

PHILIPPIANS

Content In Christ (4:10-23) Commentary: Week Eight

North American Commentary

Expression of Thanks for the Philippians' Support¹

The final section of the epistle addresses finances. Paul thanked the Philippians for remembering him and his needs, as they had before. Because of their pattern of giving, they were a double blessing. Typical of Paul, however, he used this occasion to teach the church spiritual truths. An introductory statement of thanks led to an explanation of Paul's outlook on things. This was followed by identifying some of the benefits for those who gave.

Paul's Situation² [4:10-14](#)

(1) Appreciation [4:10](#)

[4:10](#) Apparently some time elapsed between gifts from the Philippian church. It may have been years between the gifts mentioned in [2 Cor 8](#) and the one delivered by Epaphroditus. Perhaps Paul had despaired of their love for him since so much time elapsed and since they were the ones who remembered him financially and a financial gift uniquely expressed love. Their gift was a cause of joy in the Lord. Perhaps they expected Paul to be joyful because of the gift but, as the context clearly reveals, his joy was in the Lord. Spiritual relationships brought the most satisfaction: their love for him because of Christ's love and his love for the Lord. Thus it was natural for a material gift to become an occasion for Christian joy. The Christian nature of this relationship is supported by the word Paul used for "concern." It is the key verb of the epistle, *phroneō*. Paul used it consistently to point out proper Christian attitudes in following the mind of Christ. He must have consciously alluded to that in his choice of the word.

Although some time elapsed between the gifts, Paul remained in the Philippians' thoughts. He explained that they were mindful of him all along (the same verb occurs, *phroneō*), but they lacked opportunity. The lack was probably that Paul did not have need, but some interpret it as the church's inability to provide what they desired. Since when they were motivated to give, they created the opportunity by sending Epaphroditus as their minister, Paul's situation best explains the reference.

Paul may have moved between mild rebuke and sympathetic understanding in this section. On one hand, lest some misunderstand him as being too critical, he explained that they had no occasion to give. On the other hand, the phrase translated "indeed you have been concerned" is introduced by a causal construction (*eph ho kai*). That makes the meaning "you have renewed your concern for me *because* you have been concerned." Rather than a rebuke, this makes Paul's situation the reason they could not respond and implies that they wanted to respond all along. It makes good sense of the passage.

Paul's statement did not reflect his own need. He had learned to be at home with whatever God supplied to him. He stated three reasons he fared well even without their gift.

1. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Expression of Thanks for the Philippians' Support".

2. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 151-158.

(2) Contentment [4:11](#)

[4:11](#) The first reason Paul did not need the gift was his own contentment. Twice in these verses he stated that he had learned contentment. One word, *emathon*, was natural to use. It speaks to having arrived at a fact of understanding. The other word, *memyēmai*, often appears in the mystery religions. It means to *learn the secret* and conveys the idea of a secret knowledge to which adherents of the mystery religions aspired. The word conveyed what Paul desired. Contentment is learned through experience. Paul used another rare word for “to be content.” The etymology means “self-reliant,” and the context supports that meaning. It is a self-sufficiency because of Christ, however, as Paul clearly stated in [4:13](#). He meant that he came to grips with his circumstances and fared well in and through them because of his own relationship to Christ. He did not need help.

(3) Adaptability [4:12](#)

[4:12](#) Circumstances were the arena of spiritual growth, and through them Paul developed adaptability. In this verse Paul presented three contrasts that provided the occasion for learning and explained the nature of contentment. The first and last speak to physical needs in general, while the middle refers to food. In these varied experiences, Paul displayed spiritual equilibrium. He was equally unaffected by poverty and riches. This knowledge is learned by walking with Christ, who is the sufficient one, and by developing a solid theology of material things. Things ultimately do not matter. Relationships matter. Paul’s attitude contrasted with the false teachers’. They were preoccupied with food and other earthly matters; Paul could rise above any set of circumstances.

(4) Dependency [4:13](#)

[4:13](#) Paul depended on Christ for strength. The expression “through him who gives me strength” clearly refers to the indwelling Christ, and Paul could accomplish all that God wanted through the strength he provided. Some people abuse this verse by taking it out of context. They assume Paul was making a comprehensive statement about the spiritual abilities of a Christian. Some even act as if there were nothing they could not do. Paul did not mean that. Two factors in the text reveal why. First, the passage discussed material and physical needs. In the day to day economic fluctuations, Paul knew a stability that enabled him to rise above them. The rule of context means that this must be applied to economic matters. Second, Paul expressed his dependence on the power of the Lord. In this, he knew that where the Lord led him, he had power. The will of God limited the application of the strength he knew. Many who misapply this verse step out of God’s will for their lives. They hope to cover their actions by a blanket promise of power, but power comes in the will of God. Thus, Paul expressed a crucial paradox. He was strong when he was weak! He was independent (self-sufficient) only when he was dependent! Although Paul realized the necessity of living in a Christian community, he also knew what it meant to face life’s problems alone and still triumph through them.

It may be more difficult to triumph in the good times than in the bad. A Christian’s victory comes from a conscious dependence on the Lord and his power, and that is easier understood when times get hard! One mark of maturity in Christ is that the mature know how to depend on the Lord in every situation of life, not only in those for which they assume they need help. Paul modeled this lesson for them and thus even in his thankfulness taught the truths of Christian living.

(5) Blessing [4:14](#)

[4:14](#) As a summary of this section, Paul reminded the readers that their share in his work was good. The NIV translates this accurately but perhaps too casually: “You share in my troubles.” Two important terms indicate the significance of their contribution to Paul. First, they participated with him. The Greek *sygkoinoneō* emphasizes that participation. The basic translation, “fellowship,” means *a deep partnership of two going the same direction*. This is heightened by the preposition “with” (*syn*), which has a perfective force here. Second, Paul identified their partnership specifically as with his “troubles” (*thlipsis*). The term naturally implies hardships of any kind, but it had a deeper significance for Paul. In [Col 1:24](#) he spoke of suffering the “tribulations of the Christ” (the same Greek word) so that his difficulties in spreading the gospel actually related to the Messiah. In reflecting on his tribulations, Paul realized the eschatological significance of his ministry and that those who supported him participated in that themselves. Their gifts evidenced their willingness to identify with the new era inaugurated by Jesus.

This expression contains the first hint of the significance of Christian giving. It also explains something of Paul’s hesitancy in expressing his own needs to them. The Philippians recognized Paul’s strategic place in the spread of the gospel, the mystery revealed to him ([Eph 3:1–13](#)). Others, particularly the Jewish Christians, had difficulty accepting Paul’s ministry. The gifts from Philippi meant that the church eagerly participated in the work of God and that their gifts were, in reality, contributions to the spread of the gospel to other Gentiles. Paul knew he would suffer because of his distinctive apostolic calling. He accepted this suffering joyfully and learned the secret of triumph over any circumstance. Paul’s ministry simply provided an occasion for sharing in the gospel. He knew that he handled sacred resources when they came from the people of God (see [4:18](#)). Their gift was good because it demonstrated that they understood God’s working in the world and that they willingly supported it through God’s servants.

Paul’s Attitude Toward Those Who Gave

[4:15–20](#)

Paul’s thankfulness turned to commendation and promise of reward. Both the nature of their giving and its motivation pleased the Lord.

(1) Commendations [4:15–17](#)

[4:15](#) Paul commended the church for the way it supported him. Its support was unique. It was the only Macedonian church to support him. Paul disclosed one of the reasons he remembered the Philippians fondly “from the first day until now” ([1:5](#)). When they first heard the gospel, they saw its implications for others and shared in its propagation. Since Paul committed his life to the progress of the gospel ([1:12](#)) and measured his success by the proclamation of the gospel ([1:18](#)), their giving promoted a natural friendship. The early days in Macedonia had been difficult. Paul suffered physically in Philippi. In Thessa-lonica his work caused an uproar ([1 Thess 2:9](#)), which resulted in his departing the city ([Acts 17:5–9](#)). These difficulties were only external. Perhaps the greatest difficulty was that the other churches failed to help him. In this, Philippi was different! From the very first it supported his work, evidencing the genuineness of salvation and love for Paul.

The other churches failed in their obligations to the gospel. Paul called the Philippian support a matter “of giving and receiving” (4:15). When he stated that other churches did not support him, he used the common word for “fellowship” (*koinōneō*) which so characterizes this book. Subtly and without complaining, Paul pointed out that others had received but not given. They had a one-way relationship in the gospel. Paul expected rejection and loneliness in his work; it came as no surprise. He was, however, troubled for two reasons. First, when they received they had a responsibility to share. Second, they missed the spiritual blessings that came from giving. The Philippians understood both principles and acted on them. That brought joy to Paul’s heart.

4:16 Paul also commended them because their support was immediate and consistent. He remembered that they supported him in Thessalonica, the city he had entered after being asked to leave Philippi. Beyond that, they continued to support him. His statement in 4:10, however, reveals that at some time their support ceased. Perhaps the deeper meaning of their giving enhanced Paul’s joy when they gave again.

4:17 Paul commended them because their gifts were an investment. Financial terms dominate this passage. The gifts were an investment in the work of God and in their future. Some believers may have mistakenly assumed that Paul sought gifts, but he clearly stated he sought the blessings it would bring to the givers. Paul saw beyond the physical act to the spiritual transactions taking place. Even in acknowledging their support, his servant attitude surfaced. He thought of their growth and blessings.

(2) Blessings [4:18–19](#)

Paul’s commendation led him to speak of how the Philippians benefited from supporting him. He understood well that genuine giving seeks no personal benefits. He lived that way, and so did they. Nevertheless, giving brings blessings to both giver and receiver. First, Paul stated what he received from their gifts. Further, using financial language, Paul stated that his need was met. He had sufficient resources to carry on God’s work. Any obligation they had to him had been paid in full. Their responsibility was satisfied. The gift brought by Epaphroditus exceeded what Paul might have expected, and they were to feel no obligation to give more.

4:18 Paul also listed two benefits to the giver. First, God was pleased. In terms reminiscent of [Rom 12:1–2](#), Paul pointed out that their gift was an acceptable Christian sacrifice. Like [Rom 12](#), this passage teaches that physical activity can become spiritual in motivation and importance. Romans states that dedicating the body to God is a spiritual act. Here, Paul revealed that giving was a spiritual exercise. Since Paul used the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system, perhaps even his terms subtly countered the Jewish false teachers.

Paul had developed a comprehensive theology of stewardship. Its most thorough statement occurs in [2 Cor 8–9](#), where he solicited support for a famine relief offering. He stated that the Macedonians led the way in giving, and most likely the primary church to give was Philippi ([2 Cor 8:1–5](#)). Their giving was exemplary because they gave out of “rock-bottom poverty.” Their contribution was a “fragrant offering” to God because of its sacrifice, its Christian motivation, and its significance to the spread of the gospel.

4:19 The second benefit to the believers was that they would experience God’s provision. Just as God had met Paul’s needs in the work of the gospel, so God would meet their needs. The context of this promise deserves careful attention. Paul spoke to those who actively supported the work of the Lord. His statement of [4:15](#) indicates what he meant: God meets the needs of those who give to him. In the context of ministering being ministered to occurs.

God's supply is "according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Often commentators point out that the statement says "according to" and not "out of." "According to" means that the supply is suited to the resource and like it in kind and extent. God, therefore, bountifully blesses those who give with glorious provision in accord with his glory and for his purposes. Since the glory is associated with Christ—it is "in Christ"—Paul probably spoke of one of the benefits brought to those who are in Christ. "Glorious riches" are available to those who give as the Philippians did.

(3) Doxology [4:20](#)

[4:20](#) The section closes with a doxology to God the Father. The thought of the glorious nature of what the Lord supplies no doubt prompted Paul to think of the ultimate purpose of life: to bring glory to God forever. The doxology expresses a prayer concerning all the affairs discussed in the epistle. Through whatever means, in every age, and through all creatures, may God be glorified. Once again, Paul's thoughts moved beyond the present to the future, or, as in other places in the epistle, he consciously remembered the ultimate purpose of life. It is to bring glory to God now and forever. In so doing, the believer will join a great host of creation glorifying God for eternity.

Conclusion

[4:21–22](#) The conclusion of Philippians is typical of other epistles, including exhortations to greet the brothers and greetings from Christians in the place of writing. These concluding remarks are abbreviated, but significant. Paul sent greetings from three groups of persons with him. First, greetings were sent from the brethren who surrounded him, his team of men who supported him and served with him. No doubt they knew the church well. Second, greetings were sent from other saints with whom Paul had contact. The term "all the saints" must mean those in the church at Rome, who were not specifically a part of Paul's band of men. Such greetings were commonly exchanged as a mark of Christian friendship and brotherhood. Finally, greetings came from Christians in Caesar's household. The unusual manner of identifying them as a "household" suggests that they were not family members. Most assume that they were in Caesar's civil service. Perhaps because of Philippi's importance as a colony and financial center, some of them had regular business contacts with the Christians at Philippi. The interchange of greetings was an important way of maintaining contacts with the Christians around the empire.

[4:23](#) Paul's final words implored the grace of God. He ended like he began—with a prayer for grace. Possibly he had a collective church spirit in mind, but most likely he referred to the spirits of individuals. The spirit stands for the entire person, spiritually sensitive through this aspect of human beings. God communicated with their spirits, and through them he brought the riches of his grace wherever it was needed. In an epistle which presents clearly the polarities between law and grace, works and faith, and self-righteousness and divinely imputed righteousness, it is significant that the final line should be grace. Fittingly he reminded them that everything good they had came because of God's grace.