

“Meaningful Risks”

Philippians 2:19-30

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RISK AND SACRIFICE

Let me start with a moment of honest confession – I love the book of Philippians, but I have had some trouble getting excited about today’s passage. At the beginning of the week, I didn’t like this text at all. I had a professor in seminary who had no patience for my tantrums. Whenever I would tell him that I didn’t like a particular passage, he’d not-so-gently remind me that the things I don’t like are probably the things I most need to “do business with.” In other words, if I want to skip over a passage, that’s probably a good reason to camp out on exactly that part of the Bible and wrestle with the question of why I want to avoid it.

Today’s passage has had me thinking about sacrifice and risk a lot this week. Specifically, I was trying to come up with a good example of a time that I took a big risk or made a huge sacrifice. As it turns out, I don’t have any. My life is profoundly safe and comfortable. I live in middle-class, suburban America. It’s remarkably easy for me to avoid risk and sacrifice. I know there are people here who have chosen a life full of risk and sacrifice – police officers, firefighters, military members and their families all come to mind – but unless we choose it, most of us can get by like I have, living in a world that’s reasonably well-insulated from either risk or sacrifice. That’s the hard truth I didn’t want to face.

My personal philosophy on risk is that I can appreciate the occasional well-calculated risk. And by that, I mean to say that I can on very rare occasions do things that carry almost no real risk. I only go for the illusion of risk. One of the life lessons I learned very early on was to “maximize your opportunity, minimize your risk.” For better or worse (and I think there are both good and bad applications of it), that mindset has informed most of my choices in life. I spent the first half of the week questioning whether I’m normal in my view of risk. Are we all living in a risk-averse society? Or am I some kind of risk-ostrich with my head in the sand?

First thing Wednesday morning, I did something I do most mornings – skim through a variety of news outlets across the political spectrum to see what’s going on the world. I found a lot of the types of articles that most of you read this week: ongoing commentary about Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s wedding, play-by-play volleys of our trade dispute with China, speculation about the president’s now canceled trip to North Korea, another wave of sexual misconduct allegations in Hollywood. They were interesting enough stories, but one jumped off the page. On the right-hand side of CNN’s homepage, there was a video of the volcano in Hawaii. Two lines below, I saw the most startling headline I had read in a while – “Man defending Hawaii home from volcano is hit by flaming lava bomb.”¹ I’m a curious person, and this raised a lot of questions for me. Questions like, how do you defend your home from a volcano? And, who would try to fight a volcano? What’s a lava bomb? How do you survive being hit by a lava bomb? But more importantly, whoever this guy is, he’s clearly on the opposite end of the riskiness spectrum from me. I just had to know more of his story...

¹ Scott McLean, "Man Defending Hawaii Home Is Hit by Lava Bomb," CNN, May 23, 2018, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/22/us/hawaii-residents-lava-bombs/index.html>.

“You might want to step back,” said Darryl Clinton as yet another explosion boomed nearby.

He seemed to know exactly what that sound meant. A fissure that violently cracked open the earth's surface was spewing more lava and, possibly, more lava bombs -- flying chunks of molten rock.

Clinton spoke to CNN on Friday, while defending two homes in Pahoa roughly 100 yards from the unstable fissure that's been erupting for more than a week now.

To get from one house to another took a life-or-death game of frogger.

Clinton pointed to the remains of one lava bomb purged from a nearby fissure that landed just inches from a friend's house. The yard was littered every few feet with fallen lava, but Clinton wasn't worried about getting hit by the hunks of molten rock.

"It's almost like catching a football," Clinton said in describing how to avoid being hit. "But you don't want to catch this football.""

The article goes on to describe how, *“armed with just a fire extinguisher and a garden hose, Clinton defended the homes of friends”* until, while talking on his cell phone, he was struck by one of these lava bombs, which shattered and burned his leg. At the end of the article, Mr. Clinton says that *“in spite of his injuries... he has no regrets about putting himself in harm's way. Up until the point he was hit, the risk of injury seemed low enough to warrant trying to save the homes...”*

With all due respect to Mr. Darryl Clinton of Hawaii, I'm not sure I agree. I think Mr. Clinton and I are great examples of two bad options – me, taking no risks whatsoever and sacrificing next to nothing, and Mr. Clinton, taking some pretty major risks and recklessly sacrificing his health and wellness for the sake of a building. What I've learned this week, is that the Apostle Paul is going to show us a third and better way – taking big risks and making the ultimate sacrifice for the best reason of all – the gospel.

PAUL

If you've been with us over the past several weeks, you know what's happened up to this point. In case you've missed some or all of the beginning of this sermon series, let's do a really quick recap. Paul is definitely in prison somewhere. It's likely that this prison is in Rome, though some scholars suggest alternate locations. He is writing to the church at Philippi. This is a church that already knows and loves Paul. The Philippians somehow heard about Paul's imprisonment and were praying for him. In addition, they sent one of their own, a man named Epaphroditus, to care for Paul. In that time and culture, unlike ours, prisoners were not cared for by the government. Whatever they needed to survive – including food – would have been supplied by friends and family.² That the Philippians had sent this kind of aid to Paul shows us the depth and sincerity of their relationship with him. That warmth and mutual affection is reflected over and over by Paul as his letter back to them is bursting with his own joy and with encouragement for the Philippians to live lives marked by joy, even in the face of adversity.

We have spent several weeks working through Philippians 1:1-2:18 in smaller chunks, and sometimes that can make us believe (wrongly) that there's not any continuity between the sections. And indeed, I was guilty of that early in the week. When I read just verses 19-30, it was dry and boring and didn't seem to have a whole lot of practical or theological value to it. But I needed to remember, and so I want to remind you, that Philippians 2:19-30 doesn't stand on its own; it exists as part of a larger letter to a congregation that Paul loved deeply and longed for

² Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 276.

earnestly. Without context, it's a seemingly random travelogue. In context, Paul is illustrating the teachings he has already given the Philippians. In his words about Timothy and Epaphroditus, he is setting them both up as models of how the Philippians ought to live: Timothy is going to be the example of the Christian life as a life of service for others, and Epaphroditus will be the example of the lengths to which that service should go.

TIMOTHY (2:19-24)

Verses 19-24 relate to Paul's plans to send Timothy to Philippi. Throughout the New Testament, we can learn a lot about Timothy. We know that he was a believer from Lystra, a city in the region of Galatia, which is part of modern-day Turkey (Acts 16:1). His mother was a Jewish Christian, and his father was Greek (Acts 16:1). He joined Paul on what is often called the second missionary journey (Acts 16-20). He was sent by Paul to settle problems in the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10). He led the church at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). He co-wrote, or at least co-sent, several letters with Paul (1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians).

We know that the believers in Lystra spoke highly of him (Acts 16:2). But Paul goes even farther in his descriptions. In 1 Corinthians, he calls Timothy "my beloved and faithful child in the Lord" (4:17); in 1 Timothy, Paul calls him "my loyal child in the faith" (1:2); in today's passage, he says Timothy has worked "as a son with his father... in the work of the gospel" (22). It's important to note that there are two equally good and common ways of saying "son" in Greek. One of them points more toward the status of sonship, the person who is the heir to the father's estate. The other has to do with relationship; it's the child you love and nurture and care for. Paul uses the latter when talking about Timothy. Timothy is Paul's beloved son in the work of the gospel. This is sometimes true today, but even more so in the Greco-Roman world, sons learned the family trade by working alongside their fathers. It was an act of passing the torch to the next generation and pouring all his knowledge and experience into his son. When Paul says he plans to send Timothy to the Philippians, he is promising them the very best he has to offer. Timothy's presence is basically an extension of Paul's own presence, which he hopes will come soon after.

Paul's description of Timothy reminds me a bit of the first-century version of the bragging that takes over my Facebook news feed every day, but especially at this time of year. My friends who are parents share countless photos and videos of their children winning awards, scoring a last-minute goal, performing in a play or concert, getting trophies and ribbons of all kinds as the school year comes to a close. I don't blame them for doing that. These parents are so proud of their kids that they can't not share how awesome their kids are. Paul has the same feeling towards Timothy. When Paul looks at Timothy, it's that parental pride that makes him bubble over with joy – Timothy is the absolute best! In Paul's words, there is "no one like him" (2:20). But what is it that makes Timothy so special?

Paul has already written about how some people preach Christ from "envy and rivalry" (1:15) and out of "selfish ambition" (1:17). He warns the Philippians against acting out of "selfish ambition or conceit" (2:3) and to "look not to [their] own interests" (2:4). He continues, telling them to "do all things without murmuring or arguing" (2:14) and points out that they are living "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (2:15).

In a world full of selfishness, conceitedness, complaining, strife, and perversion, Paul is going to hold Timothy up as the counter-example. Timothy embodies what he wants for the Philippians – Christlikeness. Over against those who are rival preachers working from selfish

ambitions, Timothy has been laboring for Christ alongside Paul. As opposed to those who seek their own gain, Timothy has been working for the gospel.

Paul sets up an interesting, but easily missed dichotomy in verse 21. In the first half of the verse, he talks about those who are “seeking their own interests.” We already know that Paul is going to tell us that Timothy is not like them. The natural opposite of seeking your own interests would be “seeking the interests of others.” But that’s not what Paul says. Where we would expect to read, “All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of others,” we actually read “All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” Subtly, but profoundly, Paul is showing us the gospel. The opposite of working for ourselves is working for Christ. And working for Christ looks like working for the interests of others. And that’s the heart of what we learn from Timothy. When we sacrifice or lay down our own interests, what we pick up instead is the interests of others, the interests of Jesus Christ. And that’s the kind of behavior that makes Timothy’s spiritual father, Paul, overflow with joy.

EPAPHRODITUS (2:25-30)

Compared to Timothy, we know very little about Epaphroditus. We get some hints of his story in this passage, and we’ll hear a little bit more about him later in Philippians. The information we have is very limited, and outside of Philippians, he is completely absent from the New Testament. We may be tempted to treat him as a throw away character or a filler, but he’s much more important than that. As I mentioned earlier, Paul was imprisoned in a time when friends and family were responsible for meeting the needs of prisoners. It seems that somehow (we don’t know exactly how, but it was common for letters and messengers to move among the churches) the Philippians learned that Paul was in prison and in need of this kind of material help. Because of their love for Paul, they decided to send assistance. And they sent it, it seems, with Epaphroditus and probably several other travelers. It would have been unsafe and unwise for him to travel alone with such a valuable gift for the 800-mile journey from Philippi to Rome.

Epaphroditus was sent to Rome to serve as a minister to Paul on behalf of the church in Philippi. But something happened along the way. Either on the journey or shortly after his arrival in Rome, he fell ill. Very, very ill. It’s easy to gloss over Paul’s statement that Epaphroditus was “so ill that he nearly died... but God had mercy on him” (2:27). Most of us probably know personally of someone who had a grave illness or life-threatening injuries and recovered. It’s not a guarantee for anyone to recover from anything, but thanks to modern medical technology and science, doctors and nurses have been able to intervene and prolong many lives. It’s still an amazing thing and certainly cause of celebration, but it’s not unheard of. Epaphroditus had none of the medicine and science that we so often take for granted. In the first century, it was pretty uncommon for people to recover from even what we would consider minor illness or injury today. I think that when Paul says that “God had mercy on him,” he’s not offering a platitude; Paul genuinely believes that God is the one who directly intervened and preserved Epaphroditus’ life so that he could complete his mission.

Meanwhile, word has made it back to the Philippians that the servant they had sent, Epaphroditus, had fallen ill, but apparently they have not heard that he recovered. So Epaphroditus is still with Paul in Rome and knows that his friends in Philippi are worried about the sickness that he no longer has. This upsets him, because he knows they’re worried about him when they need not be. As one commentator put it, “he was worried sick that they were worried sick about his sickness.”³ In fact, it upset him so much that he is described as being “anxious,

³ Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon* (Macon (Ga.): Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2011), 84.

distressed, or troubled” using a word that only appears at one other point in the New Testament – to describe Jesus’ emotional turmoil in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁴ This is why Paul begins this paragraph by saying it is *necessary* to send Epaphroditus. It’s his deep friendship with the Philippians that leads him to believe the best course of action for all involved is for Epaphroditus to go home, and for the rest of the church to see that he is healthy again, so they can all rejoice in God’s mercy together.

All of this is interesting and useful, but what intrigues me most about Epaphroditus is the unique way that Paul describes him. In verse 25, he calls Epaphroditus “my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier.” “Brother” is the term Paul uses to talk not about blood relatives, but about those who are part of the family of Christ, the church. Calling Epaphroditus a brother just tells us that he is a fellow believer. The next term Paul uses, “co-worker,” is familiar to readers of Paul. He often uses this or one of several related terms when describing those who share in the work of the gospel. It’s broad, but it means that Epaphroditus is working toward the same goal as Paul. The third term he uses, “fellow soldier,” is where I want us to dig in a little deeper. Paul only rarely uses military language or metaphors, so we don’t often hear of “brothers” and “co-workers” also being called “fellow soldiers.” It’s not that there’s anything wrong with the military descriptions, they’re just not the words Paul normally uses. The word translated “fellow soldier” or “comrade in arms” is used only here and in Philemon 2. Two suggestions have emerged about why he uses military language here – first, that he was imprisoned in Rome and was surrounded by military force and order. In that case, he was describing the type of environment he was seeing. Second, that Roman Philippi originated as a military colony, so the metaphor would connect with his audience. Whatever the impetus, it’s a brilliant image.

Set aside for a moment your feelings about military spending, or the current commander-in-chief, or the value or success of any particular military operation. Instead, try to think of the military as a generalized concept. No matter what country he represents or what era he’s living in, any soldier has one job to do – to complete the mission assigned to him.

I was listening to a podcast⁵ earlier this week in which a Navy Seal named Charlie was recounting the story of a time when he was asked by an old friend from the Naval Academy to attend the funeral of another Seal, a man named Eddie. In addition to attending the funeral as a proxy, he was asked to deliver flowers to Eddie’s widow and daughter. He describes being at the funeral and seeing Eddie’s 7-year-old daughter break down into sobbing hysterics. This display of emotion, Charlie says, was brutal to witness. He stood at attention, not able to do anything to console the heartbroken little girl. He said: “The military trains you to separate the emotion from the mission... [the girl] was old enough to understand what was happening, but not military enough to know not to show it.” Charlie didn’t have that problem. He goes on to say that, though it was not easy to do so, he managed to get through her breakdown by using an old military trick – focusing on the mission. “That’s what I clung to,” Charlie said, “that’s my mission... to deliver the flowers.”

And that’s the sort of single-minded focus Paul calls to mind when he describes Epaphroditus as a “fellow soldier.” It’s a militaristic, myopic focus on the assigned task at hand. Epaphroditus’s one mission was to deliver aid to the imprisoned Paul on behalf of the Philippians. And no matter what happened, his own sickness, even if it was going to cost him his life, was not going to deter him from accomplishing that mission. It’s exactly how we’d expect a

⁴ Still, 84.

⁵ “The Secret of My Death.” This American Life. May 21, 2018. Accessed May 21, 2018. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/646/the-secret-of-my-death>.

soldier to act, and Paul is commending him for his self-sacrificial service. Although completing his mission to deliver aid to Paul clearly came at the very real risk of his life, Epaphroditus persevered and pressed on to complete the task at hand.

MEANINGFUL RISKS

For the Apostle Paul, the ultimate concern in all he says and does is always the progress of the gospel. So this passage is not, as I thought early in the week, merely updates on his coworkers or their travel plans. It's a clear illustration of what he wants for the Philippians, and in turn, for us. Paul is using these two men to paint a picture of what a gospel-oriented life looks like. In Paul's ideal world, we would all be like Timothy in consistently pursuing the interests of Christ and others instead of our own interests. And we would serve like Epaphroditus, risking all we have, willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of our gospel mission.

It's not an easy call. Laying down our own interests is hard. Serving with the knowledge that we may have to make some painful sacrifices is hard. But lest we get discouraged, I want to reframe it. What Paul is calling us to is clearly not a life of no risk and no sacrifice. But he's also not calling us pointless risks with meaningless sacrifices – in other words, Paul would not suggest we fight volcanoes with garden hoses.

One of my good friends, Kevin Watkins, who you'll be meeting in a few months when he joins our staff, is currently wrapping up his time on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Washington and Lee University. Last fall, Kevin challenged his college students to take meaningful risks with God. He didn't want them to take the kind of stupid risks that mark so many college stories. But he also didn't want them sitting on the sidelines playing it safe. As Kevin described it, "Risks can look like a lot of things: inviting a new friend to small group, asking forgiveness from someone we hurt, sharing the gospel, initiating a spiritual conversation, being honest about a sin we are indulging in, lovingly confronting a Christian brother or sister who is caught in sin... just to name a few."

This Memorial Day weekend, as we reflect on the sacrifice of so many of our brothers and sisters, I'm going to invite you to join me in accepting Kevin's challenge. Take a meaningful risk this week, church. Look at the world around you and be like Timothy. Ask God to show you where you might set aside your own interests and serve the needs of others for the sake of Christ and the gospel. I'm confident that's a prayer that God will always answer. And when God gives you that answer, chase after it like Epaphroditus, with the intensity of a soldier who is single-minded in focus and fully committed to accomplishing whatever mission God gives to you.

If there's one thing I know, it's that Jesus didn't die so that we could be comfortable and safe. But by his death, he has shown us the ultimate example of serving others rather than ourselves. And by his resurrection, he has given us the confidence to be fellow soldiers in the work of the gospel, living out our mission, no matter the cost. It may not be easy, but it will definitely be worth it. Amen.