

Philippians 4. 10-23. Ebenezer. 4 March 2012.

Our reading for tonight comes then from Philippians chapter 4, commencing at verse 10 ...

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your concern for me has flourished again; though you were indeed concerned for me, but you lacked opportunity.

Not that I speak as lacking anything, for I have learned, in whatever circumstances I am, to be content.

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. In everything and in all things, I have been initiated into the secret, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to lack. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Nevertheless you did well that you shared my affliction.

And you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in giving and receiving except you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent once and again to me in my need.

Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit which increases to your account.

But I have all and abound. I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the things from you, a fragrant aroma, a sacrifice acceptable and well-pleasing to God.

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Now to our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is not the only letter which he more or less concluded on the subject of money. He did much the same in his first letter to the Corinthians, the last chapter commencing with the words, 'Now concerning the collection ...'.¹ But although both passages focus on the subject of money, they differ quite dramatically ... first, in that, whereas his concern when writing to Corinth was to organise the raising of a financial 'gift',² his concern in our section is to express his gratitude for a financial 'gift' which has been received³ ... and, second, whereas the 'gift' in view in 1 Corinthians was earmarked for the poor saints in Jerusalem,⁴ the 'gift' in view in our passage had been sent to the apostle to support him in his work for the Lord.

I said that Paul more or less concludes this epistle on the subject of 'money' – and he does – but I cannot help noticing that he seems to have gone out of his way to avoid using that actual word.

The apostle has made passing reference twice before in his letter to the practical expression of the Philippian's 'fellowship' (or 'partnership') with him in the gospel – aimed at meeting his (Paul's) material 'need'.⁵ But both earlier mentions had been somewhat oblique. Now, perhaps deliberately reserving this to the end of his letter, he makes direct and explicit reference to that which they had sent to him by the hand of Epaphroditus – and for which he makes it clear he is most grateful.

As we shall see, throughout our section Paul sets before us a model of Christian courtesy and consideration for others – somebody determined not to hurt the feelings of his brethren in any way – a perfect gentleman in the best sense of the word.

He rejoiced, he said, in the Lord 'greatly' – this being the only occasion of which I know where Paul stressed in this way the magnitude of his spiritual joy. And his joy was immense, he makes it clear, not on account of the gift for its own sake, but because of what it expressed of their loving concern for him – that it was to him the practical demonstration of their care ... a care which, as he says, had revived – it had 'flourished again' ... the word he used being a horticultural term describing a plant or a tree which puts forth fresh shoots, and flowers again, in spring time. In his eyes, that is, their concern for him had come into bloom again.

And the apostle is careful to assure the Philippians that he is well aware that what they had lacked in the recent past had not been affection or concern for him, but simply the opportunity to translate this into action.

It had now been upwards of ten years since his ministry in Philippi had resulted in the forming of a Christian assembly there. As we learn from verse 16, the Philippian saints had generously supported him – on more than one occasion – after he had first left them and taken the gospel to the city of Thessalonica (some 92 miles to the west along the Via Egnatia) – and, from verse 15, how they had continued their support when he had headed south out of Macedonia into Achaia – mainly, no doubt, while he was at Corinth.

And it is only now – ‘at last’ as Paul expresses it – that they have renewed that support. But Paul swiftly puts their minds at rest that he fully understands the reason for this; namely that, on account of circumstances beyond their control, they had been unable to maintain their practical support. What those circumstances were we are not told.

Maybe it had something to do with Paul’s later movements prior to his imprisonment.

It may, I suppose, have been connected with their own financial situation. For we know that, notwithstanding the presence among them of a Lydia (‘the Laura Ashley of Thyatira’, as one of my brethren once described her), the Philippian assembly – along with the assemblies at Berea and Thessalonica – suffered ‘deep poverty’ – and, what is more, in spite of that extreme poverty, they had been extremely generous in giving towards ‘the Judean Relief Fund’ – giving, Paul himself acknowledged, ‘beyond their means’.⁶ John Chrysostom, the fourth century so-called ‘Early Church Father’, commented on our verse, ‘You had it not in your hands, nor were in abundance. This is the meaning of, “You lacked opportunity”’.⁷ The good man may well have been right.

Or it may simply have been that, until Epaphroditus bravely offered his services, no suitable messenger had been available to undertake the long and arduous journey to Rome. And I mean ‘long and arduous journey’. The distance from Philippi to Rome was 613 miles as the crow flies, just a few miles longer than the distance from Land’s End to John O’Groats.⁸ But it is estimated that, whereas today the average driving time from Land’s End to John O’Groats is about 17 hours, in New Testament days the journey from Philippi to Rome would have taken about 40 days.⁹

But, in the end, we don’t know what it was which had prevented the Philippians from responding earlier to the apostle’s material need. What we do know is that, as soon as an opportunity presented itself, they lost no time in grasping it.

And, for his part, Paul rejoiced greatly at the renewed evidence of their care for him. But he does not want the Philippians to misunderstand him, and so he is careful to clarify – and to clarify immediately – what he meant ... or, more accurately, what he didn’t mean. It was ‘not that’, he says, that he spoke as one who felt any great lack – or, indeed, any ‘lack’ at all.

And this, because he had schooled himself – through the many chequered experiences of his life – to ‘be content’ – in *whatever* circumstances he found himself.

As you know, the New Testament has much to say about the Christian grace of contentment. We have only to think, for example, of the words of the writer to the Hebrews in the final chapter of his epistle, ‘Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have’,¹⁰ and we can hardly miss that those words ‘with such things as you have’ were addressed to believers who had recently suffered the loss of more or less all of their earthly goods!¹¹ Or, again, we might think of Paul’s words a little later to Timothy, ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain ... Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content’.¹²

I guess that the apostle would have had some sympathy with the words of Socrates, who, when asked, ‘Who is the wealthiest?’, replied, ‘He that is content with least’.¹³

In this sense of the word ‘content’, it is always right to be content with what we have, but never to be content with what we are or what we have done.

But the word which Paul uses here translated ‘content’ is different from that in both Hebrews 13 and 1 Timothy 6. This word occurs only here in the New Testament – and it means properly ‘independent’ or ‘self-sufficient’.

In writings outside the Greek Bible, it is used in particular to describe the quality (highly prized by Stoic philosophers) which made a man totally self-sufficient, with resources in himself to meet any and every situation, unmoved by joy, by grief, or by any other emotion. At least one ancient writer used the word to describe a country which supplied all its own needs and had no need of imports.

And Paul is telling the Philippians here that he has learned how to be ‘independent’ of all external circumstances.

That word ‘abased’ was sometimes used in classical Greek to describe the falling of a river’s level during a time of drought. And Paul may well therefore be saying that he knows how to ‘run low’ and knows how to ‘run over’ – to ‘abound’.

'In everything and in all things', he says – in every particular circumstance as well as in all circumstances generally – he has 'been initiated into the secret' (a term referring to the introductory rites required of everyone who wanted to participate in any of the ancient mystery religions) ... he has 'been initiated into the secret' of how to face all the experiences and extremes of life ... with all of its ups and downs. He has learnt the secret of how to hold a full cup, and how to tighten his belt.

'To be hungry', did he say? Yes, indeed. Just think of two verses from his letters to the Corinthians – the one from his first letter,¹⁴ and the other from his second.¹⁵ Oh, yes, Paul knew all about hunger all right. And no doubt in the more recent past, in a prison system where prisoners had to secure their own food supply, he had had plenty of opportunity to go hungry.

And he had learnt the secret of how to face plenty or poverty ... 'to abound' or 'to lack' – that word 'lack' being the same as is translated 'be destitute' in Hebrews 11.¹⁶

'In everything and in all things', Paul says in effect, he had learned the secret of how to face both prosperity and adversity. And, make no mistake, prosperity can bring as many – if not more – problems into the believer's life as can adversity. Note the words of David in Psalm 30, 'I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved'.¹⁷ How easy in times of prosperity to rely on ourselves and our own resources. I am reminded of some words of the Puritan Thomas Brooks ... words based on a song once sung to commemorate David's 'stunning' victory over Goliath ... 'Adversity has slain her thousand, but prosperity her ten thousand'.

But where, pray, had the apostle 'learned' how to be 'independent' of all external circumstances? Not, I can tell you, at the feet of Gamaliel!¹⁸

No, he had learned the secret of contentment – of 'independence' – from Someone else!

The Stoic knew no power – no resources – outside of himself. His 'independence' – his 'contentment', if you like – could only come from within. His was – and could only be – true 'self-sufficiency'. But Paul's independence – his 'contentment', if you like – came from without ... 'I can do all things *through Him who strengthens me*' – or, more literally, 'I have strength for all things through Him who empowers me', and, more literally again – with my eye on the tense Paul uses¹⁹ – 'I have strength for all things through Him who keeps on pouring His power into me'.

In context, Paul is saying, 'In the power which the Lord Jesus gives me, I know how to cope with any and every circumstance in which I find myself ... there is no conceivable situation which I cannot face'.

Unlike the Stoic, Paul wasn't 'self-sufficient' ... he was 'Christ-sufficient! Paradoxically, the secret of his 'independence' was his total dependence ... his resting upon Christ. He drew his strength from the power which flowed into him as a result of his communion with the living Lord.

And how the apostle loved to speak of that 'empowering' – whether referring back to the occasion when the Lord Jesus first put him into His service,²⁰ or referring to an incident which took place sometime after he wrote the Philippian letter.²¹

And, in the strength which came from that empowering, Paul was equal to the most dire circumstances which could ever come his way.

Not long before Oliver Cromwell died, when lying ill at Hampton Court, he called for his Bible, and asked someone to read verses 10 to 13 of our passage to him. He then commented, 'This Scripture did once save my life; when my eldest son died – which went as a dagger to my heart'. Then, repeating the words of verses 10 and 11, he said, 'It's true, Paul, you have learned this ... but what shall I do? Ah poor creature, it is a hard lesson for me to take'. But then, quoting the thirteenth verse, 'I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me', he was heard to say to himself, 'He that was Paul's Christ is my Christ too!'²² And many of us, no doubt, when facing adverse and painful circumstances, have felt – if we have not actually said – of 'learning contentment', 'It is a hard lesson for me to take'. But, thank God, with our eyes – as Cromwell – on verse 13, we can each say with him this evening ... 'He that was Paul's Christ is my Christ too!'

And, for his part, the apostle, who could say in effect in chapter 1, 'Christ is my life', and in chapter 2, 'Christ is my pattern', and in chapter 3, 'Christ is my object/my goal', here in chapter 4 he can say 'Christ is my strength'.

But, at this point, Paul is quick to assure his readers that, notwithstanding all he has just said, he really did appreciate their kindness and the practical expression of their fellowship – of their partnering with him – both in his present affliction and in the work of the gospel in the past.

Paul is clearly concerned that his earlier comments might have been misunderstood, and that the Philippians might have concluded that he neither needed nor valued their love-gift.

‘Nevertheless’, he hastens to tell them, ‘you did well that you shared my affliction’. I note that much the same expression is used by Cornelius when he welcomes the apostle Peter to his house in Acts 10, ‘you have done well to come’ ... in other words, ‘Thank you for coming’. And here in verse 14 we have what is in effect the apostle Paul’s ‘Thank you’. He wants them to know that he certainly was not indifferent to the loving concern which had prompted them to give as they had.

Nor, he makes it clear, has he forgotten their past generosity to him, dating right back to the time when the gospel first reached their area. I suspect that Paul would have agreed with the sentiment expressed by the Roman philosopher Cicero over a hundred years before ... ‘He who receives a kindness should never forget it; he who bestows a kindness should never mention it’.²³ And it is Paul, and not the Philippians, who makes mention of the practical support which they – and they alone – had given him, both immediately after he had left them, and subsequently.

‘When I departed from Macedonia’, he says. Not long after leaving Macedonia, he had reached Corinth, and I think it likely that, while there, he had received financial help from the Philippians. This would explain his words in 2 Corinthians 11, ‘I preached God’s gospel without cost to you ... I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in want, I did not burden any one, for my needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia’.²⁴

That expression ‘giving and receiving’ is drawn from the financial vocabulary of the ancient world, and refers to the debit and credit sides of a ledger. The Philippians were the givers ... Paul was the receiver. No one else, he says, opened such an account with him.

We noted earlier the words, ‘Not that’ in verse 11, where he was careful to clarify what he meant ... or, more accurately, what he didn’t mean when referring to their kindness in the previous verse. Now again he uses the same words to clarify what he meant ... or, more accurately, what he didn’t mean when referring to their kindnesses in the previous verses.

It was ‘not that’, he says, that the gift, in and of itself, mattered to him. Rather, what mattered to him was that this gift would be reckoned as a credit (as a credit earning compound interest) to their account ... to their account not with him ... but in the Royal Bank of Heaven!

Paul saw the Philippians’ gift in terms of a spiritual investment – an investment paying rich dividends. He knew that, paradoxically, the gift would enrich, not so much the receiver, as the giver.

The following expression, ‘I have all’, was also widely used as an accounting term. These words regularly appeared when receipts were drawn up, indicating that payment had been received in full.²⁵

‘Here’, Paul is saying, ‘is my receipt for everything you have paid me’.

To which he adds, ‘I am filled’ – perhaps better, ‘I have been filled’ ... I have all I need – and more ... I am full to overflowing. Certainly then, his earlier acknowledgment of their liberality was not some backhanded and roundabout way of requesting further support from them.²⁶

Paul’s reference to ‘the things’ he had ‘received’ from Epaphroditus makes me wonder whether Epaphroditus had been making his way from Philippi to Rome with the Philippians’ gift at the very same time as Onesimus had been racing hotfoot from Colossae to Rome with Philemon’s silver!²⁷ The one carried something of value which Paul saw as being credited to an account in heaven. If the other carried something of value, Paul was happy to have that debited to his own account on earth.

But because the Philippians had sent their gift to Paul, not as a private person, but in his capacity as a servant of God,²⁸ the God whom he served accepted the gift as something given to Himself. For, although it was Paul who ‘received’ it, it was God who ‘accepted’ it ... and He did so as, in Old Testament days, He had accepted burnt offerings and peace offerings – as ‘a sweet savour’ – as ‘a fragrant aroma’ – a sacrifice ‘well-pleasing’ to Him.²⁹

It has been well said that the New Testament speaks of the believer’s sacrifice in terms of his person,³⁰ his praise,³¹ and his purse.³² The writer to the Hebrews urged, ‘Do not forget to do good and to share’; adding, ‘for with such sacrifices God is well pleased’. Well, the Philippians had ‘shared’ with Paul, both in the past and in the present,³³ and, as Paul assures them, their ‘sacrifice’ was, as the writer to the Hebrews said, ‘well-pleasing’ to God – the words ‘share’, ‘sacrifice’, and well-pleasing’ being the same in both references.

Paul knew that, given his present circumstances, he was in no position to recompense the Philippians in any way for that which they had supplied out of their great poverty to meet his need, but this gave him no great cause of concern. Because, as he assured them, he knew also that His God (who accepted and valued their gift as a sacrifice made to Him) ... that He would supply their need – and, what is more, would do so ‘according to’ – on a scale worthy of – in a manner befitting – His glorious wealth.

Because I am engaged in the service of my God, Paul is saying, you have supplied all my needs; in response to which, He (my God) will supply all of yours ... and that not merely ‘out of His riches’, but, just as you have given ‘according to your means’,³⁴ so He will give ‘according to’ His riches – His glorious riches.

In supplying Paul’s need, no doubt they had further impoverished themselves – their giving truly was ‘sacrificial giving’ – but they need have no fear for the future, for – if I may put it this way – the cheque which the apostle made out in their name was drawn on the Bank of Heaven – and all the resources of that Bank stood behind it!

And so a chapter which has spoken of God’s presence with the Christian,³⁵ of God’s peace around the Christian,³⁶ and of God’s power in the Christian,³⁷ now speaks of God’s provision for the Christian.³⁸

And it seems that Paul’s mention of God’s riches ‘in glory’³⁹ triggered in his mind another use of that word ‘glory’, and so, unable to suppress his praise for one moment longer, he bursts out with his joyful doxology of everlasting glory – not ascribed to his God only, but to theirs (and ours) also.

And I know no better note on which to close our meeting this evening than to repeat Paul’s doxology ... ‘Now to our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen’.

Footnotes

- ¹ 1 Cor. 16. 1.
² 1 Cor. 16. 3.
³ Phil. 4. 17-18.
⁴ 1 Cor. 16. 3; Rom. 15. 26.
⁵ Phil. 1. 5; 2. 25.
⁶ 2 Cor. 8. 2-4.
⁷ John Chrysostom, Philippians, Homily XV.
⁸ 603 miles.
⁹ The shortest route from Philippi to Rome, over land and sea, is estimated to be around 812 miles (http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/2445446), compared with 852 miles by road from Land's End to John O'Groats. The journey time would be about 17 hours, compared with about 40 days.
¹⁰ Heb. 13. 5.
¹¹ Heb. 10. 34.
¹² 1 Tim. 6. 6-8.
¹³ Stobaeus, Florilegium, 5. 43.
¹⁴ 1 Cor. 4. 11.
¹⁵ 2 Cor. 11. 27.
¹⁶ Heb. 11. 37.
¹⁷ Psa. 30. 6.
¹⁸ Acts 22. 3.
¹⁹ The present tense.
²⁰ 1 Tim. 1. 12.
²¹ 2 Tim. 4. 17.
²² Thomas Carlyle, 'Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell', page 246.
²³ Cicero, Laelius, 71.
²⁴ 2 Cor. 11. 7-9.
²⁵ Adolf Deissmann, 'Light from the Ancient East', pages 110-112.
²⁶ Cf. 1 Cor. 9. 15.
²⁷ Philemon 18-19.
²⁸ Tit. 1. 1.
²⁹ See Gen. 8. 21 etc.
³⁰ Rom. 12. 1.
³¹ Heb. 13. 15; 1 Pet. 2. 5.
³² Heb. 13. 16.
³³ Phil. 4. 14-15.
³⁴ 2 Cor. 8. 3.
³⁵ Phil. 4. 5.
³⁶ Phil. 4. 7.
³⁷ Phil. 4. 13.
³⁸ Phil. 4. 19.
³⁹ Compare 'riches of His glory', Eph. 3. 16.