

Paul and his beloved Philippians

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On Monday of this week we read the final verses of Saint Paul's letter to the Christians of Philippi (4: 10-23). Paul felt special affection for these people, whose church was the first he established in Europe, and who generously supported his ministry. He wrote the letter while awaiting trial in a Roman prison, yet joy and gratitude shine through his words.

The first few verses of this passage make it clear that the Philippians had been struggling financially and therefore had been unable to help Paul for some time. He acknowledges this by saying, "You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity." He gives God the glory for improving their circumstances and thus enabling them to send Epaphroditus with a gift for him.

Next Paul gives us insight into his life as an apostle. He gave up a great deal to preach Christ—and he does not regret it. He describes his state of mind and soul: "...I have learned, in whatever condition I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want."

Paul's words reflect the ideas of the Greek philosophers called Stoics, well-known in his day. They taught that a person must be guided by inner strength, not being affected by anything that happens outwardly. They claimed that in each person there is a "force" that can resist and conquer outward pressures. This view carries over to the Star Wars movies, with characters saying to

each other, "May the Force be with you."

But here Paul differs radically from the Stoics. For him there is no strong force in people. On our own we are only too susceptible to the world's evil. He depends entirely on God, and so his next words are, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me."

Having expressed total reliance on God, Paul graciously makes sure the Philippians don't take that to mean that their gift is unimportant. He writes, "Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble." He assures them that God will repay their