

# “God Will Supply Every Need”

## The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Philippians

*Texts: Philippians 4:10-23; Exodus 19:1-18*

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Paul’s letter to the Philippians comes to an end with Paul reminding his brothers and sisters of one of the great promises given by God to his people. “God will supply every need.” This is an important reminder to a congregation facing persecution from those outside the church who cannot possibly understand why someone would give up Roman religion to worship a Palestinian Jew, who claimed to have risen from the dead. The Philippians were also facing doctrinal woes from a group of Judaizers who had arrived in Philippi and were teaching that faith in Jesus was not enough to be justified. One had to submit to circumcision and embrace Jewish culture and customs in addition to trusting in Christ. Paul has exhorted the Philippians to stand firm in the face of this opposition as well to rejoice always even while in the midst of difficult times. At the end of this epistle, Paul speaks of the secret as to how the Philippians can accomplish these things—they are to realize that through their union with the Risen Jesus who strengthens them, they can indeed accomplish all things and stand firm and even rejoice in the face of anti-Christian opposition to the cause of Jesus and his ever-advancing kingdom.

As we wrap up our series on Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi we come to what one commentator has called “Paul’s thank you note,” sent to those who have supported the apostle during his difficult days in Rome.<sup>1</sup> The help coming from the Philippians was no doubt greatly appreciated by Paul who was instrumental in the founding of the Philippian church a decade or so earlier. It may even be the case that Paul was so grateful for the Philippian’s support that he could not pen just a few words of thanks and appreciation, but felt compelled by both his friendship toward the Philippians, as well as by the necessity of his calling as an apostle to encourage the churches, that Paul’s brief note of thanks became the four chapter epistle we now know as Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians.

So far, Paul has given us a series of indicatives (centering on God’s gracious work in Jesus as applied to the Philippian believers) followed by a number of imperatives (especially the exhortations to stand firm and to rejoice in all circumstances). But in the final section of chapter 4 (vv. 10-23, our text for this sermon), Paul finally gets to his main reason for writing this epistle. Paul thanks the Philippians for their generosity in sending him a gift upon learning of his imprisonment in Rome. From what we can tell, the Philippians learned that Paul’s appeal to Caesar had taken him all the way to Rome, where the apostle was now under house arrest. This unspecified gift to Paul was brought to him by Ephahroditus, who may have been a pastor or an elder in the Philippian church. Upon his arrival in Rome, Ephahroditus fell ill, and now that he has recovered, Paul composes this note of thanks (with a long letter of introduction) which is contained in the concluding section of this letter.

In many ways this closing section reflects Paul’s earlier thanksgiving in chapter 1:3-11, especially his comments, in verses 3-6. “*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” The concluding section of the epistle effectively wraps up with another demonstration of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, Philippians, 160.

Paul's affection toward the Philippians as the apostle expresses his thanks to God for allowing his friends in Philippi to support him with such a generous gift—a gift which comes at a time when Paul was himself encouraged by their concern for him.

Paul begins to wrap up his epistle in verse 10, when he writes, *“I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.”* In verse 6 of the previous section, Paul exhorted the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord”—which, as we saw, means that despite a Christian's current circumstances, Christians can know that all of God's promises will come true on the day of Christ Jesus. This is the basis for a Christian's joy in all circumstances, good or bad. This is a fruit of the knowledge that because God has begun a good work in us, his promise stands true that he will see his work of new creation through to its completion on the day of Christ Jesus. And even now, Paul reminds us of our heavenly citizenship as we await the coming of the Savior.

Because he knows he is an example to the Philippians, Paul indicates that he is one who does not fail to practice what he preaches. He too rejoices in the Lord—greatly, in fact—because the Philippians are concerned about him and his plight. This is his way of saying “thank you.”<sup>2</sup> Time and distance have separated Paul from these dear brothers and sisters, but now his own difficulties gave the Philippians an opportunity to demonstrate their concern for the apostle. Paul—who often makes use of irony—sees the irony in the fact that his recent troubles have given the Philippians an opportunity to send him a generous gift at a time when he greatly needed it. Paul's trial is an opportunity for the Philippians to express the fruit of the gospel which Paul had preached to them, and which established the church in Philippi. One of the great blessings of the Christian life is that another believer's trial is an opportunity for us to exercise the spiritual gifts which God has given to us to benefit our neighbor, who may need our help.

Given his confidence in Christ's greater redemptive purposes in all things—even the trials and tribulations which Paul himself has experienced—Paul goes on to say in verse 11, *“not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”* Paul is genuinely thankful for their gift and does not complain about his circumstances. Despite the generosity shown to him, Paul wants the Philippians to know that he did not feel neglected by God.<sup>3</sup> He knows that God has not abandoned him to face the decision of Caesar (Nero) alone. Paul knows that whatever Caesar decides about his appeal, God's will is being done and the cause of Christ will be furthered. Yet Paul has also learned one of the hardest lessons in all of the Christian life—that he not be dependent upon his circumstances (good or bad) for his sense of purpose and well-being.

In this situation, Paul serves as an example to us every bit as much as he did to the Philippians. The apostle knows that Jesus Christ will meet his deepest needs (through the generosity of God's people or other providential means) and the Risen and Ascended Lord will ensure that regardless of what happens with his appeal, Paul's relationship with God is absolutely secure because he looks to the merits of Jesus as the ground of his justification and sanctification, not to whether he feels content or not. He has learned to look to Christ (outside himself), not to his own inward mood, which like all other people changes by the hour. By focusing upon the indicatives—what we are, and already have in Christ, Paul is not held captive to his current circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, Philippians, 160.

<sup>3</sup> O'Brien, Philippians, 519.

There is great wisdom in this and we should be striving to learn the same thing. In fact, John Calvin comments, “let every person live in their station, whether slenderly or moderately, or plentifully, so that all remember God nourishes them to live, but not luxuriate. And let them regard this as the law of Christian freedom; to have learned with Paul, in whatever state they are to be content; to know how to be humbled and exalted; to have been taught, in any and all circumstances, to be filled and to hunger, to abound and suffer want.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, Paul will later tell Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6), “*but godliness with contentment is great gain.*” It is truly a blessing from God when we learn to be content in Christ despite whatever troubles come our way.

As I mentioned last time, far too often Christians are told to rejoice as a bald imperative, without the necessary indicatives which explain why we should rejoice and what it means to rejoice. Rejoicing is a response to God’s mercy in Christ, and should not be tied to current circumstances, good or bad. The same thing holds true with contentment. To tell someone they must be content under any and all circumstances because Paul was content while in a Roman jail is to do what Job’s counselors did to him. His friends were of much more comfort to Job when they sat silently with him on the dunghill, than they were when they tried to explain to him why he was suffering. The only way someone can be content without considering the biblical context is by either ignoring their bad or difficult circumstances (denial) or behave like a stoic of Paul’s day, bravely facing a world of pain because that is just how it is. But is this really contentment? I do not think so.

Rather, Paul has learned to consider the trials and tribulations of his apostolic calling in the light of God’s greater purposes. He knows that nothing can happen to him apart from the will of God. Paul knows that the life and ministry of Jesus and the pattern he established—that suffering precedes glory—is the ordinary pattern of the Christian life. There must be a battle fought before there can be a victory won. Paul has learned to read the events of life as the unfolding providence of God who loves him and cares for him. He has learned not to think about the immediate impact of life’s events upon his daily circumstances—although Paul does not ignore reality and responds to his circumstances with great wisdom and purpose. He sees his current circumstance—whatever that might be—in the light of God’s big picture. In other words, Paul takes a frequent look at the box top of the puzzle.

Here is yet another reason why a sound eschatology is so important to the Christian life. Paul’s eschatology (his understanding of the last things) determines his response to difficult times. He can be content because he knows that suffering (however prolonged and difficult) is very short in light of eternity. Furthermore, Paul has witnessed those countless times when God has turned trials and tribulations into ways of advancing the kingdom of God. Contentment in all circumstances will only come as one learns more about the nature of Christ’s kingdom, the glories of the gospel, and the surety of the promises which God has made to us. One of the best things a Christian struggling with discontent can do is read and mediate upon the promises of God. The more we learn about Jesus and his saving work, the greater will be our ability to remain content in all things.

Paul continues to elaborate on this point in verses 12-13 (which, in the Greek text, can be read as a two stanza poem).<sup>5</sup> “*I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all*

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, Institutes, 3.19.9.

<sup>5</sup> O’Brien, Philippians, 522.

*things through him who strengthens me.*” To be content means knowing how to live when brought low—with the hope and God can and will raise us up. It also means knowing how to live when times are good—not being proud or self-reliant, and to realize that good times are a wonderful gift from God and are never promised to us as a permanent state of affairs. In fact, in some ways, good times have a more negative effect upon the Christian life than difficult times. No doubt, God gives us good times as a relief from trouble, or as a pointer to the glories ahead. But do we pray more often and seek God’s help more fervently when times are good, or when times are bad?

Paul tells us that he has learned “the secret” as to how to face times of plenty, hunger, abundance, or need. And what might that secret be? Utter and complete reliance on the saving work of Jesus. Paul tells us, “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” Philippians 4:13 is a very well-known and beloved verse, which, sadly, is often taken out of context, or otherwise turned into a slogan which sounds more like a timeless truth or a trite motto than it does as an expression of Paul’s Christology.

*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*, appears on several Christian baseball player’s mitts, is used by certain well-known NBA players, and it is a common “Christian tattoo.” Philippians 4:13 is frequently used as the thought for the day in countless Christian devotionals, and so on. There is really nothing wrong with doing this—Christ does strengthen us—except that we should note that using this verse like this actually obscures Paul’s main point. The one who strengthens Paul in the midst of his trials is the same one (Jesus) who manifested his strong power in his resurrection from the dead. Paul’s point is that if God’s power is manifest in Christ’s resurrection, then Paul can be content in the knowledge that the Risen Jesus, whose return we await from heaven, will give to us his life-giving power to ensure we remain united to him during our own times of trial and tribulation and that Jesus will never leave us not forsake us when the going gets tough.

This verse does not reflect a timeless truth or a universal principle which will benefit us (i.e. help us do our best) if only we learn to put it into practice—as Christians, we can do accomplish anything, if only we allow Jesus to help us. Instead, this is Paul’s reflection upon who Jesus is, that one whom Paul desires to know, especially the power of his resurrection from the dead. In many ways, this verse is the practical application of Philippians 3:10-11, when Paul expresses his desire “*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*” The secret is not grasping the vague and general principle that Jesus can help me do my best in a high pressure situation if only I ask him, but is instead the knowledge that Jesus’ resurrection demonstrates God’s power, the same power the Lord used to strengthen Paul to do the things he has called Paul to do, in proclaiming Christ’s power to raise the dead.

To put it another way, according to Paul, the secret to enduring our trials or keeping a proper focus in good times, is to keep in mind that our union with Christ means that we are united to him in his death, burial, and resurrection and we now strive to know him in the power of his death and resurrection. This is what is signed and sealed unto us in our baptism—that we have been crucified with Christ and raised with him. The guilt of our sin has been removed and sin’s power over us has been broken. This does not mean that Jesus will help a pitcher throw more first count strikes or help with someone’s three-point shot, if only we realize who we are in Christ. The secret now revealed is God’s promise that in our union with the Risen Christ, Jesus makes us stronger to endure the trials of life. This is about learning not to fixate upon our present circumstances, and instead desire to know the power of Christ as manifest in his resurrection and ascension. As we think about these things, our present circumstances (good or bad) have less negative effect upon us. That, I think, is Paul’s point. The promise is grounded in our Christology (who Jesus is), not our ability to “plug in” to Jesus’ power so we can do our best.

Yet in making the point that the strengthening power of Jesus is all he needs, Paul does not want the Philippians to feel as though he could get along just fine without them. In verse 14, he tells them, “*yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.*” Their gift, their concern, their prayers are greatly appreciated. In sending this gift, the Philippians are sharing in Paul’s “affliction,” by becoming partners with him. In many ways, the gift served as a sign that the Philippians were standing by Paul, identifying with him and supporting him in his work of preaching the gospel. This custom has come down to us today when we send funds to our missionaries and others we identify with whenever they have extraordinary needs. The funds are a tangible way of saying; “we are praying for you, we stand with you, and we encourage you to keep doing what you are doing.”

Paul waxes nostalgic for a bit in verses 15-16. “*And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.*” The Philippians had, apparently, supported Paul’s missionary efforts since the time he had been with them. After leaving Philippi Paul made his way to Thessalonica, where he also helped found a church, only there he faced much more opposition from the Jews in the city, who, upon learning of Paul’s presence, formed a mob and created a huge uproar (Acts 17:1-9). When Paul eventually settled for a time in Corinth, the Philippians were the only congregation which continued to support him. This shows the strong bond between Paul and the Philippian Christians reflected throughout this letter. These brothers and sisters were with him from the beginning and have stayed with him even when in Rome.

Given this close tie, Paul wants to be sure that they understand that while he appreciates their gift, it is the effect of the giving of the gift upon the Philippians which is of interest to Paul. He writes in verse 17, “*not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.*” Paul does not want the Philippians to think that all he cares about is the gifts they send him. He knows that the gifts they send him are the fruit of that faith which God has given the Philippians through the gospel Paul had preached to them. The gifts they give to Paul function like compounding interest which accrues over time. It is not as though the Philippians send Paul money to get a divine reward—Paul knows that. Paul would hate the modern prosperity gospel and its “greed is good” creed. But he wants the Philippians to know that their generosity is a sign of their increasing faith, a faith which comes more and more to believe and trust in the promises of God.

There is an old saying which is now so trite it has become worn out—“it is better to give than receive.” But the saying is true, especially since Luke (in Acts 20:35) attributes that saying to Jesus. Quoting Paul, who quotes Jesus, Luke writes “*in all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*” Indeed, the fact that Jesus established a diaconal ministry in the churches reminds us of the importance placed upon giving to support the work of gospel or helping out those in need. The recipients of the gift no doubt need the help. Yet, there is a genuine blessing promised to those who give the gift—it accrues a sort of spiritual interest which increases the faith of the giver and confirms the promises of the gospel—in addition to providing relief to those suffering and in need.

Furthermore, when churches take care of their own, as well as aiding to those in need outside the church, this is a strong witness to the watching world that Christians care about them, and that we are striving to follow the example of Jesus. This functions as a sort of pre-evangelism. If you help those in need, you just might get a chance to share the gospel.

Paul also wants to make sure the Philippians know their gift has helped him. In verse 18, he tells them,

*“I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”* Paul received their gift which they sent through the messenger, Epaphroditus. It will comfort the Philippians to know that Paul is “well supplied,” literally, full to overflowing.<sup>6</sup> Paul adds that such an offering is like those offered by Israel to YHWH, alluding to Exodus 19:18 (part of our Old Testament lesson). In Ephesians 5:2, Paul makes a similar allusion to the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin which is pleasing and acceptable to God. Since the final, once for all sacrifice for our sin has been made by Jesus, believers continue to offer sacrifices which are acceptable and pleasing to God. These include sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving (as in Psalm 50) and as expressed by the author of Hebrews (13:15), *“through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”*

Such sacrifices are to be offered because all Christians are priests in the new covenant and are able to offer acceptable sacrifices to God. These sacrifices include gifts (such as the Philippians sent to Paul) and as part of the assembly of God’s people on the Lord’s Day (Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of new creation). We gather on Sunday to offer God sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. We do this through singing the Word of God back to him as an offering of praise. We do this through responding thankfully to God’s Word when it is read to us, when we pray for those in need, as well as when we give our offerings to support the work of the gospel. This is why our worship service is structured around God’s speech and our response. This is why we sing. This is why we collect an offering at the end of our worship. In doing these things, we believe we are offering acceptable sacrifices to God, which, as Paul tells the Philippians is a pleasing aroma to God.

Paul concludes his word of “thanks” in verse 19 by using a short prayer to remind the Philippians of their true source of contentment and content of the secret which Paul has learned through the trials and tribulations of his life and ministry. *“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”* Once again, we see how Paul’s eschatology informs even his prayers. God, who created all things, who is the sovereign Lord over all the events of life, is the one who can and who will meet all our needs. Paul knows that God keeps his promises because his track record is perfect.

It is critical that we understand what is being promised here. God will meet our needs, not give us what we want. God knows our true needs and what is both in our best interests and that which furthers his redemptive purposes. Just think where you would be if God gave you everything you wanted. You would be rich, better looking, totally healthy, famous and powerful—and completely miserable, and our hearts would be far from him. But since God knows what we truly need before we even ask, Paul reminds us that God does promise to meet our needs. Not just some needs, but every need. He will do so according to his riches in glory, in and through the person of Jesus. Our true needs are spiritual, overcoming sin, coming to know better Jesus in the power of his resurrection so we do not fear death, because the curse has been taken away by the work of Christ. The Philippian’s greatest spiritual need at the time of this writing was that they stand firm and not give in to the pressures facing them—persecution from the Greco-Romans pagans from without and from heresy within (the arrival of Judaizers in Philippi).<sup>7</sup> Jesus has both the will and power to grant the Philippians all their needs in this regard.

That the promise to meet these needs is primarily spiritual and only secondarily material can be seen in

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<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 540.

<sup>7</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 546-547.

the fact that our needs are met according to God's riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Paul has reminded the Philippians that their citizenship is in heaven, and that they await the Lord's return. God will meet our material needs—the Lord's prayer instructs us to ask God for our daily bread. But in this case the needs which are met by God's riches in the glory of Christ Jesus are clearly spiritual in nature. What God has already begun in this life (the new creation in which all believers in Jesus) he will bring to completion of the day of Christ Jesus. Christ's riches are already present with us in this life through the indwelling Holy Spirit and through word and sacrament, but will be fully realized when we die and enter the Lord's presence, or when Jesus returns, whichever comes first. All of God's promises (whether they be material or spiritual) are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is to him the Philippians should look to have all their needs met. This is Paul's secret, now made clear.

Paul ends his epistle with a wonderful doxology in verse 20, "*to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen,*" followed by a word of warm personal greeting to his beloved brothers and sisters in Philippi who he knows well and obviously misses. He instructs Epaphroditus to "*greet every saint in Christ Jesus.*" He tells the Philippians that "*the brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.*" This last line reveals a bit of interesting information. There were those in Caesar's household (literally, the imperial household) who had come to faith in Christ. This does not refer to members of Nero's immediate family, but to those servants who served the emperor an official capacity, including soldiers of the imperial guard, household servants, and other government officials in close proximity to the throne.<sup>8</sup> It is remarkable that when Paul writes this letter in the early sixties of the first century, that a significant number of influential members of the Roman government had become Christians. If Jesus can eat with tax collectors, God can save even members of Caesar's household.

With that, Paul brings this letter to an end by extending the Philippians the apostolic benediction, so typical of his letters. "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*" As we bring our series to a close, we reflect upon the wonderful promise of which Paul reminds the Philippians, that he who has begun a good work in you will see it through to the day of Christ Jesus. God calls us to stand firm and to rejoice in all circumstances, good or ill. God has given us his son Jesus and through faith has united us to him in the power of his resurrection. God has made us citizens of heaven and asked us to await the return of our Savior. Focusing upon these things is how we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, and it is through thinking on these things that God will supply our every need. If we do this, we will stand firm, and in the process we will rejoice. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, Philippians, 554.