

We're continuing in our series today on the book of Philippians—and we're almost at the end, if you can believe it. Just one more week after today and we'll have walked through the whole book.

For this morning, I want to attempt a little memory game with you again as a way of recapping where we've been. Paul speaks about knowing Christ, and one of the ways that we seek to know Christ is to know the Scriptures that write about Him. The fill-in-the-blank was a bit trick last time, so this time we'll do multiple choice.

Paul is writing this letter from where?

Who's with him?

Who did the Philippians send to give a supportive gift *to* Paul?

Paul starts the letter by stating that he and Timothy are 'what' of Christ?

Paul thanks God every time he remembers them. "In all my prayers, I always pray with..." what?

He's 'in chains', but he wants them to know that it has actually served to advance... what?

He's not sure if he will get out of this alive, but he's still rejoicing because for him to live is... what?

And Paul wants the Philippians to stand firm in one Spirit, have the same love, and specifically in your relationships with one another have the same mindset as... who?

In light of all this, he encourages the church to continue to work out their... what?

Continuing in chapter 3, Paul keeps telling the Philippians over and over to do... what?

Because for Paul, nothing else matters—no titles or achievements—compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, for whose sake he has lost all things and considers them... what?

We all need to take such a view of things, he says, because ultimately we are citizens of.... where?

Then in chapter 4, after pleading with Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord, he reminds the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord's nearness and to not be 'what?' but to present their requests before God.

So this week, we come full circle as Paul expresses his gratitude yet again to the Philippians for the spiritual camaraderie that they have with him in the gospel. **Read Phil. 4:10-20.**

I recently read a Thrive article that highlighted a new term for me—the Titanic Effect. Now, as many of you are aware, the Titanic was a British ocean liner—a massive ship for its time—that was built in 1912. And newspapers boasted that not even God could sink this ship.

But on its first sailing it hit an iceberg and sank, which of course resulted in terrible consequences for many of the people on board. And historical findings have revealed the sad reality that although the radio operators aboard the Titanic were very competent and focused on their duties, they were so consumed with the job of managing private telegrams that they forget the most important thing: the safety of the passengers. They were so focused on the immediate concerns that they ignored the many words of caution that were coming in regarding the likelihood of icebergs.

And so the ‘Titanic effect’—according to the article—is when participants within an organization similarly drift from the organization’s primary mission. They forget to keep the main thing the main thing. In the case of the Titanic, despite all the hoopla about how great the ship was, the primary ‘mission’ was ultimately to bring people safely across the Atlantic.

Now, as we’ve seen throughout this letter to the Philippians, to keep Christ as *the* center of the mission is Paul’s great encouragement to the church. And he has so much joy because he’s seeing that they are in fact doing it.

In many of Paul’s other letters, he takes on a very different tone because the ‘Titanic effect’ was at play. Many of the early churches (Revelation) got swayed away from their primary mission.

Not here in Philippi. And that’s reaffirmed in these verses that we’ve just read, where Paul is rejoicing again because of this gift he’s received from them. And as we unpack this, we’ll see why these gifts are so significant for Paul.

Now, interestingly, he’s saved his thank-you until the end, which may seem a bit strange. Most of us, I think, when we receive a gift from someone—financial or otherwise—write a letter or send a text message that *starts with* the a big thank you. That seems like the more ‘grateful’ thing to do.

But remember, Paul has spent the whole letter thus far focusing them in on oneness in Christ, on prioritizing Christ, and to allow *that* one mindedness to define their relationships with one another.

Their gifts to him, then—sent through Epaphroditus—are *indicative* of their oneness with him in Christ. In other words, Paul would never have wanted to make his letter about the gifts, because that would mean making the gifts the main thing. Rather, for Paul, the sending of these gifts is a sign of their common pursuit, their common mission for the gospel. *That’s* why he is so joyful.

Verse 10, Paul says to them: “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.”

Now, don't be thrown off there by that language of '*at last*'. It's not that the Philippians had been negligent in the relationship and now *finally* they're showing care for Paul again. Paul himself says that they've always been concerned; they just didn't have the opportunity to show it.

Why this was the case, we're not sure. Perhaps it was because of a logistical or a travelling issue, or because being under house arrest made it difficult, or because Paul himself told them to hold off because he was getting criticized for receiving aid, we don't know. But it's clear that they were ready and prepared to send support to him whenever the timing was appropriate.

And yet, at the same time, he wants to remind them that he didn't actually need it. Verse 11: "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

Why does he say that? Like, for goodness' sake, Paul—you've already waited until the end of the letter to say thank-you. Just be grateful. Nobody wants to hear, after they've given you a substantial gift, that you didn't actually need it.

But look at where he goes with this: "...*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances,*" he says. "*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.*"

In other words, whatever my situation is, says Paul, it is not these supportive gifts that give me strength. Again, he doesn't want to make it about the gifts.

In a creative way, he's actually reframing a Greco-Roman idea from a Philosophical group known as the Stoics who believed that contentment came from self-sufficiency. For the Stoics, contentment came from within. And Paul turns that concept on its head and says the opposite—that it's about *Christ*-sufficiency. The source of contentment comes from outside of ourselves.

So he rejoices in this gift from the Philippians, not because he can now go and buy a sandwich, but because he loves that they share in this spirit of Christ-contentment, and he wants to remind them that Christ is his strength whether they support him or not.

As one scholar put it, to 'be content with what you have' seems to have been a general precept in the early church. And Paul wants to make sure everyone understands this.

Paul can do 'all these things' through Christ because Christ *is* all things for him. And I want to pause here just to make sure we're understanding this right. Because this verse has often been misunderstood to actually support the Greek way of thinking rather than Paul's.

Just doing a quick google image search proved how this verse has often been used to speak about a kind of contentment through self-achievement. Because in these pictures, it's the person who looks strong. Almost as if to say, "I've got this. I'm going to achieve what I'm setting out to do because I can do anything through Christ."

But what Paul's saying here in chapter 4 is less of a "I can do *anything* through Christ who makes me strong" and more of a "I am able to *handle* any situation because Christ gives me the strength for it."

It's not about achieving something but receiving. That's the context. Paul's saying that he can manage any situation that gets thrown at him because his strength *is and comes from* Jesus.

So with that in mind, then, I wonder if we might be a little less inclined to use this verse too quickly. Because it's actually very difficult to say that I can handle anything that God throws at me, *even when* I am handling it in Jesus. Most of the time, I think, we loathe the idea of having to handle anything that might make us uncomfortable.

It's a dominant part of our human nature that can keep us from relying on Christ. We want to feel self-sufficient.

But it's also one of the primary reasons why Christ called us to be in community with one another. Because when we *walk with* one another in situations of discomfort—whatever they might be—and *point each other* to the source of strength, we don't give any room for allowing ourselves to think that we have to do it on our own.

Paul says in verse 14, it was *good* of the Philippians to share in his struggles. So clearly he doesn't see himself as going through his struggles alone or needing to figure it out on his own.

This Philippian church had apparently been supporting him from the very beginning, when many—if not all—of the other churches were not, or weren't mature enough in the faith to support him with the right motives. It seems to be that the Philippians were quite unique in this respect, in being able to *walk with* Paul in supporting his reliance on Christ.

For example, in Corinth, it seems to be the case that the Corinthians felt that Paul *had* to receive their support because both he and they got something out of it. In Greco-Roman society, there was the patron-client relationship that was part of Roman culture, which was a very transactional relationship. It was a 'you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours' kind of relationship to help build up one another's status. There was a kind of mutual usefulness—if we can be useful to one another—rather than a relationship built on gospel fellowship where our gifts to one another is ultimately a sacrifice to *God*, to honor *Him*.

Big difference. The primary mission is very different.

Think about it his way. It would be like if one of the missionaries we support—say Hannah who’s serving with Resonate in Greece—came here asking us for extra support because of the extreme hardships on the refugee camps where she serves. And instead of seeing our financial gift as an offering, as a way of partnering with her in the work she’s doing for Christ, we instead thought of it as a way to get something back out of it.

For instance, maybe we tell her that she has to give credit to Willoughby Christian Reformed Church so as to get our name out there and encourage people to watch our services so that we gain popularity. And so that people can know how generous we are. That would be a relationship that is focused on mutual benefits and enhancing each other’s status *rather than* the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was the kind of problem that was present in many of the early churches—and is a great temptation for the Church still today.

But here in Philippi, here was a community where the transforming nature of the gospel had clearly been at work. Because they had been with Paul the whole time, they understood the relationship that they were meant to have together in Christ, and there were no cultural pressures playing into it or false expectations that would hinder them from understanding what their support meant.

Which, from Paul’s perspective, must have been *so freeing*. Here was a mature body of believers—who certainly weren’t bereft of problems, as we saw a few weeks ago—but whose focus on the primary mission allowed Paul to be grateful for their support.

Verse 18, he calls their gifts a *“fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.”*

In other words, Paul doesn’t look at the gifts and say, “Oh thank you for giving *me* all of this.” He views them, again, as their way of partnering in the work that God is doing. Philippians are simply investing their resources into the work that the Spirit of Jesus is doing through Paul. It’s not about them in any way. It’s about putting efforts and resources into God’s mission, because they see God moving and want to be a part of it.

And so it is because of *this* that Paul can say to them in verse 19 that *“my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”* Because when we seek to invest ourselves into the work of Christ, even if it stretches us, we can be assured that God will allow our needs to be met. We don’t need to doubt His provision when we keep the primary mission about Jesus.

So again, from Paul’s vantage point, there is no ‘Titanic effect’ happening here at the church in Philippi. He’s not worried that they’ve lost sight of the mission—in fact, quite the opposite. He’s rejoicing because they’ve kept Christ at the center.

So I think the question for us, then, as we come close to the end of this letter, is similar. Has this really all been about Jesus? Do we have our sights set—both in our personal lives and in our communal life together—on *that* mission? Is Christ the reason why we gather together, why we offer *our* time, energy, and wealth? Is He at the center of how we manage our resources? Or are we in any way being swayed to find contentment in our own self-sufficiency?

Are we also able to say: “*I can manage all things through him who gives me strength*”?

Because Paul is highlighting here—and what he’s said from the very beginning—is that when we are servants of Christ Jesus, in communal oneness together, and when we function off of the premise that everything is *for* and *in* Christ, then we have something here that is unparalleled in our world. We have a commonality and communion here with one another that is strengthened, not simply by *our* efforts, but by the Spirit of Jesus moving through us.

Paul had seen clearly in his own life that Jesus is *the way* that God has made His love known and available to the world. And so if Christ, then, remains the center of our mission, that love of God flows *through* us.

By far, the most impactful moments that I’ve had in my life are when another believer—a brother or sister in Christ—blesses *me* by allowing the *Holy Spirit* to move through *them*. And we know the difference. We can feel the difference.

It’s what it means to be the body of Christ—allowing the Spirit of Jesus to move through us so that we are linked together and empowered by that same Spirit *to be* Christ for one another.

This is why Paul can’t stop rejoicing in this letter. Because *this* is the relationship that they have. He is able to handle all things through Christ in part because he *also has* this relationship with the believers in Philippi. Because these are coworkers in the faith who aren’t just pals or acquaintances but fellow pilgrims who walk with him in this journey of serving Christ and His gospel.

They’re all on the same page about what this is about. Their primary mission is the same. And what a difference that makes.

So we must ask ourselves: is this what it’s all about? Is our focus *really on* living for Christ and seeing His power displayed in us?

Is it really all for Jesus?