

The Believers' Fellowship in the Apostle's Need

Scripture Reading: Phil. 4:10, 14-20

THE APOSTLE REJOICING IN THE LORD FOR THE BELIEVERS' RENEWED CONCERN

In their giving, many Christians do not have fellowship, i.e., the ministering of life. When we have *genuine* fellowship with one another, we minister life to one another. When many Christians give something as a gift, they do not have the deep sense that in this transaction there is the ministry of life. No doubt, the saints in Philippi not only sent the material supply to Paul, but also ministered life to him. Thus, between the two parties, the apostle and the believers, there was the fellowship of life and the mutual ministry of life. It is important that we learn to give in such a fellowship of life and ministry of life. The fellowship in life can be illustrated by the circulation of blood in the human body. On the one hand, as the blood circulates, it flows out; on the other hand, it returns. In like manner, our fellowship in life always has a going out with a return. Any outflow without a corresponding inflow is not true fellowship. Fellowship always involves circulation. The life goes out, and the life also returns. The life goes with a supply to the other party, and then it comes back with a supply from this party. Whenever we give material things under the leading of the Lord, we should experience such a fellowship in life. The fellowship the believers in Philippi had with Paul was for the furtherance of the gospel, i.e., for God's move on earth for His economy. (1:5) When the Philippian believers sent a gift with Epaphroditus, Paul considered this the blossoming again of their thinking and concern for him. Paul's use of the word *blossom* implies that the believers' thought of him was a matter of life, something that expressed life and of the ministry of life. (4:10) This word implies that our giving of material things to any church, to any servant of the Lord, and to any of the saints must be something living that is able to blossom. This fellowship involves more than participation; it involves the circulation of the current of life. According to the Bible, fellowship always comes from life.

THE APOSTLE'S REMEMBRANCE OF THE BELIEVERS' SUPPLY IN THE PAST

Paul refers to those times in the past when the believers in Philippi supplied him materially. (vv.15-16) Why? The secret to understanding Paul's purpose in these verses is in the word *account* (vv.15, 17). The Philippian believers' supply of material things to the apostle opened an account with him. In the Bible we have a revelation of the heavenly banking system. In Matthew 6 the Lord Jesus speaks of making a deposit in our spiritual bank account. According to His word, we need to make deposits into our account in the heavens. Paul indicates that the church in Philippi was unique in opening an account with Paul. (v.15) With this account there is the side of giving, and the other side of receiving. To be sure, in the account opened with Paul, the Philippian believers gave a great deal. The church in Philippi had opened an account to care for the needs of the apostle. This account, reflected in verse 15, was kept in the heavenly bank. They sent gifts to Paul, and in return they received God's repayment. In the apostle's experience, he had the conviction and assurance that God was his God through his being one with Him. Since he considered the Philippians' material gift to him a sacrifice to God, he assuredly believed that God, who was one with him and who was his God, would richly repay the Philippians. (v.19) On behalf of God, the believers sent something to God's servant. For this, God would be sure to pay them back. He would not owe the believers anything. The heavenly account would enter both a credit and a debit for the Philippian believers.

Which side of the ledger do you think would be bigger— the debit side or the credit side, the giving side or the receiving side? It is always the receiving side which is greater. This indicates that you are not actually the giver; God is the One who gives. However, if you open such an account with the intention of enriching yourself, God's repayment may not be given to you in this age. Rather, He may wait until your greediness has been dealt with before He repays you. Although the Philippians had opened an account with Paul and even in Thessalonica had sent "both once and again" to his need, there was a period of time when no transactions took place. For this reason, Paul referred to the believers' giving in the past. He expected that the transactions would not cease, but that there would be a continual giving and receiving. Paul says he did not seek the gift, but the fruit which increases to the believers' account. (v.17) This refers to the increase on the credit side. In these verses Paul was encouraging the believers to keep their account active, to have no gaps in the giving and receiving. Then there would be fruit which increased to the believers' account.

THE PHILIPPIANS' SUPPLY TO THE APOSTLE THROUGH EPAPHRODITUS

Receiving the material things, through Epaphroditus, Paul could say that he was fully supplied. (v.18) He regarded the things sent to him as "a fragrant odor, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." The Philippians' material gift to supply the apostle's need was considered by him a sacrifice to God, acceptable and well-pleasing (Heb.13:16). Paul indicates in his appreciation that what the Philippians did to him was actually done to God. This implies his assurance that he was one with God and that his work was by God and for God. Paul says that his God will abundantly repay the believers. In his experience Paul had the conviction and assurance that God was his God because Paul was one with Him. (Philip.4:19) Thus, Paul regarded the material gift sent to him from the Philippian believers as a sacrifice to God. Furthermore, he believed with assurance that God would richly repay them. Here we see that whenever we receive a gift, we need to have the assurance that this gift is presented not only to us, but also to God. Then we need to have the conviction that God will repay the one who gives this gift. In His repayment, God will fill every need of the giver, fully supplying that one and satisfying him. Because the Philippians cared for God's sent one, God would care for their every need. God supplies our need according to His riches, not according to our needs. His riches exceed our needs. The phrase *in glory* modifies *fill*; it does not modify *His riches*.(v.19) Glory is the expression of God; it is God expressed in splendor. God's rich supply to the believers, who are His children, expresses God and bears the glory of God. The apostle assured the Philippians that God would abundantly supply all their needs so as to bring them into His glory. Paul is testifying that God's repayment to the giver is in glory. In doing so, He will show forth the splendor of His glory and bring the givers into this glory.

The Lord's repayment is also "in Christ Jesus." The phrase *in Christ Jesus* also modifies *fill*. (4:19) Christ is the all-inclusive One as the base, the element, the sphere, and the channel in which and by which God cares for His people according to His riches and in glory. If we do not apply this principle to the matter of giving and receiving, we shall not have a full understanding of what Paul says concerning giving and receiving. The giving and receiving of material things is intimately related to the experience of Christ. On our side, it is related to life; on God's side, it is related to His glory. We give and receive in the way of life, in the fellowship of life. When we do this, there will be the blossoming in life, the sign that life is flourishing, that there is a normal circulation of life in the Body of Christ. The issue of this giving and receiving in the fellowship of life is the glory of God. By this we see that even the giving and receiving of material gifts can become a rich experience of Christ which issues in the glorification of God. God comes in to visit both the ones who give and the one who receives in such a way as to express His splendor, His glory. Thus, the fellowship in the matters of giving and receiving not only ministers life to all concerned, but also brings all parties into the glory of God.

What they gave to Paul was actually received by God. Thus, it was not Paul who was in debt to them, but God. Hence, God was obligated to pay back the believers. God and Paul were in partnership. Paul was one with God in God's heavenly enterprise. For this reason, when the Philippian believers gave something to Paul, it was God who became indebted to them. Paul knew that God would repay them. It is important for us to realize, however, that it is only when we give in Christ that God becomes indebted to us. If we do not present our gifts in Christ, God will not be obligated to repay us. But whenever in Christ we give something to the church, to the needy saints, or to the Lord's work in His recovery, God becomes indebted to us. The reason for His indebtedness is that by giving something in Christ to the church, the saints, or the work, we are actually giving to God Himself and to His concern, to His economy. Paul did not have anything with which to repay the saints. However, God would repay them, not according to what they gave Him, but according to His riches. Furthermore, He might even repay them a hundredfold.

God will also fill our needs in glory and in Christ Jesus. Glory is God expressed in His splendor to bring us into the enjoyment of His expression. When God repays us in glory, He brings us into His splendor. Everyone should have the experience of giving something to God for His interests and of being repaid by Him according to His riches and in glory, being brought into the enjoyment of His glorious expression in His splendor. The word *fill* is modified by three phrases: first, *according to His riches*; second, *in glory*; and third, *in Christ Jesus*. (v.19) As the all-inclusive One, Christ is the element, realm, channel, and atmosphere of God's repayment. The matter of giving and receiving in the way described in Philippians 4 is not a matter of natural generosity, of donating something out of a willingness to sacrifice. If we give according to Paul's word, we give not in ourselves, but in Christ. When our gift is presented in Christ and through Christ, it becomes something of life that blossoms. Furthermore, it becomes a sweet odor, a sacrifice well-pleasing to God. This will cause God's glory to be manifested to us. This is an experience of Christ. If we have never enjoyed Christ and experienced Him in giving material things for God's interest, we shall not be able to appreciate the splendor or the excellency of God's expression in this way. When we give material things in Christ for God's interest, life is ministered to the Body, and God's glory is brought in. As God's glory is manifested, we appreciate His splendor and excellency. This appreciation is both an enjoyment and an experience.