

Prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for the beauty of life which surprises us day by day. You have created a world which never ceases to give us more and more; never fails to fill us with awe and wonder; and never hides its vibrant and exuberant energy. Lead us to love Your Creation, Almighty God, and treat it with the utmost respect. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Confess your sins to God and if you are not sure what your sins are, then read Exodus 20 or Leviticus 19 before praying

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you meet** *Pray for the people who are or who have been employed in the same work as you*
- *Pray for those who are in the news in your country*
- *Give thanks to God for the forgiveness of others*

Meditation

Our Lord is our Great Provider, the Governor of life.
He provides us every day with all we need to do His will;

If we lack anything,
It is because we do not need it to do His will;
If we have too much,
It is because we have much more to do for Him.

The Lord our God gives us
Love, strength, passion, and enthusiasm to do His will;
He gives us His gifts
To help us do great and greater things for the Kingdom;
Yet when these fade,
His Sabbath Day reminds us of our need to rest, to live.

Brother, sister, friends; do not fret.
The Lord will lead the way and govern life according to His plan;
And what He has equipped us each to do.

Bible passage - Philippians 4:15-23

¹⁵ Now, dear Philippians, you do indeed know that in the early days of the Gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, no church has shared any account with me of gift and receipt, except you alone. ¹⁶ For in Thessalonica, you gave help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but prefer the fruit which increases in your account. ¹⁸ I have been fully paid; more than enough. I am well supplied now that I have received the gifts you sent through Epaphroditus. They are a fragrant offering, a sacrifice which is acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ May my God meet completely every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²¹ Give my greetings to every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you, ²² and all the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Bible Study

Review

With these warm greetings, Paul signs off his letter to the Philippians. It is a letter with some marvellous literature about the work of Jesus Christ (1:3-11, 2:5-11), which typically of Paul, does not shirk from the critical issues facing the church at Philippi (3:1-11). The letter is of great importance because of Paul's testimony about his own life and experience before he was a Christian (3:4ff), and it also contains a powerful theological interpretation of his conversion (3:7,8). Details about other aspects of Paul's private affairs are revealed by his comments about Timothy and Epaphroditus (3:19-30), and the letter is also full of advice ranging from general spiritual exhortation (1:27-30) to counsel about a dispute between two women (4:2,3). It is well worth reviewing a whole letter in this way, because this helps us remember the letter and its message as a whole. All Paul's letters are different, and if we see the threads which tie a letter together this will help us focus more accurately on what the Lord is saying to us through them. Scripture is not just a collection of memorable texts for us to mould as we will, but a real expression of human life and the way that God uses His people for His purposes; as is so clear in this letter.

Our passage today begins with some comments from Paul about the gift he had received from the Philippians via Epaphroditus (4:18). My own opinion is that this was the primary reason for the letter to the Philippians, which then gave Paul the opportunity he needed to write about the many other issues it contains, including his damning indictment of the Judaisers (3:1-11). At every point in this letter where Paul mentions the 'gift', however, he appears to have been rather embarrassed by it. For a great scholar and one who wrote some of the most magnificent Greek poetry and prose ever written, he struggled to express himself adequately when it came to money and gifts, and came out with awkward and clumsy language!

Unfortunately, this has meant that the various Bible translations of these passages differ considerably, and even today, there is some confusion about whether Paul supported the principle of the receipt of money and gifts by apostles and missionaries, or not. My own opinion is that Paul did not like the idea of direct giving from churches to individual workers, evangelists or missionaries. However, we need to be careful not to be too rigid about this issue because as much as Paul did not like the principle, he undoubtedly accepted at least one gift from the Philippians (4:15) albeit with as much grace as he could muster! We will look at this in detail later in the Bible study.

After a brief prayer of blessing (4:20), Paul finished by offering generous personal greetings as a 'postscript' to his letter (4:21-23). Despite the problems mentioned earlier with two women (4:2,3), Paul always spoke of the Philippian church with affection, and there were many reasons why he may have held them in particular esteem. In particular, the Philippian church was the first founded on the continent of Europe; something Paul believed to be very important for the future of the church. In a fascinating comment, he offered greetings from 'those of the Emperor's household' (4:22), but we should not presume he was on Palatine Hill in Rome itself where the Emperor lived. The term could equally have referred to the entourage around the Praetorian Guard who held him while he was in Caesarea, where I believe the letter was written. This reference tells us no more about the origins of the letter besides what we have already concluded (see comments on 2:25ff). For Paul, such details would be of little consequence. He concluded the letter in a formal manner, doing what was only right for one who was a missionary and apostle of Christ; giving glory to God (4:20).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The price of a gift
- Supporting ministry and sacrificial giving
- Greetings

Going Deeper

The conclusion of this famous letter of Paul may well be coloured by the whole issue of giving, which Paul certainly found difficult. However, as we study these verses we cannot ignore the immense warmth of Christian love that comes through. It has coloured the whole letter, and does so to the very end.

The price of a gift!

The difficulties presented by this passage of scripture arise because Paul used a number of technical accounting terms, as if dealing formally with the matter of the Philippians' gift; 'account' 'gift and receipt' (4:15), 'account' (4:17), 'fully paid' and 'gifts received' (4:18). It is easy for scholars to know this because there are many records of financial transaction surviving from that time, and the terms are well known. What Paul does, apart from using the words awkwardly and

possibly incorrectly, is to mix up the accounting terms with theological ones; for example, where he says 'not that I seek the gift, but prefer the fruit which increases in your account' (4:17). Whilst most of the language is that of formal accounting, Paul slips in the theological word for fruit, 'karpov' as in the 'fruit of the Spirit'! It was a favourite term of Paul's which was a regular in his preaching (Rom 7:4,5; 1 Cor 9:7; Gal 5:22; Eph 5:9; Col 1:6,10; Phil 4:17 etc.) but here, he was concerned to thank the Philippians and offer them a blessing for having helped him.

If we are to understand what was going on with the gift, however, we shall need to look more carefully at the attitude Paul generally had to gifts and payments during his ministry; and as I describe the following important background, please remember that Philippi was a key Roman colony in Macedonia, just to the north of Greece.

After his conversion and some time spent in preparation for ministry (see Gal. 1:16ff), Paul began missionary work together with Barnabas, a Levite, who was probably the senior of the two (Acts 9:27, 11:22ff). Their exploits (Acts 13-15) are commonly called 'Paul's first missionary journey'. Paul then had a sharp disagreement with Barnabas (15:39), and parted company with him, taking Silas as his partner and heading across Galatia (Turkey) in the direction of Macedonia and Greece. This is the beginning of the so called 'second missionary journey' of Paul. However, it could well be described as his first one in charge, for from this point onwards, Paul was in charge. He was able to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's direct calling on his life to take the Gospel towards Europe and deeper into Gentile territory. Notice how in a short space of time he picked up Timothy who spoke Greek (16:1ff), then was 'forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word in Asia' (16:6) and subsequently saw a vision of a man pleading for him to 'come over to Macedonia' (part of Europe - 16:9). On this missionary journey, the first place that Paul and Silas preached the Gospel was in Philippi (16:12ff).

I have explained this so that you may understand why it is that Paul talked in his letter of coming to the Philippians 'in the early days of the Gospel' (4:15). Paul was referring to his particular call to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, a task he had only just begun when he first came to Philippi (as above). Unless you know this background, what Paul says about the 'early days of the Gospel' is quite strange, for the Gospel in general had been preached for a long time before it came to Philippi! It is also true that whatever practice Barnabas and Paul had about gifts (which we do not really know), from when Paul began his own independent ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 16), he normally refused to receive gifts from individual churches. He preferred to work as a tent-maker in order to make a living (literally), and he is recorded as having spent time in Thessalonica, a town just beyond Philippi, doing just this (1 Thess 2:9, 2 Thess 3:8). Hence the common Christian expression today whereby 'tent-making' refers to an occupation used to make money in order to cover the needs of a wider ministry.

It is clear in our passage of scripture that Paul wanted to let the Philippians know that he accepted the gift they had sent and was grateful for it, but he also told them, somewhat awkwardly and pedantically, that he was perfectly happy as he was (4:18). We should note that this is consistent with what Paul had said earlier (4:12). It was a difficult balancing act for Paul to pull off, saying 'thanks, but no more, please' with grace!

Supporting ministry and sacrificial giving

So what was Paul's general policy towards the support of ministry and mission? It does seem that although Paul commends the proper, even generous, payment of the leaders of churches (e.g. 2 Tim 5:17), he made a personal point of not receiving gifts from people when he was working as an apostle and missionary. Paul seems to have maintained the important principle that it was unwise for him to receive gifts of money and support from churches in communities where he was working (1 Thess 2:9ff), and generally better for him to not to receive gifts from churches that he had previously founded, thereby avoiding any accusation of influence or personal gain. Paul therefore had to work and earn his own living amongst the people he missioned, setting an important example of godly Christian living. This is clearly behind the other major reference to this in 2 Thess 3:8ff

'we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.'

Giving and receiving are an important part of the Christian life, yet Paul was justly concerned to maintain his independence as a missionary. He wanted everything he did to be seen openly as 'the work of the Lord', and the principles by which he worked were sensible.

When it came to the gift from the Philippian church, however, Paul accepted this even though it broke his normal rules for mission, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the special relationship he had with the Philippian church, the 'first-fruits' of his own ministry to the Gentiles and the first church founded on European soil. He described the gift using language reminiscent of the Old Testament; 'a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God' (4:17). Secondly, Paul was in prison, and whereas he would normally have been able to support himself, now he could not. It was right for him to receive this gift now from a church some distance from where he was being held, because this did not compromise the work that he continued to do from prison. It may be that the Philippians knew all this full well, and were willing to risk his stubborn nature because they knew he was in prison, and not getting any younger!

Greetings

Paul included everyone in his final greetings and blessings (4:20-23), from all the Christians where he was (Caesarea, I suggest) to all those in Philippi. Throughout Paul's writings, the phrase 'every saint' or 'all the saints' appear, reminding us of the early days of the church where there were no structural divisions between Christians within a town, colony or city. This was an impressive aspect of the early church, and it has tragically not continued in the church since. Nevertheless, at the very beginning of his letter, Paul addressed 'all the saints' (1:1), just as he did at the end; and the last sentence of the letter also copies the first in the form of greeting, which is 'grace' (4:23). In this way, Paul indicates

to us that all things begin and end with the 'grace' of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, and his greeting conveys a sense of generosity, joy, love, honesty, compassion and favour, all rolled into one.

Reading the details of Paul's feelings about a gift sent to him may not be the most inspiring way to end our reading of one of the best loved of Paul's letters. But it reminds us that the letter was written in the very real circumstances of prison life in which, although Paul still regarded himself as 'on mission' and therefore resistant to gifts, he was nevertheless willing to accept this particular gift. The Philippians risked Paul's displeasure, and he had to fight with his own feelings in order to properly accept a gift that he would previously have turned away. Nevertheless, the letter Paul wrote to accept the gift contained immeasurable spiritual riches.

Application

The giving and receiving of gifts even within the church is a difficult issue for most people, and it is hedged around by all manner of cultural issues even today. The Lord longs to release people into ministry, and that ministry needs to be paid for, if not by the giving of people in the church, then in other ways. Insofar as we have studied it today, the pattern is that where there is full time ministry in a local church setting, then those who work full time should be paid accordingly (2 Tim 5:17). Where people work as missionaries and take the Gospel into new places, then Paul advocates missionaries who are self supporting, according to his own practice of 'tent-making'. Paul appears to be resistant but not wholly contrary to the idea of financial support from other churches; he feared the possible compromise a missionary's sensitivity to the prior guidance of the Holy Spirit and the cultural needs of the situation in which the mission is set.

In our own day, the more we can open up the subject of giving and receiving, the better; for the Lord surely wishes to release resources so that they can be used for the Gospel, both people and money. It could be that we are called to be like the Philippians, by giving generously as we are led, so that God's work can be done or sustained or a man or woman of God materially upheld at some important point of their ministry. Alternatively, it could be that the Lord is calling us to be like Paul, acting for the Lord with strong independence, but pragmatically prepared to receive help from other Christians because of a need for their support.

I hope it will not be true that in our churches today the riches people have and would like to share are not shared, because some are unwilling give or receive because of principles 'set in stone'. It would be desperately sad if people who are in real need go un-helped because those who have the resources are blind to their need. The letter to the Philippians is a clear example of where God's people had to be willing to both give and receive, whatever their scruples or preferences. The Holy Spirit had to be allowed to show the way forward and work as He wished through the resources available.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Thinking about the letter as a whole, what does the Philippians' gift to Paul teach us about the support of 'missionary work' today?
2. How can we best honour the sacrifice behind some of the giving to our church, Sunday by Sunday?
3. How easy is it to look at your own friends at church and see in them a 'unity' of people bound by Christ? What problems does this question uncover?

Personal comments by author

The close of the letter begs us to think about the impressive way that Paul spoke about the Christian people in one place as united in one church. How can we work for that unity of God's people as will be effective for the work of the Gospel in our age? As a clergyman, I receive a great deal of post from people advertising their brand of Christianity, which invariably berates Christians of some traditional denominations or background. Such hatred of brothers and sisters in Christ comes from the devil, and needs to be named as such.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The close of Paul's letter to the Philippians is strangely awkward, but it is about a gift! It challenges us to think about both our own giving and receiving e. This may be something you could spend some time praying through, for financial resources and financial need are not often handled with ease within the church.*

- *Set out and design a cycle of prayer which you can use for those who are doing God's work as missionaries even today. Consider prayerfully your own giving to people who you know who are doing the Lord's work in such ways.*
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Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the joy of knowing You, for the pleasure of finding You in others, and the happiness we find in living our lives according to Your will. Remind us of this when we feel low, and place within us the assurance that even though our own love falters, Your love does not, and it lasts for eternity. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN
