

Satisfied in Jesus

Philippians 4:10-13

I've come to realize recently that there's a strong parallel between New England weather and life in a fallen world. Not that New England weather is particularly unpleasant, but you never know what to expect. Everything changes so suddenly—I was glorying in the warm spring air at lunchtime on Wednesday, only to have to use my heater on the way home from work a few hours later, since it had dropped a good 20 degrees. Last winter Boston had 81 inches of snow; this year so far, 9. It's unpredictable. It changes quickly, and then sometimes, when you're longing for change, it just continues on and on and on with little variation at all.

We find that same fickle, unpredictability in life, especially life in a fallen world—a world corrupted by sin and human rebellion, that does not work the way God designed it. We never quite know what we're going to find from one day to the next. Things can change so quickly. On Monday you're sitting at your desk, pinching yourself that you get to do this for a living every day at actually get paid for it; on Tuesday you receive the memo that your department is being outsourced. The joy of moving into your dream home is overshadowed by the barrage of foreclosure notices a year later. The soccer game of your high school career comes to a halt with a season-ending injury.

And then, sometimes we wish it would change, but everything seems to carry on in the same manner. The new job that will answer all of the financial frustrations doesn't end up changing a thing. Spending years and years simply coexisting alongside your spouse, living your separate lives together, longing for more, waiting for their heart to thaw, but spring never comes.

And with the fluctuating circumstances of life, so goes our joy, our happiness, our contentment. On a good day, when life goes as planned, we feel good, stable, secure. We're pleasant to be around. But when life crests and we feel like we're starting to plummet, we're filled instead with anxiety and fear. We get edgy and sharp with those close to us, we grasp for control or look for the nearest escape. Then things turn, and we're happy again. The sun has come out on this cold New England day. Then the clouds roll back in, and the cycle goes on and on, and with it our joy and contentment in life goes up and down, up and down.

But what might life look like if our joy and contentment were able to travel above our circumstances? When you drive across country, you go up and down with the terrain of the land. But when you fly, the land beneath you still goes up and down, but you don't feel it. What if our delight was consistent, even when the world was not? Is that even possible? If so, what would it take?

According to the apostle Paul, consistent joy is not only possible, it's commanded. He's told us several times in Philippians so far to "rejoice," and to "rejoice in the Lord" (2:18; 3:1; 4:4). And now in ch. 4:10-13 he tells us the secret of this consistent joy—a joyful contentment that travels above life's changing circumstances. And the reality is, apart from learning this secret and employing it, we will be unable to fully carry out anything else he's talked about in the book. Our relationships with one another as a community will remain stagnant and self-centered. Our passion and involvement in our mission to make Christ known will remain shallow and short-lived. *Everything* about our calling to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ turns on this lesson: *a joyful contentment that travels above life's circumstances*, which can be found in only one place: *treasuring and trusting Christ*.

This morning we begin looking at the last major chunk of Paul's letter to the ancient church in Philippi. (We'll conclude our series in Philippians next week, then move into Easter. And then late April we'll begin a new series through the book of Ecclesiastes.) As Paul winds down his letter to the Philippians, he returns to the subject of their faithful partnership with him in his mission to advance the gospel—to make the good news of Jesus Christ and his life, death, and resurrection for us known—and Paul expresses once again his thankfulness for their partnership, specifically their partnership of giving (vv. 14-15). He begins in v. 10 saying, "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me." And when he says "at last," he doesn't mean that they had forgotten, as he clarifies: "Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it." And the word translated "concern" here is the same word we've seen several times throughout this book—"mind," "thinking," "perspective." "Be of one mind" (1:27; 2:2), "Have this mind among you which was also in Christ" (2:5), "Think the same in the Lord" (4:2). The Philippians had the right perspective, a gospel-shaped perspective. But they had no opportunity to act on it, until recently.

And so the reviving of their concern was particularly joyful for Paul. The word for "revive" here is like a flower coming into bloom again after a long winter. So when Epaphroditus arrived with the Philippians' gifts (4:18), it was like stepping outside this past week to see the first flower of spring in the front yard. There's an excitement and relief that comes with the signs that winter is over.

But before moving on with his thank you, Paul feels inclined to clarify one thing: that his joy has nothing to do with his needs being met. He says in v. 11: "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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, whether living in plenty or in want" (4:11-12). Paul feels it's important to make sure the Philippian church doesn't misunderstand his gratitude and joy, especially since he's spent so much of the book talking about the importance of being satisfied in Jesus, of being willing to share in his sufferings, to die to self for the sake of the gospel. He doesn't want them to get to the end of the letter and say, "Oh, now I see what this is all really about. Paul needs money. We sacrifice joyfully, you benefit joyfully. I get it, Paul." It would be easy to come to that conclusion.

And so Paul steps out of his way, derails his train of thought, to make this crucial clarification, and that's where we're going to focus this morning. Paul wants to make sure we know that his joy is not contingent on his needs being met.

Now this does not mean that God doesn't care about providing for our needs. He certainly does. Jesus says in Matthew 7, "which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:9-11, ESV). And Paul's own words later in ch. 4: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (4:19). God cares about meeting our needs, and he wants us to bring those requests to him in prayer. What Paul's talking about is whether or not our *joy*, our *contentment*, our *satisfaction in life*, is contingent on those needs being met. He says that his isn't. His joy is deeper than that; it travels above his circumstances. He has learned the secret of *contentment*. Contentment. What does that mean?

Jeremiah Burroughs, a Puritan pastor in the Church of England in the seventeenth century, wrote a book called *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. In it he defines contentment like this: "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."¹ Now Burroughs takes the rest of his book to unpack that definition, and it's well worth the read. (You can read it free online or download it as an eBook for 99 cents). But I think he captures the essence quite beautifully here.

Contentment is not just putting a good face on it, pretending like nothing is wrong, hiding our frustration or emotion. It's inward—not just what we say with our mouths, but what we feel in our hearts. But neither does contentment carry a bitter edge, or pine for the greener grass on the other side. It doesn't spend its days lusting resentfully after what others have, or obsessing over what used to be, or fixating anxiously on what it is to come. There is a sweetness and quietness to it; not an edginess, and not a resignation or a passiveness (who cares?). But a restfulness, a quiet confidence, a peace, like kind of rest an anxious child finds in the arms of her parent while the storm continues to beat outside. It's not a confidence or rest that's found from within. Contentment is not about achieving self-sufficiency. This isn't Brandon vs. the world and I come out victorious because of my own resolve and hard work. The self help gurus tell us that we need to take matters into our own hands; 'life gives you lemons, make lemonade,' 'if it's gonna be, it's up to me.' No, contentment is surrender. Not necessarily surrender to our circumstances, but surrender to our God, who is able to carry us above our circumstances. Surrender to his "wise and fatherly disposal," entrusting ourselves to the God who is wise enough to order the world and work all things according to his purposes, and loving enough to do so as a tender Father. Contentment is being joyfully satisfied in God while all the world is at war. And so, finally, contentment is something that remains consistent "in every condition." It involves a delight and a joy that don't ebb and flow with life's circumstances, but that travels above them. And of course that's precisely what we see in Paul.

Look again at the scope of his contentment in vv. 11 and 12. Look how he pairs off these sets of opposite circumstances: being in need or having plenty; well fed or hungry; living in plenty or in want. Circumstances are not a factor for Paul's joy; he is content in every condition.

It's interesting that he specifies the importance of contentment in both want *and* plenty. It's easy to think about the importance of contentment when we're in need. The apartment is a little too

¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. Kindle ed.

small for the family—we need more space. The bills are stacking up—we need more money. When we have needs, it's very easy to focus on what we don't have instead of what we do, to anchor our contentment in our situation, which is fuel for discontentment—frustration, anger, impatience, disappointment with God, seizing control.

But having plenty can be just as large a threat to contentment. Once you've tasted all this world can offer, it's really hard to not want more and more. One more dollar. One more pair of shoes. One more video game. And all of a sudden we too find ourselves anchoring our contentment in our stuff, which means we're prone to the same rollercoaster of circumstances and satisfaction.

We need a contentment that does not rest in either circumstance, plenty or want, but that travels above both. So how is this possible? What's Paul's secret? We need a contentment that comes from being *satisfied in Jesus*, from *treasuring and trusting Christ*.

That's where Paul anchors his satisfaction and strength in v. 13. Of course he's said it several other places in the book, most notably in 3:8: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things." But here he says it again in 4:13, in what is probably one of the most popular and yet misused verses in the book. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." We paste this one on the gym ceiling above the bench press;² we quote it to each other before the soccer game, or the football game; we read it before the long bike ride or think of it right before the sales pitch or the test. We take it as though it's God's promise that we can do whatever we set our minds to, because Jesus will give us the strength. But when Paul says "everything," here, he's talking about the same thing he's been talking about in vv. 11-12, the ability to be joyfully content in any circumstance, especially as he serves to advance the gospel. We need to pay attention to context. Otherwise we run the risk of being surprised and confused by disappointment ("But I thought God promised..."), or even worse, of setting up false ideas and expectations for others. As Kent Hughes wryly comments, "Are you a non-golfer who wants to shoot 70? Understand that muttering, 'I can do all things through him' before you tee off will turn your fellow golfers into atheists!"³ That's not what God promises in that verse.

But his point is no less revolutionary. The impossibility of having a joyful contentment that travels above our circumstances is made possible through the strength and satisfaction found only in Jesus Christ. What we need is to treasure and trust Jesus, to let him be our satisfaction and our sufficiency. Only then is joyful contentment a true possibility. The consistency and strength of our contentment depends entirely on the consistency and strength of what we're placing our joy and satisfaction in. Again citing Hughes, "Both abundance and loss will pass, but Christ remains the same."⁴ We need to treasure and trust Jesus Christ. And that's what I want to spend the rest of our time thinking about this morning.

First, contentment requires *treasuring Christ*. And by treasuring Christ, I mean delighting in him above everything else this world affords. Being enthralled with and utterly satisfied in Jesus. Contentment requires this kind of treasuring, delight, and satisfaction. There are two reasons for

² R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 185.

³ Hughes, 187.

⁴ Hughes, 187.

this. First, because only Jesus can truly satisfy. Everything else in this world is like the New England weather. It comes and goes, it delights for a day and then it disappoints.

What happens if I treasure my marriage more than I treasure Jesus? Then my joy in my life will be contingent on how I feel my marriage is going. On how loved I feel from my spouse. On whether my needs are met. And when they go unmet, my joy goes away. And I can respond either by pulling back and checking out, so I can protect myself from being further hurt, or I can grasp at things, and manipulate in order to regain what I want. It's fickle. It's up and down. It's why the husband ends up being married to his job more than his wife, or sneaking behind her back to look at porn. It's why the wife escapes from reality into her romance novels, wishing her husband would love her the way Gaston loves Desiree.

Marriage is a good thing, but it's not God, and it can't satisfy. And neither does Gaston, or the porn, or the job. The same is true of friendships, of sports, of children, money, career, home, vacations, retirement plans, church ministries. None of them ultimately satisfy, and every single one of them can be taken away like that. We treasure Jesus because he's the only thing that truly satisfies. He is the one who knows us more deeply than anyone else, because he made us. He is the one who cherishes us more passionately than anyone else, because he spilled his blood to save us. And if you have Jesus, then clinging to all the goods and kindred of this world for your identity and significance is like sitting before a great meal and trying fill your stomach just by smelling the aroma. This world is the shadow; Jesus is the substance. And if we are satisfied in Jesus, then we can be content in the lowliest of states, because our contentment isn't contingent on our need, but on our God.

But second, we treasure Jesus not only because he meets our needs, but because he alone is *worthy* of being treasured. Listen to how Jeremiah Burroughs puts it:

A man who has learned the art of contentment is the most contented with any low condition that he has in the world, and yet he cannot be satisfied with the enjoyment of all the world. . . . A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage [his time on earth], but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion [his inheritance]. . . . [His] soul . . . can be filled with nothing else but God . . . nothing in the world; it must only be God himself.⁵

And why nothing else? Because all the prosperity in the world is ultimately unworthy of our delight when compared with Jesus. We treasure Jesus not just to meet our needs but first and foremost because *he alone is worthy of our affection and delight*. As pastor and author John Piper says, "The Christian Gospel is about 'the glory of Christ,' not about me. . . . it is not about my being made much of by God, but about God mercifully enabling me to enjoy making much of him forever."⁶ We exist to glorify God. We were redeemed to glorify God, to make much of him. In fact, it's dishonoring to God not to be satisfied in Jesus, because we're giving the love, affection, and honor he deserves to something else. If I run to Jesus for my joy, my contentment, my satisfaction, then I am treating him the way he deserves to be treated—like God—and that gives glory to him. Our hearts will have no rest until they are consumed and enthralled with

⁵ Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Kindle ed.

⁶ John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 16.

affection for him, with satisfaction in him, and not in the circumstances of life in this fallen world.

That's really hard. It's especially hard when you're in a place of desperate need. Or when you've been longing for something for your whole life and God's just never opened the door. More space. A spouse. A child. A friend who actually gets you. A job you actually like going to. How can I think of contentment? "Fine for you," you may say, "but you don't know my story." And you know what, I don't. I don't know your story. But Jesus does, because he's the author of it. And whereas it's really hard sometimes to have any sense of how what's going on can be working according to his purposes and our good (which is what he promises, cf. Rom. 8:28), it can't be any more counter-intuitive than his story—that the God of the universe would rescue his rebellious world by taking on flesh and stepping into it, only to be unrecognized, rejected, dismissed, ridiculed, beaten, and murdered like a lowly slave or thief. That doesn't make sense either. But God didn't waste a moment of Jesus' life or a single drop of his blood. Every nanosecond was spent executing his rescue plan for the world. Neither will God waste your suffering, if you'll be trained by it. If you'll treasure him. If you'll trust him to carry you and your joy above life's circumstances.

Because the simple fact of the matter is that we can't do it. And so beyond treasuring Jesus, we also need to *trust* him. He must be our satisfaction; he must also be our strength. "I can do everything through him who strengthens me."

Once again, Burroughs:

A Christian finds satisfaction in every circumstance by getting strength from another, by going out of himself to Jesus Christ, by his faith acting upon Christ, and bringing the strength of Jesus Christ into his own soul, he is thereby enabled to bear whatever God lays on him, by the strength that he finds from Jesus Christ.⁷

Jesus, the power of his Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and lives, is the only thing that can carry us through the darkest trials with a consistent joy. We know he's with us, he's for us, he'll take care of us. Jesus and his Spirit are also the only thing strong enough to keep our hearts from lusting after the prosperity and abundance we do have. We need the strength of Jesus for both. That doesn't mean that we don't work hard. We do. But it's God's strength at work in us. Like Paul says in Colossians 1:29, "For this *I* toil, struggling with all *his* energy that he powerfully works within me" (cf. Phil. 2:12-13).

We need to treasure Christ, and we need to trust him. We need to believe that Jesus is stronger than our circumstances, that he's sovereign over them, and that he is enough to satisfy us whatever they may be.

And when we're satisfied in Jesus, when he is our strength, such that our joyful contentment travels above our circumstances, then we're actually free to love each other as a community in Christ, according to the pattern of the gospel—laying our lives down for one another to help each other make much of God. If Jesus is enough, then I don't have to worry about you taking advantage of me. I don't have to worry if you deprive me of the recognition I so desire; Jesus

⁷ Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Kindle ed.

recognizes me, he calls me brother and friend. With a content heart, I can joyfully die to self and love others as Christ has loved me.

If Jesus is enough, I don't have to fear what life or this world might take away from me. I can joyfully bear witness to him and share willingly in his sufferings. I am free to lay down my life in glad surrender for the advance of the gospel. The question is, am I satisfied in Jesus? Is he enough?

As Habakkuk 3:17-19 says,

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

May God's name be blessed, whatever our lot, to the glory of God and the joy of his people.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul focuses on the question of contentment in this passage. Why do you think he needed to interrupt his 'thank you' to the Philippians (4.10-20) with this clarification (vv. 11-13)? Where else has he talked about the idea of contentment or satisfaction in this book?
2. What comes to your mind with the word contentment? How does this world define it? How does that compare or contrast to Paul's description here?
3. Why do you think contentment is so hard? What makes it a challenge both for people living in plenty or in want?
4. Think about the past week. Do you notice any connection between the relative joy or satisfaction of your heart and the circumstances of your day? To what extent is your personal joy enslaved to your life situation?
5. What do you think it means to treasure Jesus? Why should we treasure him? What effect should that have on our joy or contentment amid different situations?
6. What does it look like to trust Jesus for our strength? How do we cling to his strength to persevere and even rejoice in difficult circumstances?