

Malcolm's Monday Musings : 17 February 2025

Greetings.

Last Tuesday (11 February) marked the fifth anniversary of a big day in the history of COVID-19:

'The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, has declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic' ... the WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID19.

(A 'pandemic' is a disease which spreads in multiple countries around the world at the same time.)

Three-and-a-half weeks later, 6 April 2020, marked another historic moment—I issued the very first 'Malcolm's Monday Musings'! 🙄

The following two 'COVID-19/pandemic' quotations have connections with the first and the last 'Food for thought' items in the main 'Musings' set out below.

1. 'A 93-year-old man was stricken with COVID-19 and in spite of his age he somehow survived. Upon being discharged from the hospital, he was presented with a very large bill. Part of it was for payment for the ventilator which he had been put on for one day. Reading the amount that was due, the old man began to cry. The hospital felt a sense of compassion and told him not to worry—surely something could be worked out to reduce the cost to something more manageable. What the old man responded made the hospital workers weep. The old man explained, "I don't cry because of the money I have to pay. Thankfully I am able to afford it. I cry for another reason. I cry because I've just come to realize after all these many years on earth I've been breathing God's air for 93 years, yet I have never had to pay for it. It seems it takes over £500 to use a ventilator in the hospital for one day. Do you know how much I owe God? Why haven't I ever truly thanked Him all the days of my life for the miracle of this divine gift which I took for granted?"

(Source: B. Blech at <https://www.aish.com/ci/s/Sukkot-and-Corona-Three-Major-Messages.html>.)

2. 'During this pandemic, many people are struggling with anxiety, loneliness, or depression—sometimes a heavy mix of all three ... The ultimate answer to anxiety, loneliness, and depression isn't a pill or a program ... It's God in three persons: (i) our Father, who cares enough to carry the full weight of our cares (1 Pet. 5. 7); (ii) His Son, ready with timely mercies for each moment of our need (Heb. 4. 14–16); and (iii) His Spirit, who walks with us step by step, turning the wasteland of a worried mind into an orchard of spiritual fruit (Gal. 5. 22–23)'.
(Source: D. Gundersen on 15 May 2020 at <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-can-i-counsel-those-with-anxiety-loneliness-or-depression/>. The expression 'an orchard of spiritual fruit' appears also in the closing 'Food for thought' item below. To avoid any misunderstanding, let me make it clear that the Lord does use medication and/or other medical treatment to control clinical depression. Further comments can be found in the closing section of the 'Give us this day our daily bread' document, which was attached to the 'Monday Musings' email dated 19 October 2020 and which can be accessed at ... <https://voicesforchrist.org/writings/142>.)

Happy reading.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Malcolm

(i) Scripture.

I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and am known by my own.

As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear my voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from my Father.

John 10. 14-18 (*English Standard Version*)

(ii) Food for thought.

A seven-fold testimony to the 'breath-giving' generosity of God.

(i) Moses: 'The Lord God formed man ... and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul' (Gen. 2. 7).

(ii) Job: 'In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind' (Job 12. 10).

(iii) Elihu: 'If He took back His breath ... to Himself, all flesh would expire together and man would return to dust' (Job 34. 14).

(iv) The psalmist: 'You open your hand, they are filled with good ... you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust' (Psa. 104. 28-29).

(v) Isaiah: 'Thus says God the Lord ... who spread forth the earth and who gives breath to the people on it' (Isa. 42. 5).

(vi) Daniel: 'God in whose hand is your breath' (Dan. 5. 23).

(vii) Paul: 'He gives to all life, breath, and all things' (Acts 17. 25).

I understand that, on average, a human being takes roughly 20,000 breaths each day. That equates to over 7.3 million breaths each year. That is a tremendous number of divinely-bestowed gifts! It takes one's breath away!

Truly, in the closing words of the Book of Psalms, we ought each to exclaim, 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!' (Psa. 150. 6).

'I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also ... there will be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10. 16).

'Many years ago, I heard E. H. Broadbent speak on the fold and the flock in John 10. He pointed out that the sheep in the fold are kept together by the surrounding walls, while the sheep of a flock are kept together by the shepherd.

'Moreover, the number of sheep that any fold can contain is limited, while there was nothing to hinder the sheep which the good Shepherd led out of the fold having their number increased by the adherence of those "other sheep" that had never belonged to the original fold'.

(F. F. Bruce, 'The Church of Jerusalem', in the 'CBRF Journal', Number 4, page 13.)

'He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2. 2).

'Election is not, in Scripture, brought in to limit the provision made in atonement—a provision sufficient for all the world.

'On the other hand, Christ is not a substitute for the world, for substitution implies the actual bearing away of the sins of those who are represented in the Substitute ... He is the Substitute of His people, yet a people not numerically limited to just so many, but embracing all who respond to the invitations of His grace, though it were indeed the world for multitude ...

Substitution is not for a fixed number before-determined, but for a people to whom men can be freely invited to join themselves, because of the infinite value of the work accomplished, and of the infinite grace which that work expresses ...

'A propitiation for the sins of the world means nothing less than such a provision has been made that if the whole world turned to God through Christ, it would find in Him a complete Saviour ... Propitiation, then, is for all ... not as actually availing, of course, but as fully available'.

(F. W. Grant, 'Atonement in Type, Prophecy, and Accomplishment', pages 109-110, 179-180.)

'Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' (Matt. 27. 17).

'Peter claimed that the men of Israel "denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted" to them; "and killed the Prince ('author', 'originator') of life" (Acts 3. 14, 15). Peter was saying that they had given life to the one who had taken life, and they had taken the life of the One who had given life.

'The irony of the situation did not, however, stop there.

'The Jewish council had condemned Jesus for blasphemy (Matt. 26. 65-66). Knowing that such a charge would mean nothing to Pilate, they had heaped up political charges against Him. Pilate could

not afford to ignore their claim that Jesus had said He was ‘Christ a king’ (Luke 23. 2). The leaders of Israel falsely imputed to Christ their own political expectations of the Messiah.

‘The Lord had scrupulously avoided giving any encouragement to an uprising against Rome (John 6. 15) but He now stood charged with being the very kind of Messiah He had consistently refused to be (Matt. 4. 1-10; 16. 21-23).

‘Pilate found it incredible that this poor, bound, Galilean preacher should have ever laid claim to any sort of royalty, and cross-questioned Him as to the nature of His kingship (John 18. 33-38). Satisfied as to Jesus’ innocence and confident of the result, Pilate offered to release for the people either Jesus or Barabbas (Matt. 27. 17).

‘Due largely to the subtle influence of the chief priests and elders, the people chose Barabbas. To both the people and their leaders, a patriotic adventurer, who recognized no Messiahship but that of the sword, was more attractive than the man who had recently suffered without resistance (1 Pet. 2. 23).

‘The rulers had claimed Jesus was a threat to Rome (Luke 23. 2); they turned from Him because they knew He was not.

‘They claimed they wanted Him crucified because His kingdom was of this world; they were happy to see Him die because they knew it was not.

‘The final irony lay in the fact that the governor was forced to release a man who was guilty of the very form of crime which the leaders attempted to fasten upon Jesus. The Lord was led out to be crucified in the place of a man who represented the kind of Messiahship which He had persistently refused to accept’.

(‘Day by Day Through the New Testament’, Precious Seed Publications, 1979, page 45—reproduced with kind permission.)

‘He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then He anointed the man’s eyes with the mud’ (John 9. 6).

‘Perhaps Jesus spat on the ground so the blind man would hear what He was doing.

‘Jesus applied His saliva directly when He healed the deaf man with the speech impediment in the Decapolis (Mark 7. 33) and the blind man near Bethsaida (Mark 8. 23). Here He mixed His saliva with clay. Applying the moist clay to the blind man’s eyes would have let him feel that Jesus was working for him.

‘Jesus may have intended these sensory aids to strengthen the man’s faith. Jesus may have varied His methods of healing so people would not think that the method was more important than the man doing the healing’.

(T. E. Constable, ‘Expository Notes on the Bible’, comments on John 9. 6).

‘Through His own blood, He entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption’ (Heb. 9. 12).

‘The statement of this verse is not that the blood of Christ was taken into heaven, but that He entered “through his own blood”, which means simply that, when He ascended, He entered heaven as Redeemer and Priest because of what He had accomplished in the shedding of His blood’.

(G. Campbell Morgan, ‘This Was His Faith: Expository Letters’, edited by J. Morgan, page 100.)

‘When Hezekiah and the leaders came and saw the heaps, they blessed the Lord and His people Israel’ (2 Chron. 31. 8).

“They blessed the Lord”—both for giving such plentiful provisions to His land and for giving His people such liberal hearts. And they praised the people for their forwardness and faithfulness in it’.

(J. Wesley, ‘Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament’, comment on 2 Chron. 31. 8.

Compare Paul’s note of appreciation to the saints at Philippi for their practical support: ‘you have done well by sharing with me in my affliction ... in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again’ (Phil. 4. 14, 16). According to both Testaments, it is right to thank not only the Lord but also His people when they give.

[For the benefit of any who are interested in considering those two ‘Philippian 4’ verses *in their context*, I reproduce at Annex A below (unedited) notes of a message which I gave several years ago on Phil. 4. 10-23.]

‘Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom’ (Psa. 90. 12).

‘Death is a fundamental human experience, uniting all humans across time and space, race and class ...

'The prayer (of Psa. 90. 12) comes as a sort of hinge between the two parts of the psalm.

'The first part focuses on human limitations compared with the vastness of God: "From everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psa. 90. 2); "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night" (Psa. 90. 4).

'But for us humans, under sin and judgment, time destroys everything. Our lives are "like a dream", and like the grass, "in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers" (Psa. 90. 5-6). At best, "the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (Psa. 90. 10). The psalmist's prayer ... is a prayer that understands our limits and the insurmountable difference between God and us.

'But this prayer sets up another theme in the second part of the psalm.

'Immediately after praying that God would teach us to number our days, the psalmist prays that God would make us glad all our days with the richness of His love: "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Psa. 90. 14)'.
(M. McCullough, 'Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope', pages 20-21.)

Twelve mentions of the expression, '... of the living God'.

(i) 'Who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?' (Deut. 5. 26).

(ii) 'Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?' (1 Sam. 17. 26; cf. v. 36).

(iii) 'You have perverted the words of the living God, the Lord of hosts' (Jer. 23. 36).

(iv) 'The king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?"' (Dan 6. 20).

(v) 'In the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people", there it shall be said to them, "You are sons of the living God"' (Hos. 1. 10; cf. Rom. 9. 26).

(vi) 'Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"' (Matt. 16. 16).

(vii) 'You are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God' (2 Cor. 3. 3).

(viii) 'You are the temple of the living God' (2 Cor. 6. 16).

(ix) 'I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God' (1 Tim. 3. 15).

(x) 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10. 31).

(xi) 'You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem' (Heb. 12. 22).

(xii) 'I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God' (Rev. 7. 2).

Three comments on Luke 15.

1. Sought.

In Luke 15, the 'seeking love of God' is portrayed in the three stories told by the Lord Jesus:

(i) the sheep (Luke 15. 4-7).

(ii) the silver (Luke 15. 8-10).

(iii) the son (Luke 15. 25-32). Yes, it was the 'older' son (and not the so-called 'prodigal son') who was actively sought by the father (Luke 15. 28). The 'younger' son first 'came to himself' (Luke 15. 17) and then 'came to his father' of his own accord (Luke 15. 20).

2. The parable of the two sons (Luke 15. 11-32).

'As the first two parables have stressed God's activity alone without telling us anything about the actions or reactions or condition of the sinner (Luke 15. 4-10), so this parable (Luke 15. 11-32) is spoken to impress that aspect and that side of the matter, lest anyone should be so foolish as to think that we should all be automatically saved by God's love even as the sheep and the lost coin were found'.

(D. M. Lloyd-Jones, 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son', in 'Evangelistic Sermons at Aberavon', page 227.)

3. The 'elder son' and the Pharisees (Luke 15. 25-32).

'The episode of the elder brother appears not as an (incidental addition to) the parable but as an essential element in it. Its object is to hold up the mirror of fact to the Pharisaic objectors that they may see their conduct and attitude of mind in their true light. Their moving principle was not, as they

fancied, a zeal for righteousness that would not have sin condoned, but just a mean-spirited jealousy that was incapable of the natural response of the human spirit in the presence of a great blessing.

'The effect, you see, is to place the Pharisaic objectors themselves in the category of "sinners", side by side with the outcasts they had despised, to probe their hard hearts until they recognized their lost estate also and so to bring them as themselves prodigals back in repentance to the Father's house'.

(B. B. Warfield, 'The Prodigal Son', in 'Sermons preached in the chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary', pages 20-21.)

God's steadfast love.

'If David was anything, he was a worshipper of God. The psalms are flooded with his declarations of praise and thanksgiving and adoration. Typical is Psalm 31. 7 where he declares, "I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul".

'The love of God does not guarantee that we will never experience affliction or distress. Rather, it is in the midst of such adversity that we can be reassured that God's love remains and is steadfast and deserving of our trust; "steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord" (Psa. 32. 10)'.

(S. Storms, 'Psalm 25: Crossway Daily Devotional', meditation for 10 February.)

'Walk in the Spirit' (Gal. 5. 16, 25).

'Instead of conforming to the darkness that presses in on every side, we must allow the indwelling Holy Spirit to conform us to the very likeness of Christ.

'Practising His presence, we live every moment of every day as if Jesus is right beside us—because He is! Walking in the Spirit continuously allows Him to produce in us an orchard of spiritual fruit (Gal. 5. 22–23)'.

(S. Booth, 'Root your disciple-making in the power of the Holy Spirit', accessed at ...

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/9-ways-to-root-your-disciple-making-in-the-power-of-the-holy-spirit/>.)

(iii) Go on, smile.

David Morse was riding in a taxicab to a hospital appointment when he leaned over and gently tapped the driver on the shoulder to get his attention.

The driver screamed, lost control of the cab, nearly hit a bus, drove up over the curb and finally stopped just inches from a large plate glass window.

For a few moments everything was silent in the cab. Then the shaking driver asked, 'Are you okay back there? I'm so sorry, but you scared the daylights out of me'.

Somewhat badly shaken, David apologised to the driver. 'I didn't realise', he said, 'that a mere tap on the shoulder would startle you so badly'.

'No, no, I'm the one who is sorry', the taxi driver replied, 'It's entirely my fault. But you see, today is my first day driving a cab. Previously, I drove a hearse for 25 years'.

Annex A

Philippians 4. 10-23.

Our Bible passage comprises Philippians chapter 4, from verse 10 to the end of the chapter:

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 had fellowship with my affliction.

And you yourselves know, Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church had fellowship with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only.

For even in Thessalonica once and again you sent to 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 you sent, 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 the apostle more or less concludes on the subject of money. He does 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 is 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 received*,³ and, **second**, whereas *the 'gift' in view in 1 Corinthians is earmarked for the poor saints in Jerusalem*,⁴ *the 'gift' in view in our passage has been sent to the apostle to support him in his work for the Lord*.

I say 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 Philippians' 'fellowship' (or 'partnership') with him in the gospel—aimed at meeting his 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 the gift which they had sent to him by the hand of Epaphroditus—and for which he makes it clear he is most grateful.

And I note with sadness that *a little over fifty years later, the fame of this very church was sullied by the sin of avarice*. Polycarp, a Christian leader from Smyrna, then has occasion to denounce repeatedly avarice and to express great grief over the scandal brought on the gospel by the greed of one couple in the church—that of a former elder (a certain Valens) and his wife⁶—who one highly respected commentator well describes as 'the Ananias and Sapphira of the Philippian community'.⁷ But, here in this letter, the apostle cannot speak highly enough of 'the sacrifice acceptable and well-pleasing to God' which Epaphroditus has now brought him.

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

He rejoices, he says, in the Lord 'greatly'—this being the only occasion of which I know where Paul stresses in this way the magnitude of his spiritual joy. And his joy is immense, he makes clear, not on account of the gift for its own sake but because of what it expresses of their loving concern for him ... that the gift is to him the practical demonstration of their care—a care which, as he says, had revived (had 'flourished again'—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 has 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 has now been upwards of ten years since his ministry in Philippi had resulted in the formation of a Christian assembly at Philippi. As we learn (i) 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 (ii) from verse 15, that they had continued their support when he had headed south out of Macedonia into Achaia—mainly, no doubt, when 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 have been unable to maintain their practical support*.

What those circumstances were, we are not told.

(i) Maybe it had something to do with Paul's later movements prior to his imprisonment.

(ii) 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 Philippian assembly (along with the assemblies at Berea and Thessalonica) suffered 'deep poverty'. And, what is more, in spite of that extreme poverty, they have been extremely generous in giving towards 'the Judean Relief Fund'—giving, Paul himself acknowledges, 'beyond their means'.⁸ John Chrysostom, the fourth century so-called 'Early Church Father', comments on our verse, 'You had it not in your hands, nor were in abundance. This is the meaning of, "You lacked opportunity"'.⁹ The good man may well have been right.

Or (iii) 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. And I hardly need tell you that Epaphroditus was no crow! His actual journey would have required him to travel upwards of 800 miles, largely by road but partly by sea (across the Adriatic straits).¹⁰

But, in the end, we don't know what it was that had prevented the Philippians from responding earlier to the apostle's material needs. 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 rejoices greatly at the renewed evidence of their care for him.

But he does not want the Philippians to misunderstand him and so is careful to clarify—and to clarify immediately—what he means ... or, more accurately, what he doesn't mean. It is 'not', he says, that he speaks as one who feels any great lack—or, indeed, any 'lack' at all.

And this, because he has schooled himself—through the many chequered experiences of his life—to 'be content' in *whatever* circumstances he finds 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'¹¹—and we can hardly miss that those words, 'with such things as you have', are addressed to saints who had recently suffered the loss of more or less all of their earthly goods!¹²

Or, again, we might think of Paul's words a little later to Timothy, 'Godliness with contentment', he writes, 'is great gain ... Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content'.¹³

I guess that the apostle would have had some sympathy with the words of the Greek philosopher Socrates, who, when asked, 'Who is the wealthiest?', replied, 'He that is content with least'.¹⁴

On the one hand, in this sense of the word 'content', it is **always right to be content with what we have**. But, on the other hand, it is **never right to be content with what we are or what we have done**.

The word which Paul uses here translated 'content' is different from that used 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, the word is used in particular to describe the quality (highly prized by Stoic philosophers) which makes 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.¹⁵ At least one ancient writer uses the word to describe a country which supplies all its own needs and has no need of imports.¹⁶

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

That word 'abased'¹⁷ is 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'**—viz. to 'abound'.

'In everything and in all things' (in every particular circumstance as well as in all circumstances generally), he says, he has 'been initiated into the secret'¹⁸ (a term referring to the introductory rites

required of everyone who wanted to participate in any of the ancient mystery religions) 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', does he say? Yes, indeed. Just think of two verses from his letters to the Corinthians—(i) the one from his first letter ('unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place'¹⁹) and (ii) the other from his second ('in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness'²⁰). Oh, yes, Paul knows 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 has had plenty of opportunity to go hungry.

And he has 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 verse 37).

'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. We do well to note the words of David, 'I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved'.²¹

How easy, in times of prosperity, to rely on ourselves and our own resources. I am reminded of words of the Puritan, Thomas Brooks (words based on a song once sung to commemorate David's 'stunning' victory over Goliath²²): 'Adversity has slain her thousands, but prosperity her ten thousands'.²³

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!²⁴

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

The Stoic knows no power—no resources—outside of himself. The Stoic's 'independence'—his 'contentment', you might say—could only come from within. His was (and could only be) true 'self-sufficiency'.

But Paul's independence—his 'contentment'—comes 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', or, more literally again (with my eye on the tense Paul uses²⁵), '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. It was 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 loves to speak of that 'empowering'—whether referring back to the occasion when the Lord Jesus first put him into His service²⁶ or referring to an incident which took place sometime after he wrote the Philippian letter.²⁷

And, in the strength which comes from that empowering, Paul is equal to the direst circumstances which could ever come his way.

Not long before the English Puritan politician Oliver Cromwell died, when lying ill at Hampton Court, he called for his Bible, and asked someone to read to him verses 10 to 13 of our passage. 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 verse 13, '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!'²⁸

And many of us, no doubt, when facing adverse and painful circumstances, have felt—if we have not actually said—concerning 'learning contentment', 'It is a hard lesson for me to take'. But, thank God, with our eyes—as Oliver Cromwell's—on verse 13, we can each say with him, '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 and goal'*, here in *chapter 4 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 does 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 therefore 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 the Philippian saints to know that he certainly is 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'*.²⁹ 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 anyone, for my needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia (where Philippi was situated)'.³⁰

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 are the givers ... Paul is the receiver. *No one else, he says, opened such an account with him.*

We noted earlier the words, 'not that', in verse 11, where the apostle is careful to clarify what he means (or, more accurately, what he doesn't mean) when referring to their kindness in the previous verse. Now again (in verse 17) he uses the same words to clarify what he means (or, more accurately, what he doesn't mean) when referring to their kindnesses in the previous verses.

It is 'not that', he says, the gift, in and of itself, matters to him. Rather, what matters to him is 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 sees the Philippians' gift in terms of a spiritual investment—an investment paying rich dividends. He knows that, *paradoxically, the gift would enrich, not so much the receiver, as the giver.*³¹

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.³²

'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 is not some backhanded and roundabout way of requesting further support from them.*³³

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, possibly with Philemon's silver!³⁴

Epaphroditus carried something of value from Philippi to Rome which Paul saw as being credited to an account in heaven. If Onesimus carried something of value from Colossae to Rome, Paul is happy to have that debited to his own account on earth.³⁵

And I note that Paul then sends Epaphroditus back to the Philippian church, even though he would doubtless have proved an ongoing source of help and encouragement to Paul—much as, shortly before and for entirely different reasons, he had sent Onesimus back to Philemon, even though this newly converted runaway was also ‘profitable’ to him.³⁶

But because the Philippians had sent their gift to Paul, not as a private person but in his capacity as a servant of God,³⁷ the God whom he served accepted the gift as something given to Himself. For, although it was Paul who ‘received’ it,³⁸ it was God who ‘accepted’ it³⁹—and He did so just as, in Old Testament times, He had ‘accepted’ burnt offerings and peace offerings as ‘a sweet savour’—as ‘a fragrant aroma’—a sacrifice ‘well-pleasing’ to Him.⁴⁰

It has been well said that the New Testament speaks of the believer’s sacrifice, not only in terms of (i) his person,⁴¹ (ii) his praise⁴² but (iii) of his purse.⁴³ The writer to the Hebrews urges, ‘Do not forget to do good and to share’; adding, ‘for with such sacrifices God is well pleased’.⁴⁴ Well, the Philippians had ‘shared’ with Paul, both in the past and in the present,⁴⁵ and, as Paul assures them, their ‘sacrifice’ was, as the writer to the Hebrews said, ‘well-pleasing’ to God—the words translated ‘share’, ‘sacrifice’ and ‘well-pleasing’ being the same in both references.

Paul knows that, given his present circumstances, he is 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 gives him no great cause of concern. For, as he assures them, he knows also that his God (who accepts and values their gift as ‘a sacrifice’ made to Him) would ‘supply all 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,⁴⁶ so He will give “according to” His riches, His glorious riches.

In supplying Paul’s need, no doubt, the Philippians had further impoverished themselves (their giving truly being ‘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 (i) of God’s presence with the Christian,⁴⁷ (ii) of God’s peace around the Christian,⁴⁸ and (iii) of God’s power in the Christian,⁴⁹ now speaks (iv) of God’s provision for the Christian.⁵⁰

And it seems that Paul’s mention of God’s riches ‘in glory’⁵¹ triggered in his mind another use of that word ‘glory’. 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.

I want more or less to finish on a (simple and fairly obvious) practical note—namely, that we should make it our aim to focus both our prayer and our practical support on individual servants of the Lord and their specific needs—and not duck out of our responsibility to them by praying in some vague way ‘for all the missionaries’ or by simply forwarding all our giving to some missionary support organisation for it to decide where to direct the gift and for it to undertake the actual correspondence.

We ought to develop personal relationships with those we intend to support—whether that support takes the form of prayer or finance. Nor is this difficult, given the extensive information made available to us through organisations such as Echoes, the Lord’s Work Trust, CMMML and MSC Canada. As we have seen from the case of the apostle Paul, this level of personal interest in God’s servants provides them with great and much-needed encouragement in their labours for Him.

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

Notes

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 *'The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians'*, paragraph 11.

⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *'The Apostolic Fathers'*, Introduction, Paragraph 1.

⁸ 2 Cor. 8. 2-4.

⁹ John Chrysostom, *'Philippians'*, Homily XV.

¹⁰ From Philippi to Dyrrachium on the Adriatic one would take the Egnatian Way; then, after crossing the Adriatic straits to Brundisium in Italy (this crossing would take about a day), one would continue on the Appian Way to Rome. It is about 370 miles along the Via Egnatia from Philippi to Dyrrachium, 100 miles from Dyrrachium to Brundisium and 360 miles along the Via Appia from Brundisium to Rome. Paul journeyed more than eight hundred miles of actual travel, from east to west. He was probably travelling for about a month.

¹¹ Heb. 13. 5.

¹² Heb. 10. 34.

¹³ 1 Tim. 6. 6-8.

¹⁴ Stobaeus, *'Florilegium'*, 5. 43.

¹⁵ The word rendered 'content' (*'αὐτάρκης'*):

(i) was 'used by the Stoic school of philosophy which taught that man should be sufficient to himself for all things. It means to be independent of external circumstances', K. S. Wuest, *'Philippians in the Greek New Testament'*, page 112.

(ii) 'means sufficient in oneself, self-sufficient, adequate, needing no assistance', W. E. Vine, *'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words'*, article 'Content, B. Adjectives, 1.

'The Stoics sought to be content by eliminating all desires, all emotions ... by a deliberate practiced act of the will', W. Fields, *'Philippians, Colossians, Philemon: Bible Study Textbook Series'*, College Press, 1969, page 105.

¹⁶ J. MacArthur Jr, *'Philippians'*, comment on Phil. 4. 11.

¹⁷ The word *'ταπεινώ'*.

¹⁸ The word *'μύεω'*.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 4. 11.

²⁰ 2 Cor. 11. 27.

²¹ Psa. 30. 6.

²² 1 Sam. 18. 7.

²³ Thomas Brooks, *'Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices' (1705 edition)*, page 8; accessed at ...
(https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_precious-remedies-against_brooks-thomas_1705/page/n27/mode/2up).

²⁴ Acts 22. 3.

²⁵ The present tense.

²⁶ 1 Tim. 1. 12.

²⁷ 2 Tim. 4. 17.

²⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, page 246.

²⁹ Cicero, *Laelius*, 71.

³⁰ 2 Cor. 11. 7-9.

³¹ Cf. Acts 20. 35.

³² Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pages 110-112.

³³ Cf. 1 Cor. 9. 15.

³⁴ Philemon 18a.

³⁵ Philemon 18b-19.

³⁶ Philemon 10-13.

³⁷ Phil. 1. 1.

³⁸ Phil. 4. 15, 18a.

³⁹ Phil. 4. 18b.

⁴⁰ Phil. 4. 18; cf. Gen. 8. 21 etc.

⁴¹ Rom. 12. 1.

⁴² Heb. 13. 15; 1 Pet. 2. 5.

⁴³ Heb. 13. 16.

⁴⁴ Heb. 13. 16.

⁴⁵ Phil. 4. 14-15.

⁴⁶ 2 Cor. 8. 3.

⁴⁷ Phil. 4. 5.

⁴⁸ Phil. 4. 7.

⁴⁹ Phil. 4. 13.

⁵⁰ Phil. 4. 19.

⁵¹ Compare 'riches of His glory', Eph. 3. 16.