

**Sunday 14 October 2018. Living From Joy.  
Philippians 4: 10-23.**



Today we're concluding our series of studies in Paul's letter to the first century church at Philippi. So in a moment we'll be reading Philippians 4:10-23, which you'll find on page 1181 in the church Bibles. But as you find the passage, let me just recap on some background to this letter.

It's now the early 60's AD and Paul is a prisoner in Rome, probably under house arrest from what's say at the end of the book of Acts. He's awaiting his day in court before the Roman Emperor. And as you read this letter you get the feeling he's optimistic that he might be freed, which meant he'd get to see them again, but he also indicates a deep uncertainty about that. And the Bible record doesn't tell us what happened, but early church tradition has it that he was beheaded on a road called the Ostian Way just outside Rome during Emperor Nero's reign. That likely means after 64AD when Nero started a vendetta against Christians - and before June 68AD. But what we don't know from either the Bible *or* tradition is if Paul was released from *this* imprisonment, only to come back to Rome a little later and then be martyred.

But we do know that from his confinement in Rome he wrote several letters to people and churches he'd had relationships with over the years of his missionary travels. And we also know we haven't got all these letters saved for us in our Bible. But we do have this one written to the church at Philippi in today's Northern part of Greece. Philippi was a Roman colony set up in the second half of the last century BC following a series of battles, and it was largely populated by Roman military veterans. This would have meant that Emperor worship was quite important here. But Philippi was also the first main stop-off for Paul when he moved from Asia to Europe - and you can read about that in Acts chapter 16. While not everyone appreciated his visit, when he moved on, he left behind a fledgling church. It's now many years later, and we'll consider a couple of hallmarks of this now developed church as we go through Paul's closing words to it. And by now you should have found Philippians 4:10-23 - so let's read it.

*I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*

*Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*

*To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*



*Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

If you're a parent you've probably gone through the process of getting a child to write a 'thank you' letter for a gift received at Christmas, and maybe with varying degrees of persuasion. Paul doesn't need persuading here, as one of the main motivations for him sending this correspondence is to say thank you to this church for supporting him, even though we find it at the end of his letter, which doesn't correspond to the way we'd do it today.

Commentators agree that this letter, while formal, is a 'friendly letter'. Some of Paul's letters are corrective: and ones like Galatians are very strongly so. Paul *does* deal with pastoral issues in Philippians, especially about rejecting Jewish pharisaical rule-keeping, but its overall tone isn't corrective. And tone is everything. Verse ten could be taken in our English translation as a sort of sarcastic reprimand. In fact some commentators take it that way. But Paul is quick to assure them it wasn't. He's acknowledging their generosity to him while recognising they hadn't had opportunity to express it again until recently. In the Greek, he uses the phrase *Ablossom once again* where it's translated as *Renewed*. If you're a gardener, you'll know exactly what he means. If you have, as I have, a shrub that flowers in early Summer, you sometimes get a second whole blooming in late Summer or early Autumn, depending of course on the weather. That's the picture he uses here - a further blossoming of their generosity. And he almost gets tongue-tied trying to explain away any thought that he wasn't truly appreciative and that his words were a sort of back-handed compliment.

But let me stop for a moment before I go any further and tell you where we're going this morning. I want to first of all consider two things Paul can teach us about living the Christian life, and then go on to think about two things the church he's writing to can teach us. And we'll start with - **Thankfulness**.

I've already said he is very appreciative of their gift and wants to tell them so. He's thankful that they've remembered him way off in Rome and for the support they have sent him via Epaphroditus (who's previously mentioned in 2:25 as someone they'd sent to take care of his needs). That much is clear. But I want to look behind the words Paul uses, to his attitude. Because thankfulness can be a suit of armour against life's hardships. A point some commentaries make about Paul's thankfulness (or joy in the Lord, as he puts it) is not so much to do with the substance of the gift, but of the care of the givers. I'm sure you've all seen, or maybe received, a homemade present from a little child that materially amounts nothing - but the look on the child's face and the knowledge of the thought put into it are worth far more to you than any monetary value ever could be. So with Paul here.

I wonder how many of you can remember a song - chorus - from a previous generation of church worship that said, "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done"? Singing these words over to yourself each day might be an antidote to the 'glass half empty' attitude some people

exhibit and sometimes even appear to positively enjoy.



Alternatively, if you're of a younger generation you might want to use, "God is so good, God is so good, God is so good, He's so good to me"(Sorry! But you know anyway singing isn't in my gifts). But it's whatever works for you.

Of course, if anyone had a reason for being down in the mouth about his circumstances, it was Paul. About five years before he wrote this letter he'd got into a series of correspondence with the church in Corinth. And in the letter preserved for us as 2 Corinthians - and in chapter 11 - he says this:

*I have.... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked... and so on. And remember - his two year kicking his heels in a prison in Caesarea, and the massive storm and shipwreck he experienced on his way to Rome that's described so vividly by in Acts chapter 27, all happened *after* he wrote that!*

But let's be practical today. What can we do to help ourselves in our everyday lives to live thankfully each day? Well something I do that helps me is to say "Thank you Lord" (out loud if I'm on my own) every time I remember something I was blessed by, or if I'm experiencing it right now, something that I'm thankful for. That doesn't of course so much cover things that haven't turned out so well, but perhaps it helps us look for the good even in the apparently unwelcome. Maybe you've heard a quote attributed to Helen Keller (who you might know was born deaf-blind): "I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet".

But what *was* Paul's secret of being able to live without a grumbling persona and be able to be genuinely thankful? Well, the answer is in the second thing Paul can teach us this morning about living the Christian life "**Contentment**". So what was Paul's secret of being content.

Let me first remind you of what Paul's said. He said, "I have *learned* to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have *learned the secret* of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Then he added, by way of a sort of explanation. "I can do all this *through Him* who gives me strength." So he fully acknowledges that he can't do it on his own.

And he also says - it didn't just happen - I had to work at it. I had to *learn* to be content. So how do you learn to be content? Well it's an attitude thing, and I suggest it's more to do with what we don't do than something we do do

As human beings we have had several vices implanted in our inner self right back to the Fall that work against contentment. Let me name just a few for brevity this morning - envy, or jealousy - covetousness - and pride - just for a start. I read a good definition of pride the other day. Pride is 'pursuing an ego massage'! Therefore not getting your ego massaged brings discontent. And the modern phenomena of Facebook 'likes' and Instagram profiles probably feed this too - but I

don't know much about that because I don't use either!



Then there's covetousness. Paul might have had a battle with covetousness himself, as when we read Romans chapter 7, he uses covetousness as the example of a sin capable of bringing condemnation. We can't say that was so of course, but Paul makes the point in Romans of its seriousness. It's not just one of the 'don't' in the ten commandments and part of the old testament. It's also a blockage to contented Christian living in the era of grace. And the advertising industry *loves* you for it! But Paul's answer in Romans 7 is, "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ". Which is about the same as what he says here, using different words. So if we recognise that it's a problem for us and turn the resolution of it over to Jesus - problem sorted says Paul. And by saying that neither he, nor I, are saying it's easy to overcome - just that we don't face it alone.

So to be content, start to work on the things that in your life stand against contentment - whatever they are. And if they aren't these things - substitute your own story into the frame - then - do something about it.

And if this all seems like hard work - let me tell you something else that Paul said to the young Timothy who he'd left in charge at Ephesus some years before. "... *godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*" And if your thinking - that sounds a little bit like something Jesus said - you'd be right.

Jesus said in Matthew 6 as He draws His 'Sermon on the Mount' to a close, "*And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*"

So maybe I should have put 'worry' up there crossed out as well. I know there are some places in the world where the source of a family's next meal *is* a *real* worry - but not for *most* of us today in suburban London. And I could also possibly have added 'being judgmental', as while we are forever criticising other people we reduce the room for true peace for ourselves in our hearts. And then of course there is harbouring resentment - and unforgiveness - and I better stop there or I won't get on to my next point!

But perhaps I should also modify something else I said earlier too. I said contentment was mainly to do with what we should not do or concentrate on. But it also involves something to do. Put simple - we put God first. We do that in our plans. We do that with our money. And we do that intentionally in all the whatever's and wherever's of our daily lives - all the time - by *choice*.

But now I need to move on to consider what the Philippian church can teach us from what Paul reveals about them in these closing verses of his letter. And something that jumps out about this fellowship of believers in Philippi is that they were faithful. And if you were writing a CV for them as a group today, you might describe them as 'reliable'.



They'd taken it upon themselves to support Paul right at the beginning of their relationship with him, did so time and again while he was being hounded across Northern Greece, and while there seemed to have been some unexplained hiatus in their contact with him for a while, they'd recently gone to the trouble of sending Epaphroditus to Rome, not just as a courier, but as someone to help Paul on their behalf during his imprisonment.

So - what can we learn from their attitude and outlook that we can emulate for ourselves this morning?

Well I'm not sure if the fact that a significant background to Philippi's culture was military is relevant. It may have fed into a sort of disciplined ethos for the city. We know that all the members of the church didn't have this background, but there might have been enough to have had an influence. But whether that be so or not, Paul tells us elsewhere we should behave like God's self-disciplined disciples - from putting on God's armour in Ephesians to a soldier's single-minded commitment in a letter he wrote to Timothy.

So - how did this work out in practice. Well Paul's talking here specifically about financial giving - but we're come on to that in a minute. Faithfulness and reliability covers a far broader spectrum. It's to do with another word I could have used - **'commitment'**. Our church's early history was in the Open Brethren tradition, and that - let's call it denomination - had a very strong work ethic. I know it was a time when there seemed to be a lot more time to do things than there seems to be today - but people committed themselves to take up responsibilities in the church - and worked at them for years.

Today - and it's not limited to Christian things - a prevailing attitude of many seems to be 'I'll do it if I feel like it', and 'I'll stop if I don't feel like it'. It might be to do with the idea of instant everything - from communications to gratification - part of the 'now' culture we live in. And perhaps commitment can seem like a burden.

But to answer the question: 'why commit to anything?' Well sometimes it can be because God has told you to. But it's still down to us to *chose* to obey Him. Year's ago we had a Friday night children's club here called 'Sunshine Corner', and when I first helped with it it was run by a Mike & Molly Wright. Then I remember God told me I was to take it on from them. A little while later Mike came to me and asked, "How would you like to run Sunshine Corner?". Well the answer of course was "yes" - and I can't remember how long I led it, but it was well over a decade. Similarly, through various circumstances too long to tell now, He got me into owning and driving minibuses used for youth and other church work here - and I did that for thirteen years until the need petered out. And I could also tell you stories of how He kept those vehicles on the road, and on at least one occasion - miraculously - but that would also take too long to tell now.

But you can also choose to do something just because you see the value of it. David told the prophet Nathan, "I want to do this", and Nathan said, "Go for it" (or words to that effect). In fact God told Nathan to go back to David and tell him on *that* specific issue, "This isn't for you to do, but it will get done". But Nathan's first responded is still valid. If you see something good to do, go for it, and see if God endorses it or not. So while I was unemployed I started doing a voluntary job out in Amersham. Twenty years later I still regularly travel out there (but now to Chesham) to help at WORKAID. Why? Because I saw it was good to recycle unwanted tools to needy places in Africa to help disadvantaged community massively improve their lives. The need hasn't changed, so I still go, even though

getting out there of a Monday has become more difficult over the years. I do it because it's a commitment.



But what about you? Is there something *you* should be committed to, but you're still sitting on your hands? I'll leave you to answer that question for yourself at your leisure, and move on to my last point - because the Philippian church can also teach us a thing about generosity.

Some people are spontaneously generous - and *not* just those who have a Christian persuasion. They'll see a beggar sitting on the pavement and put their hand in their pocket to find some money to give them. Some people of course might not be so much spontaneous as planning for this, having made sure they have a pocket full of loose change for just such occasions.

Me - rightly or wrongly - I'm not like that, which doesn't mean that there haven't been times when I've done just that. But by choice I prefer to give to a charity like Crisis who make targeted, organised responses to a broad range of needs of homeless people - and not just at Christmas.

And as far as church giving goes, I was blessed in my early years attending here when I was taught in my Bible class about tithing, and in fact about giving generally. So when I started work, right from my first wage packet at the age of seventeen, I set aside an amount for giving that has been part of my *modus operandi* ever since. And I'm very thankful for that training.

I think someone's said (and I don't know who I'm quoting) that the hardest, or the last thing, to come under the Lordship of Christ is our money. But the Christians in the church at Philippi didn't seem to suffer that problem, and as I've already said, Paul makes a big thing of both their generosity and their consistency (how-be-it with a break in it) of sharing of their resources.

And I come back again to that commitment thing. Their support for Paul wasn't a 'pass the bag round and see what's inside' sort of generosity, but an organised, planned response to what they saw as his need. And since Paul wasn't someone who pumped up a request for donations, they almost certainly had to work through that for themselves. Paul jealously guarded his desire to protect giving the Good News of Jesus salvation away for free. So do we here. That's why we just put out a couple of boxes to collect any money given on a Sunday, and tell you how to give electronically if you ask, but very rarely bring it up as a topic to talk about. That *doesn't mean* running this church in these premises with two paid member of staff doesn't cost us serious money. It does. Year in and year out.

Like me you probably get begging letters through the post from lots charities craving your support - secular and Christian depending on the organisations you've come into contact with. And most of them will ask you, not just for a donation today, but for a commitment to taking out a Direct Debit to give something each month (often with the opportunity to 'gift aid' it) to try and ensure their ability to plan their activities. And that's also ditto us as church. And the unspoken question is always, how generous can you be?

But here's the thing - Paul doesn't emphasis their giving for his good but theirs! First he says, "... what I desire is that more be credited to *your* account." Then later. "And my God will meet all *your* needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."



I don't know if it's in the Bible because I couldn't locate a reference, but someone's said, "God is no man's debtor". And he isn't. Someone else has said you can't out-give God, and that's true too. But please note, this *is not* Prosperity Gospel teaching. We don't subscribe to that here. So it doesn't mean if you give a pound to the church you're miraculously get ten back! God's actually a lot more canny than that. For a start, he looks more at our motivation than the amount of money we give away for his use.

Take for instance what Jesus said about the rich givers jangling their money down the chute of the temple treasury's collection box and the poor widow with the almost inaudible tinkling of her couple of mites. That's because He has the nerve to look at what we've kept back for ourselves as well as what we've given away! And we can't fool Him either. A couple of church-goers called Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter five forgot about that - and paid a heavy price for trying to fool the church that they were more generous than they were.

You'll probably heard someone say, "If God is not Lord of all, He's not Lord at all". But we're all on a learning curve. Part of that learning is to find out how to allow God to be the Lord of your bank balance - large or small - along with everything else - and to be sensitive to his prompts in how to use it. You may never know what he grows out of your generosity in this life - although Paul does says in 1 Corinthians that there will come a time when we will know everything - but for now - it's all part of the journey of faith.

And just in case it ever crosses our mind that living out our lives this way is earning us points with the Father - let's finish by singing a hymn framed around the idea it's just our response to God for His faithfulness and generosity to us.

So let's sing 'I will offer up my life in spirit and truth'.

*Granville Richards*