompted chiefly by the evidence afforded in the money brought by Epaphroditus of the spiritual power of the Gospel, and of the success of St. Paul's work. So rich a harvest from seed sown in tears might well fill the sower's heart with joy. We wonder not that in chapter iv. 1 he speaks of these loving children in the faith as his *joy and crown*, and that his letter to them overflows with joy on their behalf.

Inasmuch as the gift from Philippi was a natural out-working of the Christian life operating according to its own organic laws, the Apostle describes it in a metaphor taken from vegetable growth : *Ye have revived, or caused to sprout, your thought on my behalf.* For a time want of opportunity prevented this manifestation of the Christian life. But the life was there. And when the hindrance was removed, like the torpor of winter retiring at the approach of spring, the old stock burst forth into new foliage and fruit. Another form of the same metaphor meets us in ver. 17 : *I seek for the fruit which increaseth to your account.*

By making this contribution, the Christians at Philippi, as we read in ver. 14, *had fellowship with St. Paul's affliction.* For by submitting to the self-denial involved in their gift to him they placed themselves to this extent under the burden of imprisonment and want which was pressing upon him, and thus helped him to bear it.

Their gift is called in ver. 18 *an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.* For Christ had already said, as recorded in Matthew xxv. 40, *Inasmuch as ye did it to one of these My brethren, ye did it to Me.* And whatever is done for Christ is an offering laid upon the altar of God. The phrase, *odour of sweet smell*, recalls at once the same words as a sort of refrain at the close of the prescription for each of three kinds of sacrifice in Leviticus i. 9, 13, 17, and elsewhere. And certainly the gracefulness of the gift from

Philippi, pleasant to God and to man, was a perfume more fragrant than all the Levitical ritual.

The Apostle reminds his readers that the gift for which he now thanks them was not their first gift to him. Long ago, *at the beginning of the Gospel*, when St. Paul first preached at Philippi and Thessalonica and then *went forth from Macedonia* to Athens and Corinth, the Philippian Christians sent a contribution for his support while preaching the Gospel in another province. This is a most interesting coincidence with 2 Corinthians xi. 9, *When I was present with you, and was in want, . . . the brethren, when they came from Macedonia, supplied the measure of my want.* From the Epistle before us we learn that this Macedonian liberality was entirely from Philippi: *No Church except ye only.* Even this was not their first gift. St. Paul reminds them that before he left Macedonia they sent a gift to him *at Thessalonica.* More even than this. During his short stay there they sent *twice* to supply his *need.*

The above casual and evidently undesigned coincidences between this Epistle and the second Epistle to the Corinthians and the Book of Acts strongly confirm our other abundant proof of the genuineness of these Epistles and of the historic truthfulness of the Book of Acts.

Once more. In 2 Corinthians viii. 1, 2, St. Paul speaks in glowing terms about the liberality of the Macedonian Christians in the great contribution he was then organizing among the Gentiles for the poor of the Christians at Jerusalem, holding them up as an example to the Christians at Corinth. We have here no mention of Philippi. But the earlier and later gifts of the Christians there suggest irresistibly that also in this contribution they took a leading part. If so, we have five distinct gifts from Philippi: two to St. Paul at Thessalonica, one to him at Corinth, one for the Christians at Jerusalem, and one for St. Paul at Rome.

These incidents taken together are full of significance, and present to us a most beautiful and instructive picture of early Christian generosity. The Christians at Philippi did a good work, which no one around them had done before. They made a contribution to enable one who had taught them to teach others at a distance from themselves. And by so doing they gained the high honour of opening up a new path of Christian well-doing. Moreover their liberality was no passing emotion. Long years afterwards, and when St. Paul was so far away that they could not render him practical aid, they were eager to do so; and did so at the first opportunity. Their thoughtful care for the Apostle not only sprang up and bore fruit at once, but its fruitfulness continued undiminished after the lapse of many years. Once more. The generosity of the Philippian Christians was not limited to kindness towards St. Paul. They who so readily contributed to supply the needs of the great Apostle, to whom they owed so much, contributed also to supply the needs of men to whom they owed nothing whatever, whom they had never seen, and whose attitude towards themselves had been rather hostile than friendly. For their liberality was prompted, not by human gratitude, but by love to Christ and to those for whom Christ had died.

It has often been noticed that among the Churches addressed by St. Paul, the Christians at Philippi occupy the highest place. Except a passing reference to a misunderstanding between two persons whom otherwise he commends, his letter to the Philippians contains no word of reproof and not many words of warning—a conspicuous contrast to most of his letters to Churches. He tells them, in chapter i. 3-5, that his every prayer for them is made with joy; the reason of his joy being their spirit of brotherhood for the spread of the Gospel, a brotherliness which began with the beginning of their Christian life and con-

tinues to the present hour. We notice here on a wider scale the early development and the constancy already noticed in the one detail of generosity. The coincidence is not accidental. Gold perishes. But gold represents material good. Consequently a man's dealings with money reveal his conception of material good, and thus reveal his inmost character. The gifts of the Christians at Philippi were prompted by genuine and intelligent love, the central virtue of the Christian life. And the love which prompted them bore fruit also in all other directions; or, rather, it wrought in them a rich and full development of Christian excellence. Thus the spiritual pre-eminence of the Church at Philippi reveals the sacredness of Christian giving. This does not imply any unfair advantage to the rich. For the spiritual worth of giving is in inverse proportion to the wealth of the giver. The liberal givers in this case were probably poor. But it points out to the rich, and to all men, a pathway they must tread if they are to climb the heights of real Christian excellence.

The spiritual importance of generosity St. Paul knew well. Hence his joy at the gift from Philippi. For he tells us in chapter iv. 17 that in his joy he is thinking, not about the supply of his own temporal need, but of the harvest of spiritual blessing which the gift is working out for the givers.

We now return to Epaphroditus, the bearer of the gift from Philippi. St. Paul speaks of him in chapter ii. 25 as *your apostle*. This designation sheds light upon the title given by Christ, as recorded in Luke vi. 13, to the highest rank (1 Cor. xii. 28) of His servants. Just as they were commissioned by Him to bear to all men everywhere the good news of life, so Epaphroditus was commissioned by the Christians at Philippi to carry their gift to St. Paul. A similar use of the same word is found in 2 Corinthians viii. 23: *apostles of Churches*.

Another title of honour is given to Epaphroditus. St. Paul calls him *your minister of my need*. The Greek word here used, *leitουργός*, and a cognate word with the same reference in ver. 30, are different from, and stronger than, the word commonly in the New Testament translated *minister*; and denote a public officer, or some one who renders service to the State. The same word is regularly used in the Septuagint, e.g. Exodus xxviii. 35, 43, etc., as the title of the priests, the public and official servants of God in the ritual of the Old Covenant. A similar, but proportionately greater, honour St. Paul claims for himself in Romans xv. 16, where, using the same word, he calls himself *a public-minister of Jesus Christ*; and explains this title by saying that to proclaim *the Gospel of God* is his public and sacred and priestly work, and that *the offering* he desires to present to God is nothing less than the Gentiles consecrated to His service.

A similar title of honour St. Paul now gives to Epaphroditus. By so doing he reminds his readers, that in bringing their gift to Rome he was performing on their behalf a public and sacred work, *viz.* the supply of St. Paul's need. This work the Christians at Philippi would themselves have performed by personal attention to St. Paul. But this personal help, distance prevented them from rendering. The *lack* (ver. 30) of it Epaphroditus supplied by bringing their money to the imprisoned Apostle. Doubtless this word was chosen in order to emphasise the importance and dignity and sacredness of the work committed to Epaphroditus.

In discharging the duty laid upon him by the Church at Philippi, the messenger fell seriously ill: *He was sick nigh to death; . . . he came near to death, hazarding his life in order to make up for the absence of your ministry towards me.* The details of this illness are unknown to us. Possibly, in his haste to reach and relieve the prisoner, Epa-



phroditus exposed himself to inclement weather on the journey. Or perhaps, in his attention to St. Paul at Rome, he exposed himself to infection. In any case the risk was knowingly encountered, with the express purpose of rendering to the Apostle the service which distance prevented the Christians at Philippi from rendering. Well might St. Paul speak in ver. 30 of such risk as encountered *because of the work of Christ*. For that which is done and suffered to aid the workers is done for the Master.

The news of the illness of Epaphroditus had reached Philippi: and he knew this. An ordinary man would have been glad that they who sent him knew at how great risk and cost he had discharged their mission. But Epaphroditus was filled with sorrow. This sorrow reveals an exceedingly noble character. It was a mark of genuine unselfishness. He who has risked his life to help the great Apostle is troubled that his sickness has caused trouble to others. He would have preferred to suffer alone. And, since his friends at home are already troubled on his account, his care for them makes him wishful, now that apparently he is again well, to return and by his own presence to dispel their fears on his behalf. This wish to return was prompted by a sentiment so noble, that St. Paul felt that he had no choice but to comply: *Necessary I deemed it to send Epaphroditus*.

The recovery of the sick man, St. Paul attributes, in ver. 27, to the *mercy of God* towards the sufferer and towards himself. This reveals his faith that even the uncertainties of human life are under the control of God. So does his request in 2 Thessalonians iii. 1, 2 for his readers' prayer that he may be preserved from bodily danger. We cannot infer from the above that St. Paul knew of the illness while Epaphroditus was in danger, and prayed for his recovery; although this is quite possible, and not unlikely. For in any case, whether or not the danger

was known to the Apostle, the recovery of the sick man was an act of Divine mercy both to him and to St. Paul.

That Epaphroditus is called a *fellow-worker*, we can easily understand ; for St. Paul was essentially a worker, and all his companions shared his toil. But the precise reference of *fellow-soldier* is not quite clear. The same title is in Philemon 2 given to Archippus. Doubtless Epaphroditus would bravely stand beside the prisoner at Rome, and encounter cheerfully whatever risk or hardship this involved. Therefore, naturally, in the conflict of the Christian life, the Apostle calls him a companion in arms.

Notice that St. Paul recognises, and bids his readers recognise, the work done and spirit shown by this brave fellow-soldier : *Hold such in honour*. That honour will be paid while the world lasts.

Put together now the whole story of the gift from Philippi and the journey of Epaphroditus, and we have an incident of surpassing beauty from the life of the early Church. At Philippi we find corporate church life of the highest excellence ; and in Epaphroditus we have a private member worthy of the noble Church he represented.

We go in thought, perhaps about the close of the year in which St. Paul arrived a prisoner at Rome, to Philippi. Less than eleven years ago three Jewish strangers visited this Roman colony. They remained a few weeks, until the scourging and imprisonment of two of them made their departure expedient. But the seed sown during that short sojourn had taken deep root. Loving and liberal hearts followed the strangers to other cities of Macedonia, and even beyond the limits of that province. Some six years later St. Paul again visited Philippi, and was overjoyed at the eagerness there manifested to support his great project of a contribution for the poor among the Christians at Jerusalem. The next year, as we learn from Acts xx. 6, on his way to Jerusalem with the completed collection,

St. Paul spent Easter in the bosom of the same beloved Church. Doubtless there, as at Miletus,<sup>1</sup> he spoke of the fears with which he looked forward to his arrival in the city which had now become the citadel of his foes. His subsequent arrest at Jerusalem must have come to the ears of his friends at Philippi. And lately they have heard that he is a prisoner at Rome and in want.

The Church is eager to send help. But no one is able to go to Rome. And none but a personal messenger can carry money safely.

Thus passed, in vain solicitude, some months. At last a messenger is found. Epaphroditus is going, or is able and willing to go, to Rome, and offers to carry help to the prisoner. A large gift is soon collected; and amid the blessings of the Church, and doubtless with many greetings for the Apostle, Epaphroditus starts along the great Roman road towards Rome; but either before or after his arrival there, and in consequence of his loyalty to his trust, the messenger is overtaken by serious illness, and his life is in danger. But his charge is performed. The contribution is duly given to the prisoner.

This unexpected mark of Christian sympathy fills the Apostle with joy. He longs to thank his benefactors. Moreover Epaphroditus is now well, and is troubled to hear that tidings of his illness have reached his friends at Philippi. How great will be their loving anxiety on his behalf, he knows well. He is therefore eager to dispel their fears by his personal presence among them again. This desire St. Paul approves. The opportunity thus afforded, he also resolves to use by sending to his friends at Philippi a worthy acknowledgment of their kindness to him. With this reply, a gift infinitely more precious than that which he brought from Philippi, Epaphroditus starts on his homeward journey. The joy caused by his return, and the

<sup>1</sup> Acts xx. 23.

effect of this wonderful letter when first read in the Church at Philippi, are hidden from us. And we may almost say that with this letter the Church itself passes from our view. To-day, in silent meadows quiet cattle browse among the few ruins which mark the site of what was once the flourishing Roman colony of Philippi, the home of the most attractive Church of the apostolic age. But the name and fame and spiritual influence of that Church will never pass. To myriads of men and women in every age and nation, the letter written in a dungeon at Rome and carried along the Egnatian Way by an obscure Christian messenger, has been a light Divine, and a cheerful guide along the most rugged paths in life. As I watch, and myself rejoice in, the brightness of that far-shining light, and glance at those silent ruins, I see fulfilled an ancient prophecy: *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*

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RECENT ENGLISH LITERATURE ON THE NEW  
TESTAMENT.

PATRISTIC TEXTS.—The Cambridge University press has issued for Prof. Rendel Harris and the Johns Hopkins University a very complete and beautiful edition of *The Teaching of the Apostles*. This edition indeed may be said to take rank as the *editio princeps* of this important relic of primitive Christianity; for not only does it present a carefully edited text, but it gives photographs of the entire MS., so that any one can satisfy himself as to the correctness of the text. These photographs are beautifully executed, and will do something towards inducing curators of MSS. to follow Prof. Harris' advice, and insure by photography that, if important historical monuments disappear by fire or otherwise, we shall have guaranteed duplicates to refer to. Not only does Prof. Harris give us in this volume an assured text, but the notes he