

North American Commentary¹

(4) The Command to Obedience [2:12-18](#)

Following the extended hymn to Christ, Paul returned to his primary concern. The passage resumes the thought of [1:27](#) with the concern of whether Paul might be present or absent. More importantly, however, Paul identified and applied what he considered the central thrust of Jesus' attitude, obedience ([2:8](#)). For Paul, obedience was also a primary responsibility of the church and expressed an essential ingredient in Christian living. These verses have three movements to them, all of which extend the central idea of obedience. First, the Philippians were to devote themselves to practical Christianity ([2:12-13](#)) by working out their salvation. Then, they were to be characterized by positive steadfastness ([2:14-16](#)), never succumbing to complaining or grumbling. Finally, they were to participate in Paul's personal joy in ministry ([2:17-18](#)), not only rejoicing with him but also sharing his outlook.

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY ([2:12-13](#)). Paul immediately applied the example of Christ to the problems in the Philippian church. In so doing, he urged the believers to work out their salvation (v. [12](#)) and provided a reason for doing so (v. [13](#)).

The Command to Work Out Their Salvation ([2:12](#)). [2:12](#) One central theme ties these verses together. The Philippians were to make salvation work in their lives. It will be helpful to determine the nature of the word "salvation" and whether this refers to the church at large or the individuals within it.

Salvation was central to Paul's theology. Normally the word has its full soteriological sense of spiritual deliverance from sin and the world. Paul described salvation as a past event ([Eph 2:8-9](#)) and as a future consummation ([Rom 13:11](#)). Here he spoke of working out salvation. Many recent commentators have opted for the meaning "well being," as a better translation for *sōtēria* ("salvation," NIV) although this is highly unlikely. Personal salvation brings with it responsibilities which Paul related to Christians' obedience. The responsibility was to live in accord with their salvation, letting the implications of their relationship with Christ transform their social relationships. Paul really meant, in the first place, that they were to act like Christians.

To live like Christians, the Philippians were to have an attitude of obedience. The obedience was not to Paul, although apparently his presence encouraged it in their lives. The obedience was to God. The church members were to solve their problems as an act of obedience to God. Such obedience confirmed the fact that they were truly saved. Perseverance, whether in individual purity or harmonious group relations, was expected of Christians.

In addition to obedience, the Philippians were to be sober. The precise words are "fear and trembling." These words reminded them of their relationship to God and that they were to conduct their lives with a seriousness and reverence due him. After all, he worked in them.

Did Paul's exhortation refer to individuals or to the church at large? Many contemporary interpreters understand the words to address the church collectively. Basically, this position recognizes that Paul was concerned with a group problem. In order to promote harmony and unity, he told the group to work out their salvation. That position has some difficulties, however, as well as some strengths. Those who take that position correctly interpret the text in light of the context of Philippians. Paul did, indeed, want to

1. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 108-122.

correct the group, but often he provided more instructions for dealing with a group problem. He did that in [4:2ff.](#), where he invoked the help of a third party. Further, the group would have had difficulty changing without the individuals devoting themselves to the task of personal change as well. Finally, this approach must make salvation refer to the wholeness of the group, and that would be very strange for Paul. Instead, Paul must have meant the individuals of the group were to live consistently with their salvation. If they did so, the group problems would be solved.

The Reason for Working Out Their Salvation ([2:13](#)), [2:13](#) Paul often provided reasons for ethical commands. The reason the Philippians were to work out their salvation was the soberness of realizing that God worked in them. The text emphasizes God. Using a play on words, Paul said they were to “work out” because God “works in.” God’s work in them provided both the motivation and the ability to do his good pleasure. Two factors indicate that Paul meant God initiated their interest in him. First, the context was one of salvation. Although the implications of salvation concerned Paul, they could not be separated from the total experience of salvation. Second, the work of God culminated in “his good purpose.” The term generally relates to the ultimate will of God (see [Eph 1:5, 9](#)), his own glory. The application to the Philippians should have been clear. First, without God’s taking the initiative, they would not have had the opportunity to work *out* salvation because they would neither want to nor be able to do so. Second, the fact that God started the work in them gave them a stewardship responsibility. They were to be true to his purposes, handling the gift of salvation with utmost care. After all, they were God’s showcase ([Eph 3:10](#)), and the way they handled their salvation reflected on the God who gave it. This passage closely resembles [1:6](#), where Paul expressed his confidence in them because God began a work in them and would complete it.

The emphatic use of words for “work” built on the same root in Greek presents an unusual contrast. Paul presented both the work of God (“works in”) and the work of the individual Christian (“work out”). Paul recognized the place of each. Divine initiative called for a human response. While he believed that, ultimately, all of salvation, considered in its broadest scope, depended on God’s initiative and power, he never tolerated passive Christianity. Human energy could never accomplish the work of God, yet God did not accomplish his purposes without it. The two functioned in perfect harmony, and people cooperated with and contributed to what God did in them and in the world. It is both comforting and sobering to realize that God initiated the relationship. It is equally sobering to realize that nothing short of full cooperation with God’s working confirms personal salvation. Thus both the divine initiative and human response accomplish his purposes. Here, the Philippians were to apply their salvation to the problems of selfish ambition, strife, and egocentric actions which divided the church ([2:3–4](#)). Their salvation demanded it; their responsibility to God called for it.

POSITIVE STEADFASTNESS ([2:14–16](#)). The second sentence of the paragraph changes directions slightly. Appealing perhaps to an Old Testament precedent, Paul warned of the dangers of murmurings and arguing. Paul knew that selfishness and vainglory led to complaints. He may, therefore, have been heading off even more problems in the community.

Another possible rationale for this entire section may rest in Paul’s quoting [Deut 32:5](#) (LXX) in [2:15](#). In Deuteronomy Moses made his farewell address. He complained that Israel was a “crooked and perverse generation,” and that no doubt brought to mind the people’s “grumbings” against Moses in the wilderness. Paul may have used the text because he thought in terms of his own farewell (his absence, [2:12](#)). The combination of the two seemingly different ideas of “work out your salvation” and “do everything without complaining” could have come from his realization of Moses’ disappointment with Israel, who failed at both these points. Perhaps Paul wanted to be sure his fruit lasted. All three of the major portions of this section fit that motif, including the idea of sacrifice with which Paul ended the section. The fact is, the Philippians had the possibility of being blameless among a crooked generation. Israel was blameworthy, and Moses called them the crooked generation. In this section Paul issued a command (v. [14](#)) and gave an extended purpose for the command (vv. [15–16](#)).

The Command to Stop Complaining (2:14). [2:14](#) The command has positive force although it is framed negatively. The use of the words no doubt comes from the Old Testament text, but their appropriateness to Philippians is a question. What would the positive command be? Would it be to trust God in everything since complaining is at the root a failure to accept God's plans and provisions? That seems unlikely because the problems within the group still govern the context. Perhaps it was to be accepting of the ways and efforts of others in the church since Paul warned about self-seeking ([2:3-4](#)). Whatever the problem, it was a concern which affected the moral life of the church and its witness to the world. Paul implied that if dissension stopped the church would be on its way to purity of life and action.

The Purpose of the Command (2:15-16). [2:15-16](#) Employing terminology like his prayer in [1:9-11](#), Paul looked for the completion of the Philippians' character. They were to become pure and blameless. The terms speak to the moral nature of their lives. They were to have complete Christian character, and they were to have no offense in relation to others. This hope was further expressed by Paul's statement, "children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation." This statement explains the first so that "without fault" incorporates "blameless and pure." They were children of God already; Paul hoped they would become blameless.

This consistent character is particularly striking when viewed against the backdrop of the world. Two metaphors describe the contrast between Christians and non-Christians. First, using the words of [Deut 32:5](#), Paul described the world as distorted and depraved. The use of such language stressed the moral distinctiveness of Christians. Purity and blamelessness were the standard by which the distortions of the world were measured. Thus Paul meant that the world was morally crooked, distorted by its failure to understand the word of God. The ministry of the church, then, was to provide a straight model for distorted lives.

The second metaphor comes from astronomy. The Philippians, with their unblemished moral character, shone like stars in the universe. Even with their imperfections, they were the light of the world to those in darkness. This mission was accomplished by their holding out the word of life. All assume that the "word of life" is the gospel, of which Paul had so much to say in this epistle. The word "hold out," however, may mean "holding fast" or "proffering." The immediate context supports "holding fast" because Paul's discussion concerned moral conduct. By their lives, the Philippians were actually holding fast to the gospel. By so doing, their lives also became the measuring rod and illumination of the world around them.

Paul ended this section with a personal appeal. His converts were his life. Equally, his life was Christ. Like other seeming paradoxes, this one blended perfectly in Paul's mind. He urged them to progress in their lives so that his efforts would be profitable. Looking to the day of Christ, the day of judgment, he wanted to have fruit from his labor. Using athletic imagery, he stated he wanted not "to have run ... for nothing." At other places, he expressed that desire in terms of his personal understanding of Christ ([3:12-14](#)).

Here he related it to his ministry. Was he selfishly motivated in this? Two factors require a negative answer to the question. First, Paul's life was Christ ([1:20-21](#)). Paul knew that everything he did, Christ actually did, and all of his glory was for Jesus' glory. Paul's energies, therefore, contributed to the glory of Christ whom he so much loved. Second, it hardly seems consistent in a context devoted to selflessness and warning about personal ambition that Paul would so blatantly express his own selfish wish. That the Philippians were to live a certain way for his benefit would be the height of egoism. In baring his concerns, Paul openly spoke in terms of his ministry. He had previously just as openly revealed his deepest motivation to please Christ. There was no conflict!

PERSONAL JOY IN MINISTRY (2:17–18). Paul’s concern for the Philippians’ steadfastness did not replace his joy for them and their service to the Lord. In this last portion of 2:12–18, Paul employed sacrificial terms to explain that he was not dissatisfied. The introductory words are “but even if.” They suggest a sharp contrast. The question is the nature of the contrast. Paul did not merely accept his lot as an apostle; he rejoiced in the faith of the church no matter what the cost to him. The words introduce a deliberate affirmation of Paul’s trust in the Lord. Whatever happened—whether he was released from prison or died a martyr’s death—he was confident the Lord had called him into apostolic ministry on behalf of the Philippians, and not even the prospect of death could diminish his joy.

2:17 The sacrificial terminology of these verses supplies another metaphor to explain. Three words recall the sacrificial system: “poured out” (*spendomai*), “sacrifice” (*thysia*), and “service” (*leitourgia*). “Poured out” refers to a drink offering that accompanied the sacrifices. “Sacrifice” was the actual offering, and “service” accompanied the offering. These last two appear to combine to speak of a sacrifice; the first, “poured out,” definitely referred to a procedure of pouring a drink offering either before or after the offering itself.

Paul said he was being poured out. The present tense verb suggests something already happening, although it may have been happening in kind and would culminate in the future. Some interpret this to mean his impending martyrdom, of which Paul was certain. Others think of it in terms of his apostolic ministry, which often included suffering. While Paul may have entertained the idea of martyrdom, he was not unduly pessimistic at this point. His language is reflective. It seems to be a verbalization of thoughts about his life and its meaning. The conditional sentence in which this occurs (“even if”) suggests an element of doubt about the matter.

Regardless of its interpretation, Paul’s “being poured out” accompanied their sacrifice. While many think of Paul’s life as the offering, that blurs the metaphor. Further, there is no reason he would not use more direct terminology to express sacrifice, as he did in [Rom 12:1](#). The sacrifice was that of the Philippians. Most likely, he meant that their support of him, including the gift mentioned in [4:10](#), was a sacrifice and service to God. He used that terminology in [2:30](#) and [4:18](#) when speaking of the gift. Understood this way, the “sacrifice and service coming from your faith” would be that which their faith produced. Thus their response to God in faith produced the sacrifice of the gift to Paul.

The use of this terminology reveals Paul’s humility about his own importance. In the ritual, the sacrifice was primary; the drink offering was secondary. If Paul placed himself in the position of the drink offering, he saw their gift as the primary matter and his own circumstances as secondary. Their support, in fact, enabled him to be a drink offering. Without it there would have been no need. This balances the statement of [2:16](#) that Paul “boasted” in their continuing to the end as a source of pride. If that seemed arrogant, though in actuality it was not, this countered it. They were the important ones; his part was complementary.

2:18 Rather than being discouraged about his circumstances, Paul had great joy. In [2:18](#) four times joy is prominent. Twice the words “joy and joy with” (“glad and rejoice with,” NIV) occur. One time Paul used them to explain his feelings about being a part of their offering. The other, he urged them to feel the same way.

In this section, the mind of Christ occurs in the thoughts of Paul. He urged the Philippians toward the goal of blamelessness. As for him, he was happy with his service to them and with them. If Christ’s act were one of sacrifice, Paul’s life was too. It was “poured out like a drink offering” along with those whom he loved so much.

This ends the first section of exhortations. From [1:27–2:18](#) Paul’s commands provide the tone and organization of the text. He urged the Philippians to stand true, to have the mind of Christ, and to work out their salvation in obedience. Above all, they were called to be like Christ.

Paul's Future Plans [2:19-30](#)

These verses form a break in the letter. Paul exhorted through commands from [1:27-2:18](#), and he returned to that in [3:1-4:8](#). Here he provided information about his situation and his intent to visit the Philippian church when he could. In these verses, Paul promised to send Timothy and Epaphroditus and praised them for their good character and service to him and to the Lord. These two stand as further examples of the mind of Christ. They both served unselfishly, considering others better than themselves. They were of value to the church at Philippi, as is clear, but they were of equal importance to Paul at this time in his life.

The character of Timothy and Epaphroditus does not explain why Paul wrote about them. This section has often been called a travelogue because it reveals Paul's travel plans, and Timothy and Epaphroditus fit into those plans. That raises the question of why Paul would reveal his plans to the Philippians. Perhaps they were concerned about when he would see them and anxiously awaited some news regarding his situation. They had both a financial and a fraternal interest in the apostle. No doubt that was a primary concern of the apostle in disclosing this information. Even so, it is necessary to explain why these verses occur in this part of the text. The answer must be that while Paul thought of the mind of Christ he was reminded of two who represented that character and had especially been selfless in their service to him. Since they each had a special relationship to the church at Philippi, Paul took the opportunity to discuss their character, their value to the ministry, and their proposed journey to Philippi. If Paul were not enough of a model of Christ-likeness, these two beloved friends were.

(1) Concerning Timothy [2:19-24](#)

Timothy is mentioned first. He was the companion of Paul whom Paul called a servant with him ([1:1](#)). Often Paul sent Timothy on missions for him, and he intended to do that again. Perhaps the church would be surprised to see Timothy and Epaphroditus, rather than Paul, and some explanation was needed. Paul, therefore, first explained his plans to send Timothy (v. [19](#)), commended Timothy for his character (vv. [20-23](#)), and explained that Timothy was only a temporary substitute for Paul (v. [24](#)).

THE SENDING OF TIMOTHY ([2:19](#)). [2:19](#) Knowing he could not visit Philippi, Paul hoped to send Timothy. As always, his plans were subject to the will of God; therefore he stated, "I hope in the Lord Jesus." The expression was not simply tacked on to Paul's statement, nor was it an escape clause in case the plans did not materialize. Rather, Paul naturally thought in terms of commitment to God's will, and the expression disclosed the principle by which he lived his life. Perhaps part of that hope was that Timothy would be sent soon. Paul could not release him yet (v. [24](#)), but he hoped that would change and Timothy could be on his way quickly.

Paul hoped to receive news concerning the church. Good news would lift his spirits, which may have been somewhat depressed by the difficulty in the church. Paul used an unusual term for the expected lift of his spirits, "cheered" (*eupsycheō*), which showed how important this was to him. Of course, other means of gathering information were available to Paul. If there were no better courier of news (v. [20](#)), there was certainly the possibility of mail. These did not suffice. Paul wanted accurate, reliable information. Timothy knew them well. He could read between the lines of their comments. Further, Paul appreciated this church, and in his absence, his right-hand man should go. Thus, he planned to send Timothy on another important mission.

THE COMMENDATION OF TIMOTHY ([2:20-22](#)). [2:20](#) These verses contain one of the highest commendations possible. Both the commendation itself and the reason it was given deserve comment. The commendation includes a statement and three reasons to support it. They evidence the reality of Paul's words. Simply stated, Paul sent Timothy because he was "like-souled" ("I have no one else like

him,” NIV). Some have questioned whether Paul meant Timothy was like Paul, but all the evidence suggests that Timothy was a partner in ministry, sharing Paul’s commitments and burdens. Significantly, Paul did not commend Timothy for like desires, his word “like-souled” suggest that the basic life principles coincided. Apparently, for Timothy to live was Christ as well, and he conducted his affairs in that way.

Paul gave three evidences that what he said was true. First, Timothy had a “genuine interest” in the affairs of the church at Philippi. The NIV translation weakens a strong statement in the Greek text. The word root has the idea of “legitimate” (“born in wedlock,” *gnēsiōs*), and the adjective form is used of Timothy in [1 Tim 1:2](#). That has led some to suggest that Timothy was Paul’s son and as a son he “naturally” inherited the interests of his father. That, however, goes beyond the normal sense. Paul’s commendation was that Timothy had acquired a concern for others that had become second nature in its genuineness.

[2:21–22](#) Timothy’s concern for others manifested itself in other ways. The second reason for commendation was that Timothy sought the things of Jesus Christ rather than his own interests. The wording recalls v. [4](#), and with it Paul provided a model of what he meant there. Finally, Timothy’s worth was found in his commitment to Paul. Paul had no sons. Timothy took care of Paul as though Timothy were a natural son. The dangers he endured in that service, such as at Philippi ([Acts 16:19–40](#)), proved his genuineness even in life-threatening situations. Paul added to his commendation by pointing out that though Timothy served as a son his primary commitment was to the gospel, not to Paul.

Why did Paul go to such lengths to commend one the Philippians already knew well? It is not likely that they would be disappointed with seeing Timothy because they apparently had a positive relationship with him. It is not likely that they hoped instead for Paul to come. They knew Paul’s circumstances, so much so that they anticipated his needs in Rome and sent Epaphroditus ahead of Paul. Surely they knew Paul could not come even if he wanted to. He still awaited trial. Any word from Paul would have been welcomed. Further, some have suggested that Epaphroditus failed in the mission given him by the Philippian church, and perhaps they would be disappointed in seeing him since he was supposed to stay with Paul as their helper. Yet they knew of his serious sickness, and they had responded to it in a way that increased Epaphroditus’s desire to see them. If they were angry with him, he hardly would have sought to return home. Further, even if Timothy were sent to “soften” the impact of Epaphroditus’s return, that was no reason to commend Timothy as Paul did.

Apparently, Paul commended Timothy because he remembered Timothy’s value to the ministry. Paul quickly praised his fellow-workers, and after thinking about Christ’s servanthood, he remembered that he lived with a servant, Timothy, who had the same disposition. Further, in sending such a valued helper, the church would realize his esteem for them as well. They could not be disappointed with Paul’s actions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMOTHY ([2:23–24](#)). [2:23–24](#) Obviously Timothy had a significant role in the work of Paul. Although he represented Paul in delicate situations, Paul reluctantly allowed him to do so. Two statements in the text reveal Timothy’s importance to Paul and the work of the gospel. First, Paul needed Timothy a while longer (v. [23](#)). When he knew “how things [would] go,” Timothy would be free to come. No one knows why Paul felt that way. What is certain is that Timothy uniquely sustained Paul during the uncertainty of his trials, and Paul felt he could hardly get along without him. Later, as Paul knew of his impending death, he called for Timothy to stand with him ([2 Tim 4:9–11](#)). Second, Timothy replaced Paul, who desired to come when he could. In sending Timothy, Paul sent the best he had—an extension of himself—and a costly gift to them. After all, they had sacrificed for him as well.

(2) Concerning Epaphroditus [2:25–30](#)

With a similar style of commendation, Paul explained why he sent Epaphroditus to the Philippians. This section has a commendation of Epaphroditus (v. [25](#)), a reason Paul sent him (vv. [26–28](#)), and a command to honor him (vv. [29–30](#)).

THE COMMENDATION OF EPAPHRODITUS ([2:25](#)). [2:25](#) Paul wanted to send Timothy, but he also found it necessary to send Epaphroditus. That raises many questions. Why would Paul have felt that way? Would Epaphroditus not be of service to Paul as the church originally intended? Did something happen to sour him or Paul? Was he physically impaired in a way that limited his usefulness? Further, it would seem that Epaphroditus could make the trip without Timothy, so perhaps Timothy accompanied him for his sake, as well as to find out about the church. The text provides no answer to these questions. For that reason, even though imaginative suggestions abound, it is best to state what the text does and leave the rest to conjecture.

Paul commended Epaphroditus as he identified him. First to be mentioned was Epaphroditus's relationship to Paul. Obviously Paul expressed a fondness and deep appreciation for him. Paul reminded them of Epaphroditus's relationship to him on their behalf. As for Paul, Epaphroditus was a brother, a fellow-worker, and a fellow-soldier. These descriptions emphasize partnership by employing familial, vocational, and military terms. Each of them provides insight as to how Paul saw the work of the gospel. Epaphroditus was an equal; there was no hint of inferiority or failure.

Epaphroditus's service had been a gift from the church to Paul. The NIV translation describes Epaphroditus as “your messenger [*apostolon*], whom you sent to take care [*leitourgon*] of my needs.” The words “messenger” (*apostolon*) and “servant” (*leitourgon*, a word suggesting religious service which the NIV fails to translate clearly) state his mission. He came with news of the church's love and a gift from them. He also determined to stay and care for Paul. This action demonstrated the love of the church in sending and supporting Paul, and it showed the self-giving character of Epaphroditus, who left home to serve in difficult circumstances.

THE REASON PAUL SENT EPAPHRODITUS ([2:26–28](#)). [2:26–28](#) Before discussing the reason he sent Epaphroditus, Paul described his situation. Perhaps he had some concern that they would not understand. After all, Epaphroditus was well enough to travel, and they would not know of his difficulties. The verses tell of his sickness. Apparently on the way to Rome, Epaphroditus fell sick. He traveled on to Rome, perhaps after some delay for healing, and met Paul. When he arrived, however, the situation was not like it was when he started. The church made known its concern about Epaphroditus's well-being, and Paul wanted to assure the believers their messenger was well. Even the discussion of his sickness has the flavor of selflessness about it. Epaphroditus was concerned only for the impact his sickness would have on them (v. [26](#)), and Paul agreed that Epaphroditus's return to Philippi would have more profit than the service he would render to the apostle (v. [28](#)).

The sickness was severe. Three times Paul informed them of that fact (vv. [26](#), [27](#), [30](#)). It almost cost Epaphroditus his life, and Paul understood that kind of service. The church, though it had heard Epaphroditus had been sick, had no way of knowing what he went through, so Paul reinforced Epaphroditus by this disclosure.

The scene is filled with emotion as well. Epaphroditus was filled with deep emotion over the Philippians' reaction to his circumstances. Some have suggested he was homesick. That is not as likely as the fact that he felt his sense of responsibility toward them and wondered how they would respond to his inability to carry out their wishes. This feeling grew from a sense of responsibility on his part. Perhaps he was anxious about how they would treat him, but the text seems to indicate that he participated fully in the decision to return, and that would not be likely if he had dreaded seeing them.

Paul also expressed his own emotion. He took Epaphroditus's sickness to heart, realizing no doubt that he was sick because of his love for Paul. A special relationship develops when some willingly risk their lives for others. Paul expressed his feelings by the word "sorrow" (*lypē*), which occurs three times in the Greek text of vv. [27–28](#) (the third usage in v. [28](#) is a form of *lypē* and is translated "less anxiety" in the NIV). It was better for Epaphroditus to return home than to die in service to Paul. Further, Paul expected that the church would be eager to see him.

THE COMMAND TO HONOR EPAPHRODITUS ([2:29–30](#)). [2:29](#) Was there any doubt that the church would honor Epaphroditus? Paul wanted to make sure that it would. Therefore, he urged the members to welcome Epaphroditus appropriately, with the honor due to men like him. If they had doubts about whether Epaphroditus had failed, Paul relieved those concerns. Men like him deserved honor, and the Philippians were to provide it. He had risked his life for Paul, but he also had done it in demonstration of his love for them. He endured sickness near to death for their sakes.

[2:30](#) Paul ended this section by reminding the Philippians that Epaphroditus really served them. He had no chance to serve Paul. They were to realize that this man attempted to do what others, no doubt, could not or would not do. He had acted on their behalf. Paul's words "to make up for the help you could not give me" translate literally "to fill up your lacks of service toward me." The terminology suggests that something was missing. In fact it was. Although the word "lacks" (*hysterēma*) does not necessarily mean that they had failed or that Paul judged them because of it, here "lacks" seems to have its normal meaning. The church intended to do more than it could do without Epaphroditus or someone like him. The gift had to be carried to Paul, and it came with a promise that someone would be with Paul to care for him. It was a special way the church chose to honor the beloved apostle. Thus, their gift, as they intended it, had three stages. First, they collected the gift. Second, they selected a courier to go to Paul. Third, that courier was to remain with Paul for an extended time, presumably at the church's expense. They intended all three, but the church at large could only do one. The rest was the responsibility of Epaphroditus. What they could not do, the "lacks" in their ministry, he attempted to do. Thus "lacks" may mean the remainder of what was intended but which, to this point, had not been done. In confirmation of this interpretation, the word for "service" seems to be the equivalent of "gift."

Paul ended this section of the epistle by commending the service of these two Christ-like men. Both thought of others before their own concerns, and both served the Lord and the church. They would journey to the church in Paul's stead, in the hopes that he would soon follow.