

Philippians 4:1-20 - Contented Christians

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Gordon Randall

Introduction

What do you think of when I say the word 'contentment'? I ask this because in our culture today it's perhaps something we never quite reach. We are part of a consumer society (me, you – all of us). Everywhere around us, we're bombarding with messages - we need to buy certain things, holiday in certain places, drive a stylish car that fits the image we want to create and so on.

Contentment is the very opposite of consumerism. And we live in a consumerist society which seeks to make our possessions obsolete so they can be replaced with new ones. New models of electrical goods are released every few months, with very minor changes to their functionality, changes in fashion seek to render clothes out of date before they are worn out, and easy credit allows you and me to change our car or home furnishings just because we feel like a change. All around it's as if we are being expected to achieve more money, more wealth and more possessions. And so Contentment is not easy but I guess it is something we all wish we had more of which bizarrely is a contradiction in itself.

Socrates was once asked, "Who is the wealthiest man?" His answer was, "He who is content with the least."

So with this in mind and as we look at our passage this morning I want to hold my hands up and confess – I haven't got this sussed out any more than anyone else. But I hope and pray as we reflect on this scripture it helps you and me as we endeavour in God's strength to move ever close to becoming more Christ-like. So please have your bibles open at the passage and let me pose another question.

Do you experience up's and down's in your life? I ask that because I do. I'm a keen fan of Reading Football Club. Back in October we played Arsenal. We have never beaten them – so when we raced to a 4-0 lead in just 38 minutes you can imagine I was on quite an 'up'. However, when with the very last kick of the game they made it 4-4 and then in extra time went on to beat us 7-5 you can imagine I was on a bit of a 'down'! My wife Ruth will confirm this as she happened to be around as I was listening to the match on the radio. I was a victim of circumstances – Reading were brilliant for the first 38 minutes whilst Arsenal were rubbish and then for the rest of the game it was the other way round.

In life through differing circumstances we all experience probably much more serious 'up's' and 'down's' than the example I've just used. But what about the Apostle Paul? Our passage from Philippians suggests he did not have spiritual ups and downs. As circumstances changed, he went right on, steadily doing his work and serving Christ. How? He had learned in Christ's strength not to be the victim of circumstances: In verse 11 he writes: I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Paul did not have to be pampered to be content; he found contentment in the spiritual resources abundantly provided by Christ.

So what does 'contentment' mean? Well - Contentment is not complacency, nor is it a false peace based on ignorance. If we are complacent then we are also unconcerned about others. Rather a contented Christian is someone who wants to share his or her blessings. Contentment is not an escape from the battle, but rather an abiding peace and confidence in the midst of the battle. Contentment in the Christian context is not saying we are self-sufficient. Rather like Paul we are striving to learn how to be content by travelling with Jesus through the many difficult experiences we encounter in life. Like Paul - as we grow in our discipleship we find ourselves becoming sufficient in Jesus. Because Jesus lives within us, we are adequate for the demands of life.

We can be content because God is totally, irrevocably committed to us. In His providence God is working in advance to arrange circumstances and situations for the fulfilling of His purposes. As Paul writes in Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose".

Interestingly our Philippians reading begins: "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it". God in His providence has caused the church in Philippi to become concerned about Paul's needs, and it came at the very time Paul needed their love most! Life is not a series of accidents; it is a series of appointments. The providence of God shows that He is ultimately in control – it is a wonderful source of contentment.

So let's delve deeper into this passage from Philippians where in addition to God's providence Paul describes two other spiritual resources that bring us Godly contentment. They are...

- 1. The unfailing power of God (4:11-13)**
- 2. The unchanging promise of God (4:14-20)**

1. The unfailing power of God (4:11-13)

In verses 11-13 Paul explains that His happiness does not depend on circumstances or things; his joy comes from something deeper, something apart from either poverty or prosperity. In verse 12, Paul says: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty". In a life dedicated to serving Christ, Paul had faced excruciating poverty, abundant wealth, and everything in between. What ever the circumstances, Paul had learned to be content, finding real joy as he focused all of his attention and energy on knowing Christ and obeying him. But what about us – do we share in Paul's aspiration and seek to know Jesus Christ more and more. So let's examine this a bit further...

Most of us including me have learned how to "be in need" because when difficulties come we immediately run to the Lord! But it is more challenging to learn how "to have plenty." For example, (and this may sound controversial) prosperity can potentially hinder our growth in faith more than adversity. Sometimes our desire for more or better possessions is really a longing to fill an empty space within us. Paul says: "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."

Through trial and testing, Paul was initiated into the wonderful secret of contentment in spite of poverty or prosperity because he had learned to see life from God's point of view. He focussed on what he was supposed to *do*, not on what he felt he should *have*. Paul had his priorities straight, and he was grateful for everything God had given him. He had detached himself from the non-essentials so he could concentrate on the eternal. Verse 13 says: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." It was the power of Christ within Paul that gave him spiritual contentment". Let me try and illustrate this – and please forgive me because you may have heard this before as I'm going to re-use something I mentioned in a sermon here last August. I remember doing a presentation once using Powerpoint – Initially everything was fine but halfway through the presentation my screen went blank. It was because I hadn't plugged the equipment in – I wasn't plugged into the power source and the battery on my laptop had ebbed away. It's the same for us – we need to remain plugged into Jesus because He is our power source and He never has a power failure.

In John 15:4-5, Jesus says: "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing".

The Christian has all the power *within* that he or she needs to be adequate for the demands of life. We need only release this power by faith. Paul depended on the power of Christ at work in his life. "I can – through Christ!" was Paul's motto, and it can be our motto too.

So we've talked about the overruling providence of God and the unfailing power of God as spiritual resources upon which we can draw for the tasks of life. But there's another resource.

2. The unchanging promise of God (4:14-20)

In verses 14-20 Paul thanks the church at Philippi for their generous gift as they shared in Paul's financial support. In verse 17 Paul says: "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account".

Paul looked upon their missionary gift as an investment that would pay them rich spiritual dividends. The church in Philippi entered into an arrangement of "giving and receiving"; the church gave *materially* to Paul, and received *spiritually* from the Lord. So here is an unchanging promise of God. The Lord keeps the books and will never fail to pay one spiritual dividend! When we give, there is not only benefit to the receiver, but we are benefited as well. It was not the Philippians' gift, but their spirit of love and devotion that Paul appreciated. In other words when we give generously and joyfully we open ourselves to receive back from God. Let me try and illustrate this – when the church in Philippi gave to Paul – they were giving to further the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Their generosity helped resource the proclaiming of the gospel message.

Paul confirms this right at the beginning of his letter in Philippians 1:4-6: "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy **because of your partnership in the gospel** from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus".

The Philippians were partners in the gospel, Paul was pointing out their valuable contribution in spreading God's message. They contributed through their practical help when Paul was in Philippi, and now through their financial support when he was in prison. And it's the same for us. When we give to this church, or other Christian agencies or in many other ways (for example Street Pastors, bringing a Christian presence as a School governor, sponsoring a child in who would otherwise live in poverty). Our giving furthers the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. We are partners in the Gospel. Just like the church in Philippi - it is through our generosity (giving of time, skills, talents, abilities and money) that God makes so many things happen and through which his blessings are not just poured out on those who receive but are also poured back in blessings to the giver. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Ultimately our generosity helps to reflect to all people Christ's care, comfort and compassion and moves us closer to 'your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. As we honour God He in turn will pour His blessings upon us. By contrast a church is poor that fails to share materially with others.

In verse 18 Paul says: "I have received full payment...They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God". Paul looked upon the Philippians gift as a spiritual sacrifice, laid on the altar to the glory of God. But Paul does not see this gift as simply coming from Philippi. He sees it as the supply of his need from heaven. Paul's trust was in the Lord.

As we look at verses 18 and 19 we might paraphrase what Paul says as: "You met *my* need, and God is going to meet *your* need. You met *one* need that I have, but God will meet *all* of your needs. You gave out of your *poverty*, but God will supply your needs out of His *riches* in glory!" Paul is saying - **as** the Philippians give **away** God will ensure that they will always have enough. And that challenge remains for Christians today. So - keep trusting God and maintain your generosity - Give and God will give to you so you can continue to give and therefore carry on God's good work. But also recognise we must not get carried away with ourselves. God has not promised to supply all our "greeds." Yes – God gives in response to the individual giving but not for that person's own self indulgence but so they can continue giving. God gives so that generosity can continue. Hudson Taylor had it right when he said, (CLICK) "When God's work is done in God's way for God's glory, it will not lack for God's supply." When the child of God is in the will of God, serving for the glory of God, then he will have every need met. It is a wonderful source of contentment. As we grow in Christ's Spirit of generosity we grow in contentment.

Sadly when we witness our world we see something very different and don't have to look to hard to witness the way greed and materialism can consume us. Again – forgive me because this is another story I've used previously. A few years ago in America they did a survey. They wanted to find out what people would do for money. For at least \$2million, people responded they would do these things for money: (25%) Would abandon their entire family; (23%) Would become prostitutes for a week or more; (16%) Would give up their American citizenship; (16%) Would leave their spouses; (10%) Would withhold testimony and let a murderer go free; (7%) Would kill a stranger; (3%) Would put their children up for adoption.

In Luke 16:13 Jesus says: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money". So as Christians seeking to serve God we must remember the principle of stewardship – God owns; we manage. We are to be a steward of what He entrusts to our care. And when it comes to giving the challenge for us is we need to sow before we can reap.

There is a domino effect in giving; when we learn to give it releases lots of other areas of our lives, but in particular spiritual blessings one of which is a growing sense of Godly contentment. We have sown here at Christ Church (one obvious example is this building) – but of course we must always keep sowing – one way I believe we are doing that is through the Discover mission. It is hugely exciting thinking about what God is and will do with it. So I'd like to say - be encouraged and at the same time let's continue to trust God's unfailing promise? Because all the time the direction is upwards. The Holy Spirit is at work. He is leading us on and we find ourselves trusting God more and worshipping things like money less. And we find ourselves being more content. But also recognise contentment isn't instant. You can't go to Ian Bentley for a contentment injection. It can't be ordered on Amazon. It is learned slowly over the years, not delivered by the postman next day.

Contentment comes from adequate resources. Our resources are the providence of God, the power of God, and the promises of God. Ultimately the heart of contentment is security in God. These resources made Paul sufficient for every demand of life, and they can make us sufficient, too.

Let's pray: Dear Lord Jesus – thank you that you are ultimately in control of this world and of our lives. Thank you for your unfailing power. Thank you that in Your strength anything is possible. Help us Lord Jesus to continue to trust in you, to continue to grow and develop as your disciples, and to become more and more contented –Christian people wanting to share our blessings with others and enjoy an abiding peace in you. Thank you for the rich generosity that exists here in Christ Church. Help us Lord Jesus to continue in that generosity and to demonstrate in response to your amazing love, grace and mercy that you are Lord of our lives. In your name we pray. Amen.