



## "The Secret Of Contentment" (Philippians 4:10-13)

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Paul says he had learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. Wow! And that's a big WOW once one realizes the kinds of situations Paul found himself in (see II Cor. 11:24-28).

The "secret." This is a fascinating verb; it is a verb that is used to speak of being initiated into the mystery religions, the pagan cults which held certain secrets for only the initiated to know. Paul borrows that word and says, "I have been initiated into the secrets of contentment, I have learned the secret of living a contented life." Paul tells us he has learned the secret but does not tell us outright what the secret is. Why would the Holy Spirit inspire that? Couldn't he just clearly spell it out? He didn't, so God wants us to probe, to dig a little, to examine Paul's life, to examine the text, and perhaps other texts that reveal Paul's secret, so that we can discover it for ourselves.

As we begin our examination, let me make a couple of what I think are important points.

1. Paul learned to be content in any and every situation.

- This is encouraging, because contentment does not happen overnight, even for the committed Christian. It is learned through time and trial.

2. For Paul to be able to learn contentment in any and every situation, God had to place him in a variety of situations, both good and bad, although the majority of Paul's were bad (James 1:2-4).

3. What Paul does not mean by contentment.

- Ever heard of Stoicism? "Stoic" was a porch in ancient Athens where a man named Zeno taught that man should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submit without complaint to the unavoidable necessity by which all things are governed. The Stoics believed that this concept of contentment was reached when you had come to the point of total indifference, when you were indifferent to everything, then and only then would you be content. In other words, you sort of thought yourself into an "I don't care" attitude. One ancient Stoic writer, Epictetus, said, "Begin with a cup or a household utensil, if it breaks say, 'I don't care.' Go on to a horse or a pet dog, if anything happens to it say, 'I don't care.' Go on to yourself and if you're hurt or injured in any way say, 'I don't care.' And if you go on long enough and if you try hard enough you'll come to a state when you can watch

your nearest and dearest suffer and die and say, 'I don't care.'" But what Paul is talking about is not numbness. It is not a denial of the realities of the world we live in. It is not the absence of emotion. Paul wept, grieved, hurt, was distressed, perplexed, etc. See II Cor.4:7-9.

#### 4. Paul learned the secret of contentment "in the will of God."

- Paul's secret concerns the will of God for his life. He had learned to be content in that. With that said, I need to add that no one should be content out of the will of God. The Bible calls that complacency (self-satisfaction; showing smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one's achievements).

Now, there are lots of points we could make that are connected to Paul's learning contentment as a Christian. But as I have tried to glean directly from our text, and other texts that I believe relate to Paul's secret, here's what I believe the Lord gave me to help us understand and prayerfully one day become as content in life as Paul had become.

#### 1. Paul became more and more detached from this present world (Col.3:1-3; II Cor.4:16-18).

##### a. Enabled him to be satisfied with little

- Hebrews 13: 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

- I Tim.6: 6 But godliness with contentment is great gain.(context) 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

- Psalm 49: 16 Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; 17 for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him.

- The culture is redefining what man needs. We have turned wants into needs these days (examples?).

##### b. Kept him from becoming engrossed with much

- I Cor.7: 31 those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

- Engrossed: Having all one's attention absorbed by someone or something; to occupy exclusively.

- Heb.11: 26 He (Moses) regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

- I personally believe it is more difficult to learn contentment with more than it is with less. It was much easier for me to be content when I had nothing.

- I Sam.15: 12 Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor... 17 Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel.

- II Chron.26: 16 But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall.

- Rich young ruler

2. Paul accepted suffering as a natural part of his Christian calling.

a. Was told ahead of time how much he would suffer for Christ's sake.

- Acts 9: 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

- Acts 14: 21 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

- Luke 9: 23 Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

b. Understood that suffering was actually a necessary means to advance the gospel and encourage the church (Phil.1:12-14).

c. Was fully convinced that present suffering could not be compared with future glory.

- Rom.8: 18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

3. Paul had an absolute dependence (and in time an assurance) of divine power to sustain him through anything and everything this life threw at him (Phil.4:13).

- I look at some things other Christians go through and wonder if I could make it through such tragedy... When you have learned not to depend upon your own resources, but when you've been to the desert, when you've been to the valley, when you've been to the extremity, when you've stood in the valley of the shadow of death, you've been on the brink, you can't resolve your problems, you can't eliminate the conflict, you can't solve the marriage, you can't do anything about the kids, you can't change the environment at work that you're involved in, you have no way that you can deal with the disease that's wracking your body and you come to

the point where you are out of resources. And then God kicks in supernatural grace to get you through

- Anybody have a pacemaker? A pacemaker only kicks in when the heart doesn't work properly. It's a sustaining power for life. There's a sense in which we have this resource, this reservoir of spiritual power that moves into action when we have come to the end of our own resources (See II Cor. 1:8-10).

4. Paul had no doubt concerning God's sovereign plan, protection and provision for his life.

- "Patient confidence in God's providence" (MacArthur); - - -

- There are two ways for God to provide, one is through a miracle, and second is through what we call providence. Now, which is more "difficult" for God? A miracle of course is when God works against nature. He just steps in and WHAM, there you go! And sometimes God chooses to work that way (Manna from heaven, water from a rock, Elijah fed by the ravens, calling down fire on his enemies, Elisha putting flour in a poisoned pot of stew, Paul shaking the viper off and suffering nothing from the poisonous bite, Peter's miraculous escape from prison, etc. etc. But in my experience it has usually been God's providence. Providence is when God takes all of the diverse elements of the normal and orchestrates them to accomplish His own purpose. God is not only sovereign by supernatural intervention, but He is sovereign by natural orchestration. Personally, I think divine providence is sometimes more impressive than an outright miracle. In a miracle, God personally and directly overrides the natural. In providence, God works through the natural supernaturally. The contented person is the person who knows that God is ordering everything for His own holy purpose (Rom.8:28). Paul was told that he would be a witness before kings of the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). It is fascinating to read how God arranged this to come to pass (see Acts 20:22-23; 21:10-14). When he gets to Jerusalem, the prophet's words come true. Paul is arrested, brought before the Sanhedrin, and such a violent dispute breaks out in the courtroom that the Roman commander who had arrested Paul was afraid they would tear Paul to pieces, so he ordered his troops to take Paul into the barracks. The next night the Lord stood near Paul and encouraged him (Acts 23:11). In the morning the Jews conspired to kill him, but by the providence of God Paul escaped (Acts 23:16-24). And so began the fulfillment of Acts 9: 15. Paul eventually stood as a witness for Christ before Felix, Festus, King Herod Agrippa, and ultimately Caesar himself! And all throughout his journey he was guarded by elite Roman soldiers! What a plan, Lord!

- Joseph was 17 years old when God gave him a dream about his life. He would one day be exalted above his brothers, even his own father and mother. His brothers sell him to some Midianite merchants who take him to Egypt and sell him as a slave. He is bought by a man named Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. Potiphar's wife made repeated attempts to seduce Joseph, and he repeatedly resisted. And his reward for these acts of righteousness? He was thrown into prison, and where he stayed for several years. Then Pharaoh had a dream, and Joseph is fetched out of prison to interpret the dream. The dream is prophetic,

warning of a coming seven year famine. Joseph advises Pharaoh to put a wise man in charge of storing up grain to prepare for the famine. Pharaoh chooses Joseph, and makes him second in command of all Egypt. The famine hits, and in time Jacob sends Joseph's brothers to Egypt to buy grain. When Joseph eventually reveals himself to his brothers, they are afraid that Joseph will get his revenge for what they had done to him those many years ago. But Joseph has learned some things through all these years. He had learned the same thing the apostle Paul learned. He had learned to trust God, to be content in any and every situation. You see, God had given Joseph a dream, a dream of future exaltation. A dream that sustained him through all the years of pain, suffering, loneliness, and doubt. (See Gen.45:5, 8.)

- The biblical story of Ruth takes place in the days of the judges. There was a famine in the land of Israel, and a man from Bethlehem named Elimelech went to live for awhile in the land of Moab. He was married to a woman named Naomi, and they had two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. Elimelech died in Moab, and Naomi was left a widow with two sons. The sons married Moabite women, and within ten years Mahlon and Kilion died. Naomi then hears that things are better in Israel and decides to return to her homeland. She tells her daughters in law to stay in their homeland and remarry. Orpah does, but Ruth insists on going with her mother-in-law. She says to Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried." They arrive back in Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest, and Ruth goes out to glean in the fields. Just by "chance" she ends up gleaning a field belonging to a man named Boaz, a wealthy landowner whose father was a prince of Israel. He has an extremely interesting story of the providence of God - his mother was Rahab the harlot (Matt.1:5). Boaz just happens to be related to Naomi. See Deut.25:5-10. This was called the law of the "kinsman redeemer." So Boaz was a kinsman redeemer in Naomi's family. But there was a closer relative than himself, so he goes to this man, and the man decides not to fulfill his duty, and he was "sanded." Then Boaz married Ruth, and Naomi and Ruth were redeemed from all their troubles - by the providence of Almighty God!

- Esther was a young Jewish woman living in ancient Persia (modern day Iraq) after the 70 year Babylonian captivity. Her father and mother had apparently died when she was very young, and her older cousin Mordecai had adopted her. Mordecai had many years before been exiled from Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar. The story of Esther begins with the king of Persia getting upset with his wife the queen and deposing her (Depose: To remove suddenly & forcefully). He later was depressed that he had no queen, so his advisors suggested he search throughout his realm and bring all the young single women for a beauty contest, the winner becoming his new queen. God had created Esther with stunning natural beauty, and she won and became the new queen. After she became queen, her cousin Mordecai learns of a plot to assassinate the king. He tells Esther, she tells the king, and the perpetrators are hanged. Mordecai is not rewarded for his act of kindness, but it is recorded in the annals of the king. Then a wicked man named Haman is exalted above all of the king's nobles. He hates Mordecai and the Jewish people, and plots their destruction, getting the king to agree to annihilate them on a certain day. Just when it seems his plot will be

successful, the king has a Somnolent evening. He can't sleep, so he has the record of his reign brought in and read to him. They read about Mordecai exposing the plot to kill the king, and the king asks what reward was given to Mordecai. His men say, nothing. Right at this time, wicked Haman is entering the outer court of the palace, coming to ask permission to hang Mordecai on a gallows. When Haman enters, the king immediately asks his advice on what should be done for a man the king delights to honor. Haman thinks he's referring to him, but the king of course is referring to Mordecai. So Haman says, "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" (Esther 6:8-9). The king then ordered Haman to do just as he had suggested - for Mordecai! After doing this, Haman rushes home, filled with grief. And while he's belly-aching to family and friends, the king's attendants arrive and hurry him off to a banquet that Esther had invited both he and the king to. During the banquet, queen Esther exposes Haman's diabolical plan, and the king has Haman hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai. Then the king exalted Mordecai to second in command, and through his leadership the Jews were saved from annihilation.

## CONCLUSION

\* I John 5: 4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ***This is the ultimate summary of Paul's secret of contentment...***

\* Lord, thank you for Paul's example. And thank you for other examples in your Word that encourage us. Holy Spirit, help us to learn contentment in any and every situation...to learn to live BY FAITH.