

Contentment **Philippians 4:10-13**

There are some times when it's easy to believe that there is a God, and that he's good, aren't there? When life is good, and things are going well, and your relationships are sweet, and you have what you need, and it seems as if God is blessing you, then there must be a God and he must be good, and our hearts are happy and thankful. In the words of the poem, 'God is in his heaven, and all's right with the world.'

But when life isn't like that, it's not quite so easy is it? And some times our circumstances, the state of our lives, makes faith in a good God seem really hard.

But interestingly, the Bible sees things slightly differently from that. Because it knows that it's not as simple as: when life is good, your faith flourishes, when it's not, it struggles. Yes, it knows very well the danger of the bad times, when life is hard and answers aren't coming – in fact there's a whole book, the book of Job, devoted to it. But it also recognizes the danger of the good times. Because you can lose your way just as much in the warm summer days of riches and success as you can in the dark winter nights of want and seeming failure, can't you?

So we need to know how to handle and navigate our way through both wealth and want, through success as much as failure. And the people Paul is writing to, they needed to know that too. And as he wraps this letter up, he wants to thank them for the gift of money they've brought him that has helped to improve his circumstances, but he also wants them to know that ultimately, true happiness, true joy and peace and contentment, are not dependent on our circumstances.

Joy Above Circumstances

So, the situation the Philippians find themselves in is tough. They've got their backs against the wall, with outside opposition on the increase, and finances becoming increasingly tight. And so to help them know real inner peace, despite what they're facing, to know what Paul calls here 'contentment', Paul shares with them something of his own experience.

Now, if you know some of Paul's other letters, you'll know that when it comes to money, Paul is incredibly circumspect. I read an article recently in the UK media that basically accused all politicians of being on the gravy train, of having their snouts in the trough, of being in it for the money. Now of course if that accusation gets leveled at politicians, it also gets leveled at ministers of religions and churches. 'Churches just want you for your money'. And Paul is very well aware of that danger, so he is very cautious about being seen as being after people's money. The last thing this man wants is to see the gospel criticized because he gives the impression of fleecing the sheep.

But the problem is he's just received an incredibly generous, even sacrificial gift from these Philippians, who were themselves in pretty dire financial straits. But in thanking them, he's got to walk this tightrope. Because whilst he's really grateful for their provision, he doesn't want to overstate it, because he doesn't want to say something like, 'things were really tough, but you guys provided' and they read that as, 'Paul needs more' and then overburden them; and he certainly doesn't want them to think 'he's just motivated by money, and that's what makes him happy, typical.'

So, listen to how he puts it, v10-11: 'I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need.'

Now just imagine the scene when Epaphroditus, who was the guy from the Philippian church who brought the money to Paul in prison in Rome, first entered Paul's prison cell.

Paul's chained to a wall, or to a guard. Outside in Rome he's got fellow Christians stirring up trouble for him. And his money is running out, and remember that in those days prisoners had to pay their own way. So he would have every reason to feel lonely and down on his luck. Stuck in prison, so-called friends turning against him, and financial very straightened. He would have had every reason not to be experiencing joy. And then the key turns in the door, and he looks up, and there's this head sticking round: 'Paul, it's me, Epaphroditus, from Philippi, I've brought you some money'. Now what do you think that would do to Paul: a friend arrives from out of the blue, having travelled hundreds of miles, a journey that would have taken him weeks, to seek Paul out in prison, in a foreign city, to care for his needs through an incredibly sacrificial financial gift from a church Paul knew was struggling. Wouldn't his heart just have filled with gratitude, wouldn't he have hugged Epaphroditus with tears of joy?

But did you notice how Paul phrased it? I rejoiced in the Lord greatly.... Not that I am speaking of being in need. Is Paul grateful for the Lord's provision through these dear friends? Of course he is. But ultimately his joy is in God, and not in his financial position or the conditions of his life improving.

On three other occasions in this letter Paul mentions what brings him joy: their partnership in the gospel, through this gift, the gospel spreading in Rome, and their growth in the faith. And it's the same here: Paul rejoices in God, not because he's now several hundred denarii the richer, after all he says in v11 I'm not talking about my financial needs; his joy is based, he says in v10, on the fact that 'now at length you have revived your concern for me.' Maybe it's been several years since they were last in a position to help Paul. But when the opportunity arose these guys grabbed it with both hands. And that tells Paul a whole lot about what God is doing in their lives - this kind of sacrificial love is all the evidence Paul needs to know that the gospel of Christ's sacrificial love for us is at work among them and Jesus is transforming them. And it's that that gives him joy, 'I rejoiced in the Lord greatly'. And so the first thing he tells them is that enduring joy, lasting joy, joy that can sustain you in the ups and downs of life, joy that can bring light into the prison cell of our circumstances, comes from Christ and not from our circumstances changing.

Because as you know perfectly well, the situations that we face that can sap our joy and happiness don't always change for the better, do they? You can be sat in your prison cell and there's never going to be a knock on the door from an Epaphroditus bearing a gift. So Paul also wants them to know how he's been coping in the hard times when the gifts weren't coming, so that they can face them too.

Be Content

Verse 11: 'Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.'

Now, if you know the ten commandments, you'll know that the 10th commandment, the last on the list is, 'Do not covet': Exodus 20:17: 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house, you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.'

And if you wanted to, you could rewrite 'do not covet' positively as: 'Be content.' Interesting isn't it? God commands us to contentment, to find contentment. But contentment is in short supply in our modern world, isn't it? Advertising, lotteries, talent shows, the celebrity culture, they all milk this inner sense of, 'I wish my life were different, I wish I was more like him or her, if only I had this, or that, if only I could make it big, if only I could earn more, if only my body were different, then I'd be happy.' And we might be happy with virtually every area of our life, but still be discontented because, 'I wish I had what she has, I wish I had his looks, if only I could have what is happening to them happen to me, if only I could have hair like Martin's.'

And yet our creator commands us not to covet, not to be in this state of wanting our lives to be different, and to have what someone else has. Now why is that? Why does coveting make the list? Why command 'be content'?

Well, firstly it's for our joy. You see, the complaining child is not a happy one is he? Those of you who are parents know this very well. There is a whine of complaint, that wants something else, that isn't happy with how things are now, and that whine of complaint is not a joy-filled whine is it?

And all the time we think that we need something else and we won't be happy until we have it, we won't ever really be happy, there will always be this discontent eating away on the inside, because we all know that the joy of that thing is short lived and before long there is something else that's not right, and we're looking for the next thing.

And we get discontented when we think that we need something else, our situation to change in some way – to have this thing, to start that relationship, or to end this one, to get that job, or get out of it, for my circumstances to change – for me to be happy. And so discontent misses the joy of today, because it thinks joy will only come tomorrow when things change.

But God would have us be joyful today, and Paul's point is that we can know joy and contentment now, regardless of our circumstances. And in particular, he wants these Philippians and you and me to know that material abundance is not the basis of that contentment.

Verses 11-12: 'I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 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.'

So Paul knows how to be brought low. He knows how to respond, how to fight for joy, when things aren't working out, when the money isn't coming in, when the job offers aren't there, when the standard of living is being cut, when he's being humbled, even humiliated. But he also sees a danger in the other direction as well. You see, we tend to think that if we just have a bit more, or this next gadget, or that bonus, or that pair of shoes, or if I'm just a bit more like him or her, then I'll be happy, I'll be content. But Paul says that the good times, when our desires are being met, when we can get, when we do have plenty, are just as dangerous to this sense of contentment and inner peace and joy as the hard times. And Paul has had to learn how to handle abundance just as much as lack.

Now why is that? What is it about having plenty that could eat away at contentment and real joy? Well, the Bible tells us some interesting things. It tells us that when we have plenty we tend to forget God (Deut 8:11-14; Prov 30:8-9). There is the danger that we see our riches as our security, our fortress that somehow makes us impregnable. We think we can get through life on our own, without God. In fact there's a temptation to begin to think of ourselves more highly than we should, we think we are above the person who has less. Abundance can be the breeding ground for pride.

And so whilst we tend to think that 'more' means 'freedom', because I can do what I want. What we find is that success and riches and abundance can begin to control us. In fact, Jesus speaks of money in a way that gives it a power over people, it begins to control them, it becomes their master Jesus says. He calls it unrighteous wealth because it leads us to think and do unrighteous things. And before long the thing that you thought would give you freedom, give you the inner joy and contentment you're after, is throwing its chains around you.

So the good times, times of plenty and abundance Paul says, times of success and popularity, need just as much careful handling to preserve contentment as times of want. Because both wealth and want can consume you.

And so ultimately, contentment, real inner peace and joy, that sense of happy settledness and satisfaction is not the product of our circumstances. You won't find lasting joy or happiness in wanting more, or wanting your life to be like this other person's, or in getting those things and your circumstances coming right.

It has to come from somewhere else. Which is the second reason God commands us not to covet and to be content. Because ultimately we will only find contentment in Him. And Paul had to learn that just as much as anyone else.

Learning Contentment

Verse 11: 'I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.' Verse 12: 'In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.'

So this doesn't come naturally does it? You have to learn it. I mean knowing

peace and joy and contentment of heart, regardless of how our circumstances are doing, that is not torpedoed when times are hard, and not smothered when times are good, is not natural is it? In fact there is something deeply unnatural about it. It's an attitude of life that we have to learn. In fact when in v12 Paul says, 'I have learned the secret' he uses an interesting phrase, that was used of the Greek mystery religions of his time: I've learned the secret, I've been initiated, I've been allowed access to the secret knowledge.

So to be content whatever is happening in our lives is not the default position of our hearts is it? Paul had to learn it. But the point he wants them and us to see is that we can learn it. We can know peace and joy and settledness of heart that enjoys the now of today, in God's grace, when we lack and when we have plenty.

But there are two questions aren't there? And the first one is, how did Paul learn the secret of contentment, what was the school he went to, what was the MBA program he enrolled on that taught him this? Because when I last looked the IMD business school doesn't run a course on contentment regardless of circumstances, does it? Everything in our world screams the opposite. I mean this is just so counter-cultural, where can I learn this kind of attitude?

And the answer is it was simply the school of life, wasn't it? In his grace, God used the experiences of Paul's life to teach him this. Life was Paul's school room, crowds waiting to hear him speak was his school room, popularity was his school room, abundant gifts of provision were his school room, but so were poverty and lack and hunger, opposition and beatings and physical frailty, and this prison cell were his school room. God used all that he allowed Paul to go through, and Paul was attentive to his lesson, to help Paul learn contentment, to bring Paul to the place when in all honesty he could say 'my circumstances don't trouble me'. And that means that for you and me, the stuff that we go through in life is not pointless. The hardship you are facing is not pointless and blessing is not mindless. If we let them, the good times and the bad can be school rooms for Christ to teach us true contentment.

But the second question is: what is the secret, what is it Paul learned, because I don't know about you, but I want it! And the answer is that Paul discovered that Christ is always sufficient. There is a secret to contentment and it's not having this thing or that job, or my life becoming more like his or hers, it's Jesus.

Verses 12-13: 'I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.'

Now what's interesting is that this sense of contentment was considered by the Greek Stoic philosophers of Paul's day, to be the ultimate goal, the ultimate attribute of the truly wise person. That if you've attained contentment, if you are untroubled by life and circumstances, then you're the perfect person. You've made it. But of course their version of contentment was all about being self-sufficient, about the inner you being greater and above the issues of life, and of course that just ends in pride. But Paul's not taking about self-sufficiency, is he? He's talking about Christ-sufficiency: that he has discovered that though he is weak, Christ is strong.

Paul has learned that whatever situation he faces, Christ will give him the strength to and the resources he needs to handle it. He has discovered that success and money is not the ultimate source of inner peace and joy, but God is. Paul can know that whatever situation he faces he doesn't need to feel overwhelmed, not because he is so strong, but because Jesus is. No situation can overwhelm Paul, because no situation can overwhelm God. And so Paul can do all things, he can face all these changing situations, because of the one who strengthens him.

He can stay content and at peace when he's hungry and when he's humiliated, when he's brought low and when he's in need, because he knows that Jesus was humiliated and brought low for him. And if that is how much Jesus loves Paul, if the cross of Christ is the measure of God's love for Paul, and these Philippians, and for you and me, then along with Paul, we can find all the strength we need in Christ to face what we face, because we know that what we are going through is not because he does not love us. Rather the humiliation and the lowness of the cross tells you just how much God does love you. Love enough to sustain and strengthen you whatever you face.

But Christ also gives Paul the strength to handle the good times, the times of abundance, success and popularity. Because Paul has learned that however great the blessing he is enjoying, it's not as good as Christ. A year ago we went as a family to visit Rome, and in the roads around St. Peter's are all these shops and stands selling trinkets. And you can buy these little snow-storm models of St Peter's, and you tilt them up and the snow comes down. Well, Paul has discovered that the riches of this world are nothing in comparison to the riches of Christ and His glory. To find contentment in material stuff instead of in Jesus, would be like spending everything you have on one of those little snow scenes and going home overjoyed thinking you've bought the real thing. And Paul has learned that the real thing, the real treasure, the real riches are far greater than whatever he is lacking or enjoying at the present. And no one can take those riches from him.

But also, the abundance doesn't go to Paul's head because he knows he doesn't deserve it. He knows what he really deserves, but Christ stepped in the way of it and took it all upon himself on the cross, and so when Paul experiences material blessing he knows it is just more evidence of Jesus' underserved grace and blessing in Paul's life. So material prosperity does not drive Paul away, it drives him further towards Jesus, further towards the source of true contentment.

And so the secret that Paul had learned, that each of us can learn, is that whatever we face, Christ is enough. His love is greater than our lack, his riches of infinitely greater worth than our wealth. And true, lasting, joy-filled contentment is found in him. So, be content and find that contentment in Christ. As Paul says elsewhere, it is great gain.