

God's Provision

In these closing verses that comprise today's text, Paul is actually getting to the primary reason for his writing this letter, to thank the church for the gift they had sent to him through Epaphroditus (2:25). Normally, Paul worked as a tentmaker, a leather-worker, to support himself financially, not wanting to be a financial burden to the churches. Of course, being in prison and under house arrest, Paul found himself in need of support, which the Macedonian-Philippian Christians were happy to provide. In fact, the church in Philippi, though materially poor, became an example to the more affluent Corinthians, whom Paul encouraged to bear their end of the financial load of the offering to the impoverished Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8 & 9).

In the context of his thanking the Philippians for their financial gift, Paul gives us some of the most precious promises of God's provision in all of Scripture.

Philippians 4:10-20

10 *I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. 11* *Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12* *I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13* *I can do all things through him who strengthens me. 14* *In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.*

15 *You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. 16* *For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. 17* *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. 18* *I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19* *And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20* *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

James M Boice told of "a delightful old French woman" who had told him a story from her life that illustrated the importance of God's promises in curing her depression:

"In her youth in France she had been taught to make a little box of Bible verses containing a selection of the promises of God from Scripture. Each verse was written on a small piece of paper about the size of a piece of chewing gum, and each was then rolled up to make a miniature scroll. After there were forty or fifty of these small scrolls they were placed on end in a tiny open box so that the tops

were even and each one was visible. This was the promise box. And she had been encouraged as a child to pull out one verse each morning and read it. One day during the Second World War (when she was much older) she was feeling terribly discouraged by many things that had happened. In her depression her mind turned to the little box of promises that had been long since forgotten. She went to the drawer of the dresser where she had kept the box, and she took it out. She prayed, 'Lord, You know how depressed I am, and you know that I need a word of encouragement. Isn't there a promise here somewhere that can help me?' She finished praying and stepped over to the window where the light was better for reading. As she did she tripped over a loose edge of the rug and all the promises went spilling out onto the carpet. And she said, 'Lord, how foolish I have been to ask for one promise when there are so many glorious promises in your Word!'"

God's promises are many and glorious indeed.. And a foundational provision is contentment. When Paul wrote to young pastor Timothy, he addressed the important subject of money. Paul warned about the sinister, corrupting power of the love of money as the "root of all kinds of evil," giving the antidote for greed: "But godliness *with contentment* is great gain" (1 Tim 6:6-10).

Scholars say that in these verses of our text, Paul is speaking like a Greek Stoic philosopher. The Stoics claimed to be content within themselves, and unaffected by outward circumstances, whether good or evil. The key difference is in the source of this contentment. For the Stoics, the source of strength and contentment is the inner will, the determination to be virtually unaffected by life's circumstances. Paul knew his own inner disposition and strength were not enough. His strength and the source of his inner sense of wellbeing and contentment were in Christ Jesus. The Stoics had a saying that "he is wealthiest who is content with the least." Paul in fact knew that his true wealth was found in his relationship with Christ, and his contentment was not in his material gain, but in the riches he had in Christ Jesus. For him, contentment was "freedom from want that was grounded in God" (FF Bruce). No doubt Paul treasured the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd, *I shall not want!*"

Paul learned to be God-contented with plenty. He may have enjoyed the good life before he met Christ as a Roman citizen living in the affluent city of Tarsus. But when he became a follower of Christ, his "plenty" probably meant "anything above the minimum requirements of food and clothing" (Bruce). Paul knew how to act when times were good as well as when times were difficult, in other words. For us in much more affluent America, we enjoy unprecedented prosperity. And because of that, we need to learn how to live faithfully with our "plenty," and to be content with the plenty God has entrusted to us.

Both Jesus and Paul warn us against the sinister forces of mammon, the word Jesus uses for money that gives the connotation of something beyond just neutral currency. Jesus refers to money as "unrighteous mammon." (Luke 16:9).

He warns against mammon as the material that shares in the fallen-ness of the sinful world in the grips of Satan. If we don't control money, Jesus seems to be saying, it will control us. And only by God's grace can we be extricated from the bondage of the desire for inordinate gain (e.g. Matt. 6:19-24; 1 Tim. 6:3-19). In the context of our Scripture passage, the implication of how to handle plenty is to be ready to use our wealth in the service of God. In fact, the Philippians served God and ministered to Paul "out of their poverty" (2 Cor. 8:1-7).

With the standard of affluence that many of us enjoy, it's hard to even comprehend what Paul means about having plenty. As Richard Foster says, "anyone with enough money to buy a book is wealthy relative to the rest of the world." As Jim Wallis points out, we live in a world where poverty has become a moral issue. We have a moral obligation to do something about the fact that nearly half the world's population survives on less than \$2.00 a day.

Prosperity can be a moral and spiritual danger, but also can become a cause of discontent. The sins of covetousness and greed are rampant in our culture. Someone asked at the time one of the richest men in the world, John D Rockefeller, how much money it takes for a person to be content. His answer? "A little bit more."

Paul learned to be God-contented even in want. Even in times of deprivation, he affirmed that he was still in the hands of a loving, caring and Almighty God, as he writes these words from his first Roman imprisonment. His second one was to end in his execution. Paul often referred to his experiences of suffering and persecution (Acts (14:19-20; 16:22-24; 21:27-29; 22:22-25; 27:27-44; 2 Cor. 6:3-10; 11:16-33), and he certainly had a lot of experience learning to be content during times of need and want! Being in want, Paul could relate to the majority of the people in the world, who actually do live in material need and poverty. Paul could identify with the hungry, and with the many who have no idea where their next meal is coming from. And Paul says that he is content in plenty and in need, "whatever the circumstances" (v. 11).

The Message paraphrases Paul in verse 12 saying, "I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty." A recipe is better than a secret, which often isn't shared or discovered. And recipes are printed for others to see! Paul gladly shares this "recipe" for contentment, for the feeling of adequacy and sufficiency for facing any condition and circumstance of life. It's hidden from the unconverted, and one that can be known only by the person "in Christ." To be in Christ is to have access to all the fullness of God mediated to us through our relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior. Jesus spoke of the care we have as children of the heavenly Father, who cares for us much more than the best of earthly parents (Lk. 11:11-13; Matt. 7:7-11).

In perhaps the best known of all verses in our text (v.13), our strength is from Christ. Paul doesn't say he can do all he wants to do, but rather he can do all

Christ calls him to do, following his example of humble service (Phil. 2:5-11), and to share in the sufferings of a cruciform life. As John Calvin said, Paul says he can do “only those things that belong to his calling.” Christ calls us to faithfully live the life he has called us to live in discipleship and in trusting in his grace for all circumstances, those of weal and those of woe, of plenty and of want.

Paul was a man who experienced God’s strength, not only in times of personal triumph and vindication, but during times of weakness and suffering. In talking about the thorn in his flesh that tormented him, and how he prayed three times for God to take from him, Paul said the answer God gave him was, “My grace is sufficient for you.” I believe this is what Paul means in our text about being able to do everything through the One who gives him strength. It was in his weakness and suffering that Paul experienced God’s power the most: “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor.12:10).

Howard Vanderwell contracted cancer years ago while serving as a pastor. He preached a sermon from our text, titled, “Insights from the Valley,” as he shared his thoughts about the dreadful disease of cancer in light of the promises of God from Philippians 4:11-13. Pastor Vanderwell was very candid with his people, sharing his honest feelings of anxiety and disappointment, but then how he was able, by God’s grace to move on to spiritual contentment and assurance of God’s sufficiency. He says what Paul is describing as contentment “is knowing that you have all you need for the present circumstances.” God promises in our text, he says, to make us sufficient in him. We are enabled to cope with our circumstances. When we are sufficient, “we can cope,” Vanderwell says.

He shared how frustrated he is when his car won’t start. He’s “extremely discontented” because he has no mechanical ability, has no wherewithal to repair it. Contentment comes from knowing we can measure up to whatever God allows to come our way because we are in Christ and our strength is from Christ. I can't repair my car, but God has provided me with grace, AAA and Zimbrick.

God provides contentment in all circumstances and also assurance of his supply (vv. 14-20). Paul had gained an absolute assurance that God would continue to meet all his needs and he shared with the Philippians his conviction of the same assurance for them. Paul gives a commendation of the Philippian church for the way they demonstrated their concern for him through their generous giving to meet his needs.

God meets needs through his church, and we need to be always aware of ways that God wants to use our giving to meet the needs of his people. (Today we're happy to welcome John Givens, from JustDane, who will share with us about an important ministry to the formerly incarcerated we help support). The church in Philippi seemed to be one that could least afford to support Paul, yet Paul gladly accepted their gift. It was because Paul understood the Law of the Harvest—that when you give to the Lord, the Lord brings blessing to the church (17-18). Paul

allowed this poor church to make this generous offering because he knew Jesus' promises to those who give:

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down and shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Lk. 6:38).

The Philippians gave out of their poverty, but Paul didn't feel sorry for them, any more than Jesus felt sorry for the widow, who gave into the temple treasury all she had to live on. Jesus knew that God would honor her sacrifice and faith by taking care of her needs (Lk. 21:1-4). And Jesus didn't feel sorry for those who had left everything to follow him. He knew that everyone who would leave houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for his sake would be compensated with these things "a hundred times" (Matt. 19:27-29). Somebody calculated that to be 10,000 % interest! In following Jesus we're really under the Lord's sponsorship, who faithfully provides (Matt. 25:40).

Paul says "My God will meet all your needs." Paul could speak out of experience, saying "God has faithfully met my needs and he will certainly meet yours. He's a loving God of grace who has already given us his Son. As Paul says in Romans, "how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (8:32).

And so Paul ends this great passage in the only truly fitting way—with a doxology. This is the reason God blesses and provides. Not for our sake, but rather for the glory and honor of his name. He provides for us that we might live for his glory and enjoy him forever as the one who takes delight in us.

Do we need to go to "the Promise Box," and claim this promise of God's provision for our life? Are we ready, along with the dear French lady, to ask God to forgive us for failing to live by faith in and awareness of God's promises? May God give us grace for faith to believe in his provision, for his honor.