



Philippians

RBS
Philippians 4:10-23

Lesson 8: Contented in Christ

“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:12-13).

Doctrinal Focus: Christians can receive help from others with thanksgiving while finding their contentment in Christ in all circumstances; and they will offer help generously, knowing that God welcomes our service to others as sacrifices offered to him and pleasing in his sight.

Read Philippians 4:10-23.

Paul had alluded to the Philippians' financial gift in opening his letter (Philippians 1:5) and later mentioned the ministry he had received from Epaphroditus, who had brought their contribution (Philippians 2:25-30). Now, at the finale of his epistle, he returned explicitly to the topic of their donation, making his gratitude and God's abundant provision the final themes that his dear Philippian friends will carry away from hearing his letter. One commentator aptly sums up Paul's strategy in reserving this theme for the end:

“When read aloud in the gathered community, these will be the final words that are left ringing in their ears: that their gift to him has been a sweet-smelling sacrifice, pleasing to God; that God in turn, in keeping with his rich supply in Christ Jesus, will ‘fill them to the full’ regarding all their needs; and that all this redounds to God’s eternal glory.”¹

The Philippians' gift raised delicate issues that needed to be handled with Christian tact and pastoral wisdom. Paul had been under house arrest in Rome for some time before Epaphroditus arrived “*now at length*” with a donation toward his expenses (Philippians 4:10). Paul was most grateful for the gift and, even more so, for the love that stood behind it. Yet he did not want to give the impression

that the timing of their gift had made him doubt their love, nor that it had caused him distress or discomfort. So he seized the opportunity both to express his thanks and to model for them again the mindset that finds contentment in Christ “*in any and every circumstance*” (Philippians 4:12).

Paul had just instructed the Philippians to “*rejoice in the Lord*” (Philippians 4:4) in every situation, and Paul himself “*rejoiced in the Lord greatly*” when the Philippians' gift arrived (his final use of “*joy*” terms in this letter) (Philippians 4:10). He had already told the Philippians that their unity would complete his joy (Philippians 2:2), that he rejoiced because his suffering enhanced their worship (Philippians 2:17-18), and that they themselves were “*my joy*” (Philippians 4:1). Now they had given him another reason for joy by their gift, and by the concern for his welfare that it expressed.

Although he spoke of their “*reviving their concern*” for him at last, he hastened to make clear that he was well aware that they had cared all along but “*had no opportunity*” (Philippians 4:10). After all, they had a long track record of partnering with Paul financially (Philippians 4:15-16)!

Paul also wanted to reassure them that his joy over their gift was not because financial need had deprived him of joy before it arrived. Because his joy was rooted “*in the Lord,*” Christ had set

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Paul's moods free from fluctuating circumstances, so he could be content in both feast and famine (Philippians 4:11-13). His purpose in elaborating on his contentment and its source in "the one who gives me strength" was to ease the Philippians' concern for himself, but he also wanted to model for them once more how Christ would enable them to find contentment in all situations.

By writing that he had "learned" to be content, Paul implied that his ability to handle whatever God's providence brought his way was not an instantaneous insight. Rather, it was a way of viewing life that had grown over time, as he came to grasp more fully all that Christ had done and was doing for him. When Paul spoke of being "content," he was forced to use a Greek word that originally meant "self-sufficient" and was a favorite of Stoic philosophers who sought a mental state of self-sufficiency by cultivating an attitude of aloof indifference (*apatheia*) to the world of everyday life. But Paul knew that no creature is self-sufficient. We all depend for our very existence on the God in whom we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-29). Therefore Paul promptly pointed away from himself to the true source of his contentment, the Christ who "strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Too often this verse is taken out of context and misread as claiming that Christ gave Paul—and will give other strong believers—superhuman power to achieve any feat he chose. Paul meant that he could endure any situation through the strength of Christ's Spirit. In fact, he found Christ's strength most fully displayed in his own weakness, when his prayer for relief was denied (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Even when material resources were meager, Paul was not in need, for he had "*learned the secret*" of enduring abundance and need by tapping into a resource that was deeper than his shifting circumstances (Philippians 4:12). Unlike initiates in the mystery religions, Paul was glad to share his secret with one and all: the God who had filled Paul's every need, even when funds and food were scarce, would fill "*every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:19).

Paul wanted his friends to know that their gift was so much more than money. First, it made them his partners, both in his current "trouble" and in his

spread of the gospel. In fact, "in the beginning of the gospel," when Christ's grace first touched their hearts through the preaching of Paul and Silas, they were unique as a church in becoming Paul's partners. They did so not only when he left Macedonia to move south to Achaia (Acts 17:14-15, 18:5), but even earlier, as he preached in the nearby Macedonian city of Thessalonica. In this partnership the benefit flowed in both directions, giving and receiving. Through Paul's preaching they had received eternal life and become his partners in grace (Philippians 1:7). In grateful response they contributed out of their meager resources (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-2) to enable Paul to bring the good news to others. Beyond their help for Paul himself, these Gentile believers eagerly gave to relieve the needs of Jewish believers, out of gratitude that they had "come to share in their spiritual blessings" through the preaching of the Jewish missionaries, Paul and Silas (Romans 15:26-27). There is a "circulatory system" in the Body of Christ, even across the miles, by which needs in one part of the body are to be met by resources that the Lord has given to another.

Believers' partnership includes not only sharing the Word and sharing funds, but also supporting each other in prayer before the Father's throne. As Paul prayed for his friends in Philippi (Philippians 1:3-10), he anticipated that their prayers for him would be answered as the Spirit of Christ gave him courage to bring honor to his Savior, whatever the outcome of his appeal to Caesar (Philippians 1:12-20).

Second, their financial gift was not only an expression of their partnership with Paul but also an investment in Christ's great kingdom harvest: "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit." Here Paul blended farming and accounting imagery. Their gift was like *seed* planted in the ground, which would bear fruit both in their own lives (Philippians 1:11) and in the growth of Christ's kingdom (Colossians 1:5-6). It was also a *deposit* that would be credited to their account, with accrued interest. Proverbs encouraged liberality to those unable to repay their benefactors with this promise: "*Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed*" (Proverbs 19:17). Jesus likewise encouraged hospitality to the poor, the

crippled, the lame, and the blind, *“because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just”* (Luke 14:12-14). So also what delighted Paul about the Philippians’ gift was not how it relieved his situation but how it would accrue blessing for them from God.

Third and most important, their gift to relieve Paul’s needs was actually offered to God himself: *“a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God”* (Philippians 4:18). Here Paul collected a variety of terms related to worship in the Old Testament sanctuary and applied them to the funds that Epaphroditus had delivered. Noah’s sacrifice after the floodwaters subsided raised a *“pleasing aroma,”* (or *“fragrant offering”*) and the Lord resolved never again to destroy all living things as long as earth remains (Genesis 8:21-22). Burnt offerings in the tabernacle emitted a *“pleasing aroma”* (Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 1:9, 13). God later promised to regather Israel from exile and accept them *“as a pleasing aroma”* (Ezekiel 20:40-41). All animal sacrifices found their fulfillment in the death of Christ for his people, *“a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”* (Ephesians 5:2). Because the Philippians belonged to Christ, their gift bore the aroma of Jesus and brought pleasure to God. Through Christ believers *“offer a sacrifice of praise to God,”* and when they share with others, *“such sacrifices are pleasing to God”* (Hebrews 13:15-16). Though Gentiles had been excluded from the temple in Jerusalem, in Christ they were no longer outsiders, banned from the courts of the Lord. Now they were priests, privileged to offer sacrifices to God by faith in his Son (Philippians 2:17; see Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:5-10). In view of God’s mercies in the gospel, they could now *“present [their] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [their] spiritual worship”* (Romans 12:1). As they offered themselves in faith and gratitude, God would welcome and approve the offering of their means for the cause of Christ.

As they had *“well supplied”* Paul’s need, so Paul could assure the Philippians that his God would *“well supply”* their every need (Philippians 4:19). God’s resources to do so are boundless, for they are *“his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”* And his willingness to do so cannot be doubted,

for he is *“our God and Father,”* whose eternal glory is magnified through his provision for his children (Philippians 4:20). This promise did not guarantee that they would enjoy endless material resources. After all, *“God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him”* (James 2:5). Compared to such a treasure, mere material affluence would be worthless. Having funds in reserve would not, in itself, enable them to continue to *“partner”* with Paul in giving and receiving. The *indispensable* resource that enriches us to overflow in generosity is *God’s grace*, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.... He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God”* (2 Corinthians 9:8-11).

In God’s accounting system, a widow’s two-coin contribution dwarfs millions given by the rich (Luke 21:1-3) because he values not the amount of the gift but the willingness of the heart. *“If the readiness is there, [one’s gift] is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have”* (2 Corinthians 8:12). The Father does kindly provide his children’s basic needs (Matthew 6:25-33), but his greater gift is the grace that frees them from trusting treasures accrued on earth (Matthew 6:19-21) and opens their hearts to give freely to advance Christ’s kingdom and meet others’ needs.

Paul’s closing greetings (Philippians 4:21-22) reinforced his emphasis on unity in the Philippian church by instructing them to *“greet every saint in Christ Jesus.”* Paul threw his arms wide to include them all in his embrace, not permitting them to hold each other at arm’s length over differences that had been dividing them. He also extended greeting from *“the brothers”* who were with him (his colleagues in ministry, including Timothy, Epaphroditus, perhaps Luke and Aristarchus who had sailed with him from Caesarea [Acts 27:2], and others). Finally, he sent greetings from *“all the*

saints, especially those of Caesar's household." As he had opened with the happy report that his chains had exposed "the whole imperial guard" to the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:13), now he closed by noting that the gospel had borne fruit in the very household of Caesar. Whether these were the emperor's slaves or relatives we do not know. But their new identity as "saints," citizens of heaven who awaited the return of the true Savior and Lord, demonstrated the life changing power of Christ in this world's "halls of power."

Paul's closing benediction was simple but

profound: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit*" (Philippians 4:23). That grace had brought them peace with God (Philippians 1:2) and partnership with Paul (Philippians 1:7). By that grace God had given them not only the gift of trusting in Jesus but also the gift of suffering for his sake (Philippians 1:29). That grace had begun a good work in them through the indwelling Holy Spirit and would carry it through to completion on the day when Christ returns (Philippians 1:6). So Paul declared that the grace of Christ would continue to be present, preserving and transforming their hearts until their King appears from heaven.

Cited Works

Fee, Gordon D. (1995). *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament) Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Notes

1. Fee (1995), 423.

Recommended Commentary

Philippians by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



Philippians Lesson 8

Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 4:10-23.

1. Was it an insult or an honor for Paul to reserve his thanks for the Philippians' gift for the end of his letter? Where had he alluded to it earlier in the epistle? Why might he have saved this theme for last?
2. Paul chose his words very carefully (under the Holy Spirit's inspiration) to avoid giving misimpressions about the reasons for his joy upon receiving their gift. Reread Philippians 4:10-19, noting especially the possible misunderstandings that Paul was correcting in verses 10, 11, and 16 (especially statements introduced with "Not that..."). What can we learn from Paul about wise use of language, especially when we are communicating in writing rather than in person?
3. What made Paul's contentment in all circumstances different from the Stoic philosophers' ideal of "self-sufficiency"?
4. How had Paul's earlier report on his situation in Rome (Philippians 1:12-27) illustrated the fact that he had learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need? According to his words in 1:20-21, what was the chief goal on which Paul had set his heart? Why did that goal enable him to respond to other aspects of his experience with joy?
5. What were the "all things" that Paul could do through Christ, who strengthened him? How has this verse been misunderstood and misapplied by Christians?
6. In response to Paul's prayer for relief from a distressing "thorn in the flesh," Christ told Paul that his (Christ's) power was displayed most perfectly in Paul's weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, especially vs. 9). Do you find that hard to accept—either to believe it, or to welcome weakness in your experience? Have you or a believer you know found Christ's promise to be true in practice? How do our weaknesses, sufferings, and neediness show that Christ is strong?

7. Reread Philippians 1:5, 7, 19, 29-30; 4:14-18. In what ways were the Philippians partners with Paul? With whom are you linked in these forms of partnership? How can you express and strengthen your partnership with them this week?

8. In Philippians 4:17 Paul helped his friends to see their gift to him in an eternal perspective, as seed that would bear fruit and an investment that would bear interest. What other passages in God's Word urge us to take this eternal perspective regarding the way we use our resources (money, time, etc.) now? How will this perspective influence the basis on which we make "investment" decisions?

9. In view of Paul's use of Old Testament sacrificial terms ("a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God") to describe the Philippians' financial contribution toward Paul's rent, food, and other everyday expenses, who was the ultimate recipient of their gift? Read Matthew 25:31-46. Whom are you serving as you feed and clothe and care for "the least of these my brothers"? How can this insight sustain your heart when your service is frustrating or unappreciated?

10. How have promises such as those in Philippians 4:19 and 2 Corinthians 8:6-14 been *misunderstood* by Christians? Why is it easy for believers to confuse our *wants* with our *needs*, and to confine our sense of what we need to material resources only? What do we need *more than money* in order to glorify God through generosity?

11. Read Ephesians 1:3-14. How does Paul's description of "every spiritual blessing" that is ours in Christ Jesus help us to grasp the meaning of God's "riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19), the reservoir from which he will supply his children's needs?