



Paul's letter to the

PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 9

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-23

Philippians 4:10-23 (NIV)

Thanks for Their Gifts

¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Final Greetings

²¹ Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. ²² All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Philippians 4:10-23



In the final paragraph of Philippians (4:10-23), Paul not only signs off and thanks them again for the money they've sent, but he also reveals what he describes as a hidden secret of Christian life.

With his major concerns about the Philippians now addressed, Paul turns to the first reason for the letter—to acknowledge their recent gift and thus to rejoice over this evidence of friendship and partnership renewed. Three ideas come together in this conclusion to the letter. First is his genuine gratitude for their recent gift, expressed three times in different ways (vv. 10, 14, 18). This is set in the context of the mutuality and reciprocity of friendship, of “giving and receiving” (v. 15). Finally, all of this is part of the greater reality of the gospel, so that their “giving” and his “receiving” (and the long-term partnership in the gospel which their gift reaffirms) culminates in verses 18-20 with gratitude from Paul and a promise from God to them.

1. “I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that you renewed your concern for me...[but] I’m not saying this because I’m in need”

Paul’s way of saying “thank you” seems a bit awkward, but there are a few reasons for that. First note what Paul is doing as he thanks the Philippians for the money. It isn’t quite as easy as saying: “You sent me a gift. Thank you for that.” In the ancient world, as in the modern world, when money changes hands, there are subtle dynamics occurring. If somebody pays you significantly for services rendered, there’s a sense in which they’ve hired you and they own you to a degree. This may be one of the reasons why Paul doesn’t accept money from the Corinthian church, to the extent that they obviously grumbled about that, and Paul has to explain that when he came to Corinth he determined that the gospel was going to be free of charge (1 Cor 9:14-18).

In addition, throughout the ancient world there were many wandering teachers and philosophers who would go from town to town selling their ideas, and many of them came to be regarded as crooks and cheats. And before anybody could discover that half of their ideas and teachings were a bit old and silly anyway, they had gone off to the next town with their money. Paul was very aware that people could look at him and say: “Oh he’s one of those people. We’ve seen plenty of them. They come into town all the time. He’s got a new god that he wants us to worship and no doubt he’ll be passing around the hat in due course.”

Because Paul stayed in Corinth for a long time, it would’ve been very easy for a certain group (those who were wealthy in the church) to feel like they owned him. And since one of the problems in Corinth seems to have been a division between the rich and the poor in the church, it may well be that Paul had refused to take money in Corinth in case one particular group there thought that he was *their apostle, he was under their control*. Some of the problems that we meet in Corinth may be caused by a reaction to that. But with the churches in northern Greece and especially with the Philippians (which would likely be a smaller church), Paul has no such problems. He is quite happy to give thanks for what they sent, but he’s very careful not to imply that it was a payment. Thus, he stresses that they are in partnership together. Paul is being cautious about saying thank you, but the thanksgiving comes through very strongly.

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2. Learning the Secret (4:12-13)

Paul is quick to say that his deep gratitude for the Philippians' gift didn't mean he was the kind of person who would complain if he wasn't kept well supplied. On the contrary, God had put him through a series of events in which he had learned one of the most important lessons in life: contentment. In between talking about receiving the money, he says that he has learned the hidden secret: *"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."*

Paul said he learned to be content, which suggests that it didn't come naturally. He had to practice it. His public ministry probably lasted not much more than ten years, but he experienced more in that time than most people experience in a long life. He suffered hardships and faced dangers that most of us can't even imagine. Why was he able to do it? Because of "the one who gives strength" (v. 13) – the God whom we know in Jesus. Paul's life is centered in Christ, and he takes what Christ brings. If it means a life of "plenty," then he is a man in Christ and that alone. If it means being "in need," he is still a man in Christ and accepts this as part of his understanding of discipleship. Paul's self-reflection here is probably also a moment of teaching. He has urged the Christians in Philippi to practice what he taught and modeled. And in the midst of their own difficulties, Paul says this is what they too should learn of life in Christ, that being "in him who strengthens" means to be "content" – whatever the circumstance.

And so for Paul, contentment isn't a matter of sitting back and saying, "Whatever happens, happens," and it isn't a matter of gritting your teeth and somehow getting through it. It's a matter of seeing that all the joys and sorrows of life are somehow swallowed up by the love and power and purpose of God who strengthens us, and that we too are to be part of that. We have strength that enables us to be content in everything through the one who gives us power.

3. Celebrating the Gift (4:14-20)

Paul says once again that he has been celebrating. He has been celebrating in prison because the Philippians' concern for him has been demonstrated in their gift. In verse 14 he says that they did the right thing by sharing his suffering, and this brings the two of them together. Paul reflects on what happened, even at the very beginning of his time with the Philippians: *"As you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need"* (4:15-16).

Paul had to move on in a hurry according to Acts 16 and 17 because he got into trouble in Philippi and they asked him to leave. And then he got into more trouble in Thessalonica and Berea, so he headed south. But despite all of this, they entered into a partnership—giving and receiving. It seems that they were receiving the gospel and instruction from Paul, and he was receiving from them the financial help he needed. Even when he was in Thessalonica, they sent him aid multiple times.

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Something remarkable had happened in Philippi. People don't part with money unless they believe that something really important is happening. When people give money to causes, they believe in them and are proud to be associated with them and they want to see them flourish. So when the Philippians sent money to Paul, they felt the same about what he was doing, and that can only have happened as a result of his ministry to them.

Paul stresses in verse 17 that it isn't the gift he's concerned with: *"Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account."* Paul's concern is that they would have a healthy balance showing up on their account. He is happy to say that the generosity they have shown indicates that they are people of whom he can be proud and who are modeling the gospel in a way that resonates in the world as good news. The result is that Paul has received in full everything he could possibly need or want: *"I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God"* (4:18).

This is the full extent of why Paul is so grateful for the Philippian church's partnership in the gospel (see 1:5, 7). It isn't just that they have sent him money with Epaphroditus as their willing messenger. It is that they have continued a habit which goes right back to the beginning. This is why the whole letter has the warm tone, the sense of deep trust and affection, that we have sensed throughout.

And so he says in v. 19, *"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."* There are Old Testament allusions here. For instance in Malachi, God says, *"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it"* (Malachi 3:10).

When people are generous and give to God's work, they find that they receive what they need in the time and way of God's choosing—sometimes through other people realizing that they have particular needs and God putting into the hearts of people to give to them. Strangely this is part of the life of faith, looking out for other people's needs and then discovering that people will look out for yours. This is part of the way God works, which is why Paul brings it all together in verse 20: *"To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen."*

There is a sense in which this whole circle of grace and *koinonia* is the sphere in which the living God is at work. Remember again Paul's words in 1:6, *"The God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ our Lord."* This is how God works. God's own generous love was acted out dramatically and personally on the cross. That's what Philippians 2:6-11 was all about. And in a sense, all we're seeing in this discussion at the end of Philippians is the outworking of what it means to have the mind of Jesus in community life and in shared ministry.

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4. Final Greetings: “You are part of a larger family and a greater work” (4:21-23)

In light of everything he has just said, Paul closes the letter by reminding the Philippians that they are part of both a local and global community: “*Greet all God’s people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. All God’s people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*”

As one scholar reminds us, we can easily overlook the significance of the phrase “those of Caesar’s household” in 4:22:

“These people are acknowledged by Paul to be ‘saints,’ members of God’s people. It could not have been easy in the ancient world for those who were employed by Caesar to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Not many years later, with the outbreak of persecution against Christians, it became impossible; those who continued to hold the faith lost their employment and usually their lives as well. The tension between various responsibilities and allegiances is one with which Christians have had to cope from the very earliest days. There are Christians in some countries today who still experience these tensions and whose witness to the gospel puts many of us to shame. We should remember them in our prayers. For those of us who are not in danger of active persecution, the temptations are more subtle. Are we willing to stand up for the gospel in a society like our own? If our faith comes into conflict with our career or our standard of living or our standing in society, which do we sacrifice? No doubt, Paul’s answer would have been to point us back once more to Christ’s own self-emptying and urge us yet again to share his mind.” (M. Hooker, *Philippians*, 548)

Paul has saved this for last to say that there are God’s people there with him, including those among Caesar’s household. There are people calling Jesus “Lord” even though they are employed by the Caesar whom others call Lord. This is part of the tension necessary in the gospel, because the gospel is about what Paul says in 1:27: “Let your public behavior be worthy of the gospel” – a life of unity, holiness, love, discernment. All of these things are modeled on Jesus himself and are to be reflected in the new way of thinking that goes with the new creation.

Indeed, we are learning to live in the way that was begun in and through Jesus (2:5-11), and is now being worked out in our own lives (2:12-13), because the God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus (1:6), who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him to submit all things to himself (3:20-21). That’s Paul’s message to the Philippians. My prayer is that it would be God’s message to us as well.

Reflections

1

Doing the Little Things

In 4:11-20, Paul expresses his gratitude to God—and to the Philippians—for their gift. But far more important than the gift itself were the love and concern the Philippians showed toward Paul—a love and concern that led them to help him. As so often, it is the thought that counts! The most significant gifts often cost us very little—sometimes nothing, except a few moments to say an encouraging word, or to make a phone call, or send a text message, or write a card. What matters is that someone has been remembered with affection and concern. May we remember to show appreciation for what others do for us in these simple ways. And may we remember to help those who, like Paul, are going through a difficult time and need our prayers and concern. (M. Hooker, *Philippians*, 548)

2

Learning the Secret

Paul's gratitude is not due to any real need on his part (v. 11), since he has learned to be content, whatever he has. The adjective translated content means also "self-sufficient." The virtue of "self-sufficiency" or "contentment" was a favorite among Cynics and Stoics, but Paul's self-sufficiency is of a very different kind—it comes from God. It arises from Paul's decision, described in 3:7-11, to give up everything in order to gain Christ. As a result, Paul can cope with every circumstance; he knows both how "to have plenty" and how "to have little/be in need." As Paul describes, he has "learned the secret" (v. 12). Verse 13 reveals the secret of Paul's ability to do "everything" in this regard; it is through the one who gives him the strength he needs. His contentment is a joyful acceptance of what God provides. (M. Hooker, *Philippians*, 544)

3

"My God Will Meet All Your Needs"

Because Paul is in prison, he cannot directly reciprocate the gift he received from the Philippians. So he does an even better thing: Since their gift had the effect of being a sweet-smelling sacrifice, pleasing to God, Paul assures them that God will assume responsibility for reciprocity. He promises them that "my God will fill up every need of yours" (meet all of your needs). In their present suffering in the face of opposition (1:27-30), God will richly supply what is needed (steadfastness, joy, encouragement). In their need to advance in the faith with one mindset, God will richly supply the grace and humility necessary for it. In the place of both "complaining" (2:14) and "anxiety" (4:6) God will be present with them as the "God of peace" (4:7, 9).

*My God, Paul says, will act for me on your behalf by "filling to the full" all of your needs, according to the glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Paul reminds us here of something we too often forget: The riches of God are sufficient to deal with all our needs. But he does not promise us earthly wealth. Far more valuable than that is the attitude Paul has acquired through being in Christ, an attitude that accepts riches and poverty with equal joy and thanksgiving. (G. Fee, *Philippians*, 192)*

Discussion

1. What would you say is necessary for contentment? Would your answer today be the same as your answer at the beginning of this year? What, if anything, has changed over the past two months?
2. In what ways do you find what Paul says about generosity and contentment to be challenging?
3. In 4:13 Paul says that because of God and the strength God provides, he has found the strength to be content in all situations. How have you found verse 13 to be true in your life? Can you recall some specific examples of experiencing this strength to be content over the last 9 weeks?
4. In 4:19 Paul made the Philippians a promise, not from himself but from God. How has that promise proved true for you? How might knowing that you live in a world in which the day of Christ is continually coming strengthen you in your current circumstances, whether you are living “in plenty” or “in want”?
5. What did you enjoy most about this study of Philippians? In what ways has this study challenged you the most and why? How will you think and live differently in light of this study?

Pray: Claim the promises of verses 13 and 19, not in a general way but for specific situations. Where do you need strength and renewed energy from God? How are you fearful about your needs not being met? What anxieties weigh you down? Pray about each concern, thanking God for the promises of verses 13 and 19 and their encouragement to you.