Content in Christ

Philippians 4:10-23

Paul concludes his letter with gratitude for the Philippians' generosity. Their recent and consistent giving made a huge difference in his ministry and it would continue to bear fruit in their lives as they labor together in the gospel.

Summary of the Text

It brings Paul great joy in the Lord that at last their care for him bloomed again, not that they stopped caring but simply didn't have the opportunity (v. 10). Strictly speaking, he has no need because he learned to be content in whatever state he is in (v. 11). He knows how to be brought low and how to abound. It's not just in Rome but everywhere and in all things that he knows how to be well supplied and hungry, to be overflowing and needy; he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him (vv. 12-13). While circumstances fluctuate, Jesus remains the same and so Paul relies on Him. Nevertheless, they did well communing with him in his affliction (v. 14). When he first left the region of Macedonia where Philippi resides, they were the only church that supported him financially (v. 15). They met his needs again in Thessalonica (v. 16). He doesn't say this to squeeze them for another gift, but because he wants them to enjoy the fruit that resulted from their gift (v. 17). He is stocked and overflowing from the gift that Epaphroditus just delivered, a sweet-smelling sacrifice, pleasing to the Lord (v. 18). His God will fill up their needs according to His riches in the glory of Christ (v. 19). Paul gives glory forever and ever to our God and Father, amen (v. 20). He wants every saint greeted in Christ Jesus and sends greeetings from the brethren with him—all of them, but especially those in Caesar's household whom we can imagine hearing a lot about the Philippians (vv. 21-22). The grace of Christ be with them all, amen (v. 23).

In Whatever State

There's a way of understanding contentment that is closer to stoicism than Christ-like strength. The Roman stoic Seneca was an advisor to Nero, the emperor who executed Paul. He said, "The happy man is satisfied with his present situation, no matter what it is, and eyes his fortune with contentment; the happy man is the one who permits reason to evaluate every condition of his existence." Stoicism was a self-centered philosophy that trusted in one's reason to find happiness. Seneca famously committed suicide in a calm way after being commanded to do so by Nero. Paul uses the word "content" (*autarkei*) but radically transforms the concept to center his contentment on Christ. Rather than being okay with the present due to cold detachment, he remains thriving in Christ regardless of the poverty or abundance he faces. If Paul was classically stoic, he may have responded, "Thanks anyway for the gift; not necessary." Instead, he rejoices greatly, not because he was discontent, but because he loves the Philippians, appreciates their love for him, and will put it to good use for the mission of Christ. There is a godly detachment from material blessings that trusts God despite lacking them. But this goes to seed when we despise the material world and especially the blessings that come to us through others. Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission in the nineteenth century and was responsible for bringing more than 800 missionaries there over 50 years. In the early years of his ministry, he was convicted about lacking joy. He was still fruitful but not enjoying it the way he knew he should. He got a convicting letter from a friend that changed his life and concluded, "It is not by trusting my own faithfulness, but by looking away to the faithful one!" It's possible to do a lot of good things but not be working from a spirit of contentment. And of course it's possible to have things go wrong and be sinfully discontent. This is where we must imitate Paul who imitated Christ and be content in whatever state we find ourselves. Imagine being Joseph in Egypt, rising out of slavery to be put in charge of Potiphar's house, only to be being thrown back in prison for being faithful (Gen. 39:20). Joseph could not know at the time *how* God

would use it for good, but he did knew *that* He would. Providence is what God does. He *pro videre*, sees ahead and gives us what we need, not what we think we need. Sometimes we need prison time in Rome. Sometimes we need a nice gift from a dear brother. But whatever it is, we can do all the things He calls us to do through Christ who strengthens us. This conviction will cause you to stop thinking about what you lack and can't do, and start thinking about what you have and can do.

Fellowship in Distress

Contentment in Christ does not make the apostle unfeeling, unthankful, or disconnected at all. It's precisely the opposite. God would have provided for him another way had the Philippians not, but their fellowship in his affliction was wonderful (v. 14). Fellowship in affliction meant they cared, prayed for, and sent what relief they could. The church in Philippi was the first to support Paul and they set a precedent of "first [giving] themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God" (2 Cor. 8:5). In order for the church to know he was in trouble, Paul had to tell them. He also had to have a relationship with them so that they knew who he was and how he conducted himself in the ministry. Given that relationship, they came to his need and God used their generosity to continue the mission of the greatest apostle to spread the gospel. Even at Thessalonica they ministered to him (v. 16). Here we see the need of one part of the body met by another part, free of manipulation and free of grudging obligation. "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). Contentment in Christ keeps us free from grasping and selfishness, ready to help and be helped.

Fruit that Abounds

Without any guile, Paul seeks "the fruit that abounds to your account" (v. 17). He's not asking for anything else (v. 18) but wants them to know how this works. We know from what he says here and his description in 2 Corinthians 8 that their gift was sacrificial—costly, personal, and well-pleasing to God (v. 18). An "acceptable" sacrifice means it wasn't a lame, half-hearted effort. The Lord rebukes Israel for despising His name by offering blind, lame, and sick animals on the altar: "'Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?' says the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 1:8). The Philippians gave generously and Paul wanted them to know that this resulted in his blessing but also to theirs. They were responsible for what was happening. They sowed and planted with Paul, and God gave the increase. They both conclude: "Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen" (v. 20). Paul knows that the Lord will supply all their need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (v. 19). What quantity of riches does God possess? How much glory does He want Jesus to have? Unbelief thinks in terms of zero-sums. To pay Paul is rob Peter. To give there is to take from here—and there's no way to get more because the pie only has so many pieces. But this is not how God is nor how He works. He will do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. The pie grows, the Shunamite's oil doesn't run out, and God work don't God's God's way doesn't lack God's resources. Paul wants abounding fruit for the Philippians. Do we want it for others? For ourselves? For our households, schools, institutions, and people? This is the way God works but you have to believe Him to see and enjoy it. This is the power of contentment in Christ. Paul wants every Philippian to get the shout out from every saint in Rome, especially those in Caesar's house. Love, grace, and abounding fruit of Christ be with every one of us. Amen.