

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 13: God's Sufficiency for All Our Needs - Philippians 4:10-23

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in his teaching in the series on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 13, God's Sufficiency for All Our Needs. Philippians 4:10-23.

Welcome to session 13 in our study of Philippians, entitled this one, God's Sufficiency for All Our Needs. And this is our final session here in Philippians. It'll cover chapter 4, verses 10 through 23.

Before we look at that section, it'll be good to remind ourselves of what we found in the section before that, chapter 4, verses 4 through 9, a series of final exhortations in the gospel. And Paul gives a rapid-fire series of commands of how to apply the gospel to our everyday lives, dealing with issues like prayer and anxiety and rejoicing and how we should fix our mind on certain things and how we should put into practice the things that we find in the gospel. So that sets the stage for what we find here at the end of the letter here in chapter 4, verses 10 through 23.

Before I read the text, I wanted to highlight a couple of things about its structure and some parallels to earlier in Philippians. So the structure of chapter 4, verses 10 through 20, works on this idea of a series of acknowledgment, explanation, and then qualifier. So you see this pattern twice.

In acknowledgment, the Philippians have revived their concern for Paul. In explanation, the hiatus in giving sprang from lack of opportunity, not a lack of care. And then the qualifier: Paul does not speak from need because he's content.

And then the next acknowledgment: the Philippians were kind to partner with Paul in his affliction. Explanation, the Philippians have a long history of doing this. Qualifier: Paul does not seek the gift, but what it represents.

Then the final acknowledgment: Paul abounds in the Philippians' gift, which is pleasing to God. Explanation: God will provide for the Philippians. And instead of a qualifier, this last part ends with a doxology where God receives all the glory forever and ever.

And so that's just the pattern that shows up in verses 10 through 20. And it's helpful to keep that in mind as we work through the text itself. One last thing before we read the text: there are at least a few parallels in this section, so chapter 4, verses 10 through 20, with Philippians 1, verses 9 through 11.

So we see a little bit of overlapping vocabulary here, right? In Philippians 1:9-11, Paul talks about their love abounding more and more. And here in Philippians 4, Paul talks about how

he knows how to be brought low and how to abound. And then also talking about abundance in the data verse 12.

Philippians 1:11 mentions being filled with the fruit of righteousness. And here in Philippians 4:17 and 18, Paul talks about seeking the fruit that increases to your credit. And then he mentions that he is well supplied, that he is filled, so to speak, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts he sent.

And then lastly, chapter 1 verse 11, the prayer ends with, to the glory and praise of God. And then chapter 4 verse 20 ends with, to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

So this helps us to see some of the larger structure within Philippians. And with that in place, we are ready to read chapter 4, starting at verse 10 and going through the end of the letter in verse 23. Verse 10 begins, 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. Not that I'm speaking of being in me, for I've learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be broad, low, and I know how to allow in any and every circumstance.

I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens faith. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.

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 knees once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

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. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.

The brothers 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.

So, I've entitled this section, God's Sufficiency for All Our Needs. The main focus is going to be on verses 10 through 20, but we will also talk about the final greetings there in chapter 4, verses 21 through 23. So Paul opens again, not surprisingly at this point, by saying, I rejoiced in the Lord.

You remember back in chapter 4, verse 4, he had issued the command, rejoice in the Lord always. And now here in verse 10, he is modeling that when he says, I rejoiced in the Lord greatly. So, the cause of Paul's joy here is the Philippians' revived concern for him and his ministry.

And he goes out of his way to clarify that the issue was not the Philippians; it was the lack of opportunity they had to actually give financially. So it's not that the Philippians were unconcerned about Paul; it's just that they didn't have specific opportunities to provide financially. And this is an interesting section that Paul gives us here, because some people, as they read through this, have actually referred to this as the thankless thank you.

And that he's, in one sense, saying, thank you for the gift. And yet, he keeps qualifying; he keeps saying, I'm grateful, and yet, and then he clarifies or qualifies it. So it is an unusual thank you.

But it's not as if he's lacking in gratitude. As we go on, I'll try to explain why I think Paul is making these qualifications and trying to explain his gratitude and the Philippians' interaction with him. So, they have revived their concern; they sent him a gift through Epaphroditus, and he talks about, at the end of verse 11, learning in whatever situation I am to be content.

So we need to think about what the nature of contentment is that's in view here. What does Paul mean by that? I would argue that contentment is being satisfied with all that God has given us. It's the opposite of coveting.

And so, it's a settled state of satisfaction and confidence in what God has provided for us, rather than constantly envying and coveting what others might have. Contentment, Paul would argue, flows out of this deep and abiding trust in God's sovereign goodness and provision. That if our contentment is rooted in our circumstances, whether we have a lot or whether we don't, then we are going to find ourselves riding this up-and-down roller coaster that will never end.

Paul seems to redefine this sort of secular concept of self-sufficiency into a Christian concept of God-sufficiency. So the term that Paul uses here was known in the ancient world and was even used among some philosophical circles as a term for a person who is self-sufficient. I don't need anything from anybody else.

And that was perceived by at least some as a goal, as something to achieve. And, if we're honest, we see that in our own culture today, oftentimes. We think the ultimate arrival in life is being self-sufficient and not needing help from anyone at any time.

And, of course, there is a good kind of self-sufficiency. We want people to take personal responsibility inasmuch as they are able to provide for their own needs and that kind of thing. But it is a lie, really, from the devil that we can be fully self-sufficient and not need others in our lives.

So, continuing on now with the nature of contentment, I think it's emphasized here to highlight that Paul's hope rests not in the generosity of others, but in the One who strengthens me. That's what Paul says there in verse 13: I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. That he's not sitting around dependent on my contentment rests on whether the Philippians or another church is going to give to my ministry needs or to my personal needs.

That's not what is motivating and driving Paul. His contentment rests in the Lord because the Lord is able to strengthen him to live in both abundance and need. And I think this is a point that we need to emphasize here because it helps explain what we might read as the weirdness of this thankless thank you.

I think that what Paul is trying to do here is avoid some of the connotations of the patron-client relationship in the Greco-Roman world. So, in the Greco-Roman world, the idea of patrons and clients was that it was common for people who lacked means to attach themselves to someone wealthier and more influential. And so these people who had resources were known as patrons.

And in one version of this structure of the system, the patron would be visited by the client in the morning. And the client was expected to extol the virtues and generosity of patrons. And the patron would then help at some level with maybe a need that the client had.

And what would the patron get out of it? Honor and status. The more people that you had who your clients were, the higher your honor and glory was within their particular cultural context. Now what comes with that, though- and this is almost always true- is that when someone gives money or resources to a person, there can be this expectation that the giver, in this case the patron, can set the terms of how that resource or money is to be used.

And there's this expectation that the client will do what the patron wants. And so there's a power dynamic that's there that would have been common. And I think what Paul is trying to do here in the way that he is explaining his response to their gift is he's trying to redefine their relationship.

And it's not that – I don't think Paul is saying the Philippians are thinking this way, but Paul is trying to make sure that they don't. That just because the Philippians gave resources and a gift to Paul, that doesn't mean that the Philippians are the patron and that Paul is the client. And that Paul now is under obligation to the Philippians to maybe do specifically what the Philippians want.

Now I want to stress there's no indication that the Philippians thought this way. But you have to remember that that is the cultural context in which gifts were often given. And so Paul is trying to help them redefine and understand what the nature of our relationship is.

And ultimately what Paul helps them to see is that it's not that the Philippians are the patron and Paul is the client. It's that God is the patron and that both Paul and the Philippians are the clients. And that they share resources together underneath the patronage, the authority of God himself.

So he's trying to help them understand that the gospel reshapes our understanding of how even these kinds of financial arrangements worked in the ancient world. So I think that helps explain this pattern of acknowledgment, explanation, qualification that he goes through in this particular section. Now I want to focus on two key words here, kind of the extremes here.

Paul talks about how he has learned the secret of being brought low and how to abound. So that term of brought low can be translated as be in need or live on almost nothing as the New Living Translation has it. I think that captures the sense of it.

But it's this part of the same word family that's connected to the idea of humility in chapter 2 verse 3 and verse 8 and chapter 3 verse 21. And again, this is where it's often difficult in English translation to bring out some of these connections between related words because there's not a one-to-one correspondence between Greek and English. And so that's why it's helpful to be able to use the original languages to point out some of these connections.

But the point is, I think he's intentionally using such language to connect conceptually to what he talked about back in chapter 2 about being brought low or living in a state of humbleness or humility. And that's the point that I think he's trying to draw out there that he's learned, as he calls it, the secret. And it's interesting how this term was used.

In the ancient world, this term was used in connection with mystery religions. And now, if you're not familiar with mystery religions, it was a set of different religions that were very secretive. There were private rites that you would go through to be initiated into it.

And they kind of operated on the margins at times, away from the sort of traditional gods. And this term secret was often used in connection with the initiation rites that would get you into one of these mystery religions. And so Paul's not using it necessarily in that sense.

But what he is doing is saying, look, the key or the entry point into this contentment is, as he says here in verse 12, he says, I know how to be brought low. I know how to abound in any and every circumstance. I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

And then verse 13 is going to get here's the secret. Here is the key to living in a way that is not dependent upon either abundance or lack. He says, I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

And so we need to dive in a little bit more into what Paul means there in verse 13. I think it's important to think about this more carefully because this is a verse that we see people using in our culture. And I think they often are misapplying. And it's almost seen as this statement of I can do anything.

But if I set my mind to it and I have Christ strengthen me, I can accomplish any task. And maybe this is just me, but I tend to see it a lot, maybe in the athletic realm where you see athletes putting Philippians 4:13 on their sneakers or on their eye black or something like that. And it's their way of saying, I can do anything out here through Christ who strengthens me.

And I'm not trying to disparage the genuineness of their faith or the sincerity of their devotion to the Lord. But I think they are perhaps missing the thrust of what Paul says here. It's not so much a positive thinking kind of emphasis, but a deep and abiding confidence, confidence in the power and provision of Christ for all of our needs.

Not necessarily our wants, not necessarily our desires, but our needs. And so I think it's valuable to remember the context that this thing that comes in a wooden translation would be in the one who strengthens me. So instead of saying, instead of it reading, I can do all things through him who strengthens me, which is a possible translation for sure.

It can also be translated as I can do all things in him who strengthens me. And if that's the case, the point would then be that as we are in the realm of Christ, in the sphere of Christ, we can do all things spanning the spectrum from living in abundance to living in me. And so I think that's the larger context there of Philippians chapter four, verse 13.

Now, as we turn to verse 14, Paul reflects on his relationship with the Philippian church. He points out the uniqueness of the Philippians. He says in verse 15, 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.

At the number 16, even at Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs once and again. So the next stop after Paul left Philippi was Thessalonica. So when he was kind of run out of town in Philippi, he ended up in Thessalonica.

And so when it says here, verse 16, even in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs once and again. That shows you how quickly the Philippians engaged in generous partnership with Paul to assist him in proclaiming the gospel right from the start. And this is one of the reasons why I think the Philippian church had such a special place in Paul's heart.

Paul, as a general rule, was pretty cautious about accepting financial support. Again, in part because I think of this patron-client dynamic in Greek and Roman culture that he wanted to avoid the appearance of being a client of a patron. And the second reason I would note is that it was actually a relatively common phenomenon of these traveling teachers throughout the ancient world.

And they come into town, and they drum up these big crowds, and they put on a show for them, and they teach, and people would give them money. And then when it started to dry up, and people stopped giving, they just moved on to the next town. And Paul wanted to avoid any kind of association with that.

He wanted to make it clear that's not who I am, that's not what I'm about. And so he was very hesitant to accept financial gifts because he wanted to make sure that the motivations were right and that the perception of why he was receiving them was not misunderstood. So again, I think that just helps us understand what seems like a very strange way of saying thank you.

In our culture, we would just expect someone to say, thanks for sending me the money or the food that's helping me. I'm so grateful for you, praying for you. If there's any way I can pray for you more, please let me know.

Love, Matt. But that's what we do. That's how it works in our culture.

And yet that's not exactly how it worked in the ancient world. And so Paul is navigating that carefully. So the Philippians from the start were generous, giving to Paul.

And once again, we see this language of partnership or fellowship here in verse 15 when he writes, No church entered into partnership. That's that same Greek word there, koinonia, fellowship with me in giving and receiving except you only. So that's a recap of his relationship with the Philippians.

And now he's going to move on to talk about his goal. What is Paul's goal in receiving this gift? He makes it clear, verse 17: not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. He's saying my ultimate priority is not simply me receiving the gift.

I want to see the spiritual benefit that you will get from that. I am anticipating how God is going to bless you through your giving to me. Now, I have to be very careful when we say things like that in our context because there are false teachers out there who twist passages like this.

And we'll say things like, well, if you want God to bless you, you should give this large sum of money to my ministry or my church. And that is not what Paul is saying here. He's simply saying, I'm grateful for the gift.

I'm even more excited about the spiritual benefit that God is going to produce through it in your life. A second goal that he lays out is their joy. He says not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

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. So he wants to see the Philippians experience joy in continuing to partner with him in the advance of the gospel.

And you notice in the verse that I read there, verse 18, that Paul frames this gift in sacrificial language. He says the gifts you sent are a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And now here's what I want you to catch here.

Earlier we talked about this dynamic of the patron-client relationship and how Paul is trying to help the Philippians think differently about that. And so I mentioned that both Paul and the Philippians are clients of God, the patron. That's how he's going to reframe this.

But here's the picture. He's saying instead of the Philippians, instead of thinking of it as the Philippians just directly give to Paul, what Paul is saying is you Philippians, you actually gave this to God, and then God gave it to me. And so he's trying to reframe even that, that this is not merely a horizontal transaction where the Philippians said, well, we have these resources.

We want to be a blessing to you. Let's just send them to you. He's saying that this was an act of worship, that this giving was an act of worship of the Lord that has been used by God to supply Paul's needs.

And I would suggest to you that that's exactly what happens when we give in our local churches: that we can think of it as, oh, well, I give to the church. Well, in one sense, that's true, but ultimately our giving is to the Lord, who then directs his church to use those resources for the advancement of the gospel, for the advancement of the mission of the

church. And so when we give to a local church, we should think about this as I am giving this to God, and he is directing this resource to the church to use it for his purposes.

And then notice he ends on this note of God's sufficiency, right? He says there in verse 19, my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. You see, the ultimate source of our generosity is the richness of God. And this only works if we understand that everything that we have ultimately belongs to God, and we are stupid.

So it is a mistaken way of thinking to think, well, God, you know, we have these resources and all God asks for is 10 percent. He just asks us, hey, you can keep 90. I would just like 10, please.

That's all I want. That's not the way we should think about our resources. The reality is, God says these are my gifts and resources to you, and you are a steward.

And we don't tend to use that term a lot in our context today, but a steward is someone who manages the belongings of another person. I remember when my kids were young, we had some friends who went on vacation and they needed someone to watch their fish. And so they brought the fish bowl over and, you know, we were responsible for feeding it and cleaning out the water and all that sort of stuff.

My kids were fairly young at this point. They were probably like five and two, six and three, maybe. And I just remember as the dad being terrified that that fish is going to die while my friends are on vacation.

And so I was watching that like a hawk, and I was trying to gently encourage my boys like, OK, it's time to feed the fish. Have you fed the fish today? Have you? Oh, now it's been a few days. We need to change the water out and do that very carefully because they can't kill the fish because that fish is not ours.

It's our friends. And we're going to have to answer to them when they come back. They're going to expect, well, let's see our fish.

How's it doing? And if it's floating at the top, lifeless, upside down, then that's an awkward conversation to have. I'm sorry. While you were gone having a nice vacation, your fish didn't make it.

And so it's a silly illustration, but it's the sense of stewardship: I have to take care of this. It's not mine. And I'm going to answer to the owner for how I have cared for this.

That's true of our resources. That's true of your income, of your home, and of things that we may not think of as naturally as your time. Our time is a gift from God as a resource.

And so sometimes when we're in these conversations about generosity, people who don't have a lot of financial means might think, oh, well, I don't have much that I can give. So this really doesn't apply to me. But the word that really applies to people who have a lot of wealth or resources that they can give away or something like that.

And the reality is all that we have is God's. And so our time and our energy and other things that we have are God's resources given to us to be a blessing to others. And so when we

understand that all that we have is God's and that we are stewards to use it in a way that honors him, that can unlock levels of generosity towards others that can really be a blessing to them, but also to us.

So that's where Paul lands the plane, so to speak, in this section. And notice that the ultimate expression here is a doxology. Right.

Verse 22, our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. So the focus remains on God and his glory as it's magnified through the generosity of the Philippians.

So that brings us then to the final greetings, verses twenty-one through twenty-three. And again, sometimes our temptation is to just kind of skim over these because they don't seem as weighty or meaty. And yet there are things in here for us to reflect on.

First, it focuses on greetings from other believers. And this is a subtle point, but it's very important. It stresses the universal nature of the church.

One of the great blessings of traveling and going to different parts of the world, different parts of the country, is meeting fellow Christians that you've never met before. And you walk into a church, or you're in a context where you're in close proximity to them. And there's an immediate bond that's already there because of your shared trust in Jesus.

And we might be tempted to think, well, you know, in the ancient world, there were all these kind of isolated churches all around the world. And there was actually a lot of interaction between these churches. People would travel from place to place.

They would seek out fellow believers and bring news of how the gospel was advancing. And so Paul starts with Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you.

And then verse 22, all the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. And so Caesar's household was kind of a catch-all term for people who were involved in the larger Roman Empire bureaucracy. The people who are under the employment of the Roman emperor are sending greetings.

And this just reminds us again, back in chapter one, how the gospel is advancing in areas that might have been hard to reach. Unless Paul had been put in the position he actually is. So these final greetings set the stage for Paul's last words in verse 23.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. And if you recall, this is how the letter started. Right after he introduces himself and then introduces and then refers to the Philippians.

How does he greet them? Grace to you and peace. And so he concludes this letter here with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. And that's not a throwaway line.

That's a way of stressing that the entire contents of the letter are within the framework of God's grace. And this is actually a common feature in Paul's letters. He mentions grace at the beginning, and then he mentions grace at the very end.

And so even when he's saying very hard things and very challenging things, at the end of the day he wants it framed in terms of grace. That God has been gracious to us. God has done all of these things for us in Jesus Christ.

And that's the note that he wants to leave them on as they end the letter of this idea of. Now you are going out in the grace of God who is with you. So let's step back to the big picture here and look at the big idea for this passage.

Fellowship in the gospel empowers us for mission and unites us in God's grace. Fellowship in the gospel empowers us for mission and unites us in God's grace. And we see this in two sections following, kind of the breakdown of the passage here.

The first is that fellowship in the gospel empowers us for mission. It gives us contentment. It brings credit to God's glory, God's grace.

And it's a way of bringing completion to his work in this world. And then the last section, their fellowship in the gospel unites us in God's grace. It's shown in the warmth of the greetings and then the reminder that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with our spirits.

So, application. What should we think? What should we believe? What should we desire? And what should we first think or understand? Contentment is not found in possessions or circumstances. We are sorely tempted to think that contentment comes from acquiring more and more and more and more things.

That if I just get the nicer house or the nicer car or the nicer vacation or more of whatever you enjoy, that that's going to bring you contentment. And that is not what scripture teaches. Second, believe.

We need to believe that God can give contentment in any and all circumstances. It is natural for us to have a sense of discontentment, especially when we are in lack or when we are in need. And I'm not trying to minimize the hardships that come with being in need.

Those are very real. Those are absolutely legitimate. And yet, Paul holds out this promise that there is a biblical secret to learning to live in both abundance and in lack.

And that it's in the trust in Christ as the one who strengthens us and is sufficient for us. Desire. I think we should have confidence that God will supply all my needs.

Now, again, we have to be very careful about how we determine the meaning of the word need. You know, we in our current context often think we will say things like, oh, I just really need that new mobile phone that just came out. Well, do you really need it, or do you just want it? You might actually need it.

Maybe your previous one is 10 years old and is starting to stop working. But, you know, if you got the one last year that just came out, do you really need this one, or is that just something you want? Lastly, do. This is a little less tangible than some of the other ones we've done.

But this idea is that we have to be intentional about fighting the temptation to think that our contentment rests in our possessions or our circumstances. So that brings us to the end

of our study in the book of Philippians: rejoice in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so I'm hopeful that the Lord has blessed you through our time here in Philippians.

And that this is serving as a springboard for your own personal study of going back through it, reading, reflecting, and thinking about the glorious truths that we find here in Philippians. And so I think it's only appropriate to end by ending the way that Philippians ends, by reminding us in verse 23 of chapter 4, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

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