

A NUGGET OF JOYFUL RELIANCE

Philippians 4: 10-23

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For the past eight weeks we have been searching for hidden treasure, not the kind that you find in a gold mine, but the kind you discover in the Word of God. We've been looking for nuggets of joy in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Today we bring our search to an end, as we examine chapter four, verses ten through twenty. In many respects it is the most precious nugget of joy that we have discovered during these past eight weeks and yet perhaps the most difficult assay in terms of its value for our walk with the Lord. Even the name of this nugget is difficult to comprehend. What does it mean when someone says, "In these last verses of Paul's letter I have found a nugget of joyful reliance?" Well, let's take a careful look at what Paul wrote and see if we can uncover what he is saying to us today.

He begins by declaring in verse 10, "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me." Later in verse 14 he adds, "Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles." What was he talking about? He was talking about the way in which the church at Philippi had supported his ministry. Over and over again they had come to his aid. The first time was when he left Philippi and continued his missionary journey to Thessalonica and Berea, two other nearby cities in northern Greece. Then for reasons that we do not understand the Philippian church had not been able to send additional support. Perhaps they had lost track of where he was. Paul moved around a lot and communication was restricted to hand delivered letters. There were no cell phones or post offices in the ancient world. Now, however, the Philippians had caught up with him. They had discovered that he was a prisoner, locked up in Rome. So they had sent Epaphroditus, one of their own, with gifts for Paul and so now in his letter to the church he was expressing his gratitude.

What he said is a reminder to all of us that we need to express our gratitude to those who have bestowed their love upon us. A kind word, an invitation to dinner, an act of kindness, a gift of time or financial resources that benefitted us, all of these things deserve a note, a call, a genuine expression of our thankfulness. But there is something more. Paul expresses it in this way. Speaking of the gifts that they had sent him, he wrote, "They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18). In other words when we help other Christians and other Christian causes, we are actually presenting a gift to God. It's like the offerings that were presented to the Lord on the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. They were considered to be a fragrant aroma pleasing unto the Lord (Leviticus 1:9).

But there is something else that Paul says in the next verse. Listen to this translation of verse 19, "And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from His glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus." In other words, when we give, God returns the favor. These glorious riches, I believe, refer to those warm feelings that well up within us when we do something good for others in Christ's name. There may be, however, some other benefits as well. There were two members in the church I served years ago, a husband and wife, who lived on a very small fixed income. Nevertheless, they decided to tithe, to give 10% of what they received to the work of the Lord. One Sunday, the husband, a man by the name of David, shared this testimony with our church family. He said, "There is no way that the income we receive can meet our monthly expenses, especially all of the medications we take. I can't explain it, but since we've started tithing there is always money in our bank account at the end of the month." God was willing and able to meet their needs. Their generosity became an opportunity to receive God's generosity. In the book of Proverbs chapter 11, verse 25, we find these words of godly wisdom, "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."

So what does this nugget of reliance look like? It's an expression of gratitude for all of those who have been there for us in our times of need. It's an admission that we need one another, that none of us can make it in life by ourselves. Remember that old TV show called "The Twilight Zone." One of the episodes featured a self-possessed bank employee who really didn't like other people. He wanted to be left alone and he was overjoyed to discover that his wish had been granted. Accidentally locking himself in the bank vault one evening, he discovered that when it automatically opened the next morning everyone had disappeared. At first he was shocked, but then he realized that now he could do anything he wished. No longer was he a lowly employee at the beck and call of everyone else. He was the captain of his own ship, the master of his own life. Joyfully descending the steps of the bank, he lost his footing, tripped and then fell. He landed on his glasses, a special prescription without which he could not see. They were broken and now there was no one to replace them. Years ago a well-known English poet and theologian by the name of John Donne, wrote these words, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." They are just as true today as they were then.

There is, however, another facet to this nugget of reliance that we need to examine. Take a look at verse 12. Paul 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." What was that secret? Verse 13 provides us with the answer. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Not only was Paul relying on his friends in Philippi, he was also relying on this relationship with Christ. Even when things got tough, even when

he was hungry—Roman prisons didn't provide three meals a day—Paul could rely on the indwelling strength that comes from Christ. He could face just about anything, including starvation, just so long as he was being infused with the spiritual stamina that comes from Christ.

And speaking of stamina let me tell you the heart rending story of an incident that transpired during World War II. It took place in 1941 at the Auschwitz death camp in Poland. A prisoner had escaped and the Nazi commandant of the prison was furious. So he decided to do something that was so malevolent that none of the prisoners in the camp would even consider the possibility of trying to escape. Lining up all of the inmates on the parade field, he told them, "I will select ten men in exchange for one who escaped. They will be incarcerated in a cell without food and water until each and every one of them dies of starvation." He then marched up and down the rows of prisoners selecting at random those who were going to die. The last one to be chosen cried out, pleading with the commandant, "Please no. I have a wife and children." Then as the commandant was turning to leave, heaven intervened. One of the inmates in that prison yard stepped forward. He said, "I will go instead of the last man who was selected. He has a family. I am alone. I am a Catholic priest." Silence gripped this gruesome scene. Perhaps for the first time in his life, the commandant realized that he was standing in the presence of a power far greater than his own or even that of the Third Reich. Turning to the priest he uttered, almost in a whisper, "So be it," and then quickly walked away. The priest was from Poland, a man by the name of Maximilian Kolbe. He had been arrested for hiding Jewish refugees and for supporting the underground movement. During the next two weeks he cared for his fellow inmates, who like himself were starving to death. He prayed with them, watched over them and ushered them into eternity. He was one of the last to die, receiving a lethal injection from his captors. Now recognized as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, he both knew and lived out this truth, "I can do all things, even voluntarily surrendering my life unto death, through Christ who strengthens me."

Reliance—finding strength in one another and in the Lord Jesus Christ—this is the golden nugget of joy that makes our lives worth living, both today, tomorrow and forever.