

When the church in Philippi heard that Paul was in prison, they took up a collection for him and gave the money to a trusted member of the community named Epaphroditus. He traveled from Philippi in northeastern Greece to the prison -- where that was we're not sure -- and handed the money over to Paul. Paul was not entirely surprised. The Philippians had done the same thing for him more than once already when he was preaching the gospel in Thessalonica. One of the reasons Paul wrote the epistle to the Philippians was to acknowledge receipt of their gift. He does it at the end of the letter, in the passage we heard as today's second reading.

He acknowledges receipt of the gift, but he never says the two words you'd expect to hear; he never says, "Thank you." Instead, he says, "Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being wellfed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need." In other words, he got the gift, he admits he's hungry and poor in prison, but he doesn't want them to think that he needs the gift he received. He has learned the secret of life. What is that? Paul continues, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." That is, he can be poor. He can be weak. He can be hungry. It is God who gives him strength. "In any case," he concludes, "it was kind of you to share my distress."

I don't know about you, but if I don't get my food around the time of day I should be fed, I get pretty cranky. If paying my bills at the end of the month is a stretch, I get pretty tense. If I'm sick, or if the car breaks down, or if I find myself in a place I shouldn't be and don't want to be, I can get pretty antsy. If someone puts us on hold, if the grocery line is too long, if the sales clerk isn't polite, if the account is overdrawn, we'll take any rescue we can get. Paul got a gift from the Philippians, but instead of saying thanks, he says he doesn't really need it. He accepts it because it profits them to do an act of charity, but Paul is beyond need.

In the spiritual life, this is a marvelous goal to seek, to be beyond need -- to be so content with God, that we can put up with inconvenience and tragedy. I think the way we get there is through a prayerful spirit that accepts God's will. "Your will be done," we pray in the Lord's Prayer. One of the psalms begins, "Only in God is my soul at rest." At the annunciation Mary said, "Let it be done to me according to your word." At Gethsemane Jesus said, "Not my will but yours be done." Very often our prayer is about getting things. It's about telling God how to improve our lives. Paul's prayer must have centered on a different experience. For him, God had already improved his life. He was so filled with the gospel, with the life of God and the will of God, that he didn't need anything else, even when he was poor, hungry, and in prison. If we seek peace in God, we have to be ready to let things go God's way.