

TO LIVE IS CHRIST
A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS
The Secret of Contentment

In his book *Simple Faith* Charles Swindoll relates a poem concerning the discontentment so prevalent in our society.

It was spring, but it was summer that I wanted,
the warm days, and the great outdoors.
It was summer, but it was fall I wanted,
the colorful leaves, and the cool, dry air.
It was fall, but it was winter that I wanted,
the beautiful snow, and the joy of the holiday season.
It was winter, but it was spring I wanted,
the warmth and the blossoming of nature.
I was a child, but it was adulthood that I wanted,
the freedom and the respect.
I was 20 but it was 30 I wanted,
to be mature and sophisticated.
I was middle-aged but it was 20 I wanted,
the youth and the free spirit.
I was retired, but it was middle age that I wanted,
the presence of mind, without limitations.
My life was over, but I never got what I wanted.

David Legge tells the following story, “One day a godly man, overheard his Christian servant remarking in the kitchen: 'Oh, if I only had five pounds I would be perfectly content'. Pondering her statement he decided that he would like to see someone who was perfectly content, so he went to the woman and said that he had overheard what she'd said in the kitchen, and he wanted to do something about it. So he proceeded to reach into his pocket and lift out a five pound note and gave it to her, for which she thanked him very gratefully. He went out the door of the kitchen, and for a moment he paused at the door unknown to her, and as soon as the woman thought he had gone she began to complain: 'Why on earth didn't I ask for 10 pounds?'”

We may chuckle at this woman's attitude but we must ask ourselves how often have we done something similar. John and I have spent over 40 years remodeling and changing the same house, and I must confess that before one project has been completed, my thoughts always turn to the next one that will make 'everything perfect'! Contentment is elusive.

Warren Wiersbe uses this example:

The trouble with him is that he's a thermometer and not a thermostat!" This statement by one of his deacons aroused the pastor's curiosity. They were discussing possible board members, and Jim's name had come up. "Pastor, it's like this," the deacon explained. "A thermometer doesn't change anything around it—it just registers the temperature. It's always going up and down. But a thermostat regulates the surroundings and changes them when they need to be changed. Jim is a thermometer—he lacks the power to change things. Instead, they change him!"

Don't be discouraged. Contentment is not out of our reach. The Apostle Paul had it and we can as well.

Read Philippians 4:10-13 (ESV) ¹⁰ *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.* ¹¹ *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.* ¹² *I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.* ¹³ *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

From the illustration by Wiersbe, we realize that Paul was a thermostat. Instead of having spiritual ups and downs as his life situations changed, he went right on, steadily doing his work and serving Christ. He was not the victim of circumstances but the victor over circumstances.

Paul's letter to the Philippians began as a 'thank you' letter for a gift he had received from them that had been delivered by Epaphroditus and that thank you letter turned into a letter of rejoicing for much more than a monetary gift. In fact, Paul would use the gift from the Philippians and other Macedonians as an example of 'grace giving' when he wrote to the Corinthians. Grace giving does not come from pressure, guilt, or even a sense of being faithful or because of what we may receive. Grace giving is an outgrowth of our overwhelming realization that we are the recipients of God's glorious grace.

Paul's joy in receiving the gift from the Philippians was greater because there had been a period when he received no gifts. Paul had been in prison two years in Caesarea. He had also been shipwrecked. Now that Paul was in Rome, a place easier to reach, the Philippians were more than likely taking advantage of the first opportunity they had to share with him. It's like that for us sometimes. There will be moments when prayer for someone is our only opportunity, but we should not overlook opportunities to share physically when they arise.

CONTENT – WHERE GOD PLACES YOU!

Even though Paul desperately needed the support the Philippians had sent, Paul wanted them to realize that he had learned to be content even when no gift came – no matter his life's circumstance. As Paul wrote this letter, he had been brought low, but he also said that he knew how to abound. Paul was likely from a wealthy Jewish family possessing an affluent first-century lifestyle. He had trained by Gamaliel which was a privilege that most likely only the wealthy experienced.

And yes, even if it appears that we have been abandoned, we should not give in to feelings of discontentment. The Lord has promised never to leave or forsake us.

Contentment is an internal satisfaction which does not demand changes to external circumstances. Some people are always searching for the ‘best’ church, the most exciting Christian fellowship, the most emotional worship experience, the next Bible study while failing to put the principles of the last Bible study into effect.

When we have seen Jesus, how can we long for anything more? Jesus is all that we need and in our hearts we know it. But, contentment is not something that comes natural to the human nature. Notice that Paul said he had **learned** to be content. I definitely had to learn practicing contentment in the workplace. In fact, for many the workplace is a daily spiritual battlefield and we must continually remind ourselves of Paul’s words “*I have learned to be content.*” I am sure it is the same for those who experience prolonged illnesses, incarcerations, and extended separation from family. Whatever the conditions, whatever the circumstances we face, true fellowship with God comes only when we have learned to be content where God has placed us.

CONTENT – BECAUSE OF THE POWER OF GOD!

When Paul said, *I can do all things through him who strengthens me*, does Paul literally mean we can do everything if we believe hard enough? Is Paul saying that although I cannot see well enough to pass a driver’s license vision test, I should go ahead and drive a car? No. Paul says, "I can do all things in Christ" -- that is, in the context of the will of Christ for my life I can do all things. I have learned to be content with not being able to drive.

When Paul said, *I can do all things through him who strengthens me*, he means whatever Christ has for us to do, He will supply the power to do it. Whatever gift He gives us, He will provide the power to exercise that gift. A gift is a manifestation of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer.

Thinking of their sacrifice to supply his need, Paul assures the Philippians that God would supply all their needs. He doesn't say all their wants -- he didn't include luxury items -- but all their needs. What kind of luxuries have become necessities to us? God does even supply luxury items many times to His children. When He does, this it is out of His loving-kindness. God is good in the green pastures and He is good by the still waters. Yes and even in the valley God is good. *Psalms 23:6 (ESV)* ⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

CONTENT – BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD’S SUPPORT

Read Philippians 4:14-18 (ESV) ¹⁴ *Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.* ¹⁵ *And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.* ¹⁶ *Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.* ¹⁷ *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.* ¹⁸ *I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*

Paul wrote in *Galatians 6:2 (ESV)* ² *Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* The Philippians shared in Paul’s troubles. Although they were not that ‘well-off’ financially themselves, they were glad to share with Paul and they shared more than once.

CONTENT – SUSTAINED BY THE PROMISE OF GOD

Read Philippians 4:19-20 (ESV) ¹⁹ *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.* ²⁰ *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

God has not promised to supply all our "greeds." When the child of God is in the will of God, serving for the glory of God, then he will have every need met. Hudson Taylor often said, "When God's work is done in God's way for God's glory, it will not lack for God's supply.

Most of us want to feel good and avoid discomfort or pain. We may not get all that we want. By trusting in Christ, our attitudes and appetites can change from wanting everything to accepting His provision and power.

Ron Mattoon reminds us, "We have a wealthy Heavenly Father. His wealth is immeasurable. He is the One who created diamonds, rubies, gold, silver, and oil. No one can come close to comparison in the wealth of God. He can supply any need we have now and in the future. In Christ we have a wonderful inheritance waiting for us."

Read Philippians 4:21-23 (ESV) ²¹ *Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you.* ²² *All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.* ²³ *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

Paul used the word saint to mean a person set apart to the one true God. The geographical location of these saints was in Philippi but spiritually they were in Christ Jesus. Paul made sure the Philippians realized that greetings also came from *Caesar's household*. It appears that while awaiting trial Paul was making converts from the Roman civil service reminding us of the bond – the connection that we have with all those in Christ – no matter their backgrounds – as the old 1970s chorus said – we are one in the bond of love!

On Saturday morning, I thought I was finished with the lesson until I came across a verse in our daily Bible reading that caught my attention as being applicable for today's lesson.

Read Numbers 11:1 (ESV) ¹ *And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.*

We could easily do an entire lesson around this passage. However, I just want us to consider it in light of Paul's attitude that he had learned to be content. Complainers do not please God. A contented Christian pleases the Lord. Let this passage from the Old Testament be a reminder that a dissatisfied spirit causes displeasure to the Lord and His displeasure brings consequences. Learn to be content no matter the circumstance. It is the wise thing to do.

And this concludes our study of Philippians. We will close this final lesson with the words that Paul used in closing his letter as translated by the KJV:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.