

Learning Contentment.

The Apostle Paul said in Philippians chapter 4 verse 11, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances". That's a priceless possession. One of the problems of a materialistic society is that it stirs up the desire within us for more of what it offers. So we become discontented with what we have because there is more of what we want around us. It's a danger we can all fall into. Jeremiah Burroughs said, "What a foolish thing is this, that because I have not got what I want, I will not enjoy the comfort of what I have! There is a great deal of folly in a discontented heart". How then may we avoid such a heart of discontent?

We face two main challenges to contentment. The first is the ability to be content in adversity. Paul experienced great need at times in his life. There were times of struggle and uncertainty. He describes his experiences in 2 Corinthians 11 verse 27. We read, "I have laboured and toiled. I have gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked". The temptation when we suffer loss and hardship is to complain about God. We groan about his providence. We feel like giving up. You may be facing a need now. The challenge is to be content at such a time.

The second challenge is to be content in prosperity. Paul says in Philippians 4 verse 12, "I know what it is to have plenty". Life is like that. It's up and down. Our circumstances can change rapidly. There were times in Paul's life when he had adequate provision for his needs. The challenge we face in a time of plenty is to keep close to the Lord. It can stir up the appetite for more and distract you from your devotion to Jesus. Agur had it right in his prayer found in Proverbs 30 verses 8 and 9. He said, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you, and say, 'who is the Lord?'. Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God". Both poverty and riches bring their own temptations to destroy your walk with God. Now these rapid transitions from one state to another are designed by God to test your faith. The true state of our hearts is revealed in all the varied circumstances of life. Much is revealed about us in the way we respond.

What was Paul's secret so that he could be content regardless of his circumstances? Notice carefully what he says in verse 12, "I have *learned* to be content". Contentment is learned. It's a process. It doesn't happen immediately you become a Christian. It needs to be worked at and developed. Left to yourself, and if you follow your heart, you'll be unhappy in adversity and greedy in plenty. The secret of contentment isn't looking on the bright side of life in some sort of psychological exercise. It's not the result of positive thinking. It isn't even the stoical stiff upper lip where contentment is brought on by self discipline. The secret of contentment in all the ups and downs in life is knowing Jesus. Paul says in Philippians 4 verse 13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength". Not simply Jesus the figure of history, but Jesus the saviour of the soul. It's the result of Jesus Christ living in your heart by faith. Eugene Peterson in the "Message" Bible paraphrase of this verse puts it like this, "Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the one who makes me what I am". For the believer Jesus gives strength for every situation life throws up. There's grace for every need. There's grace to weather the storms, and grace to respond appropriately in calmer waters and better times. He gives strength for it all.

A contented heart is the result. The words in verse 13, "Who gives me strength" is in the present tense in the Greek text. It indicates what is constantly happening. It could be paraphrased something like this, "Through Christ who is strengthening me and does continually strengthen me. It is by his constant and renewed strength I am enabled to act in everything. I wholly depend on him for my spiritual power". The believer can be calm in adversity because Christ's peace floods the heart. Philippians 4 verse 6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, bring your requests to God". As you bring your needs to the Lord in prayer he assures you of his presence. Verse 7 says, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus".

You can be humble in prosperity because you acknowledge him as the source of every blessing and provision. You worship him with a grateful heart. You use it for him and in his service. Jesus takes away the worry when you have little. We read in Hebrews 13 verses 5 and 6, "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`. So we may say with confidence, `The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid`”.

A new minister visited a poor member of his church for the first time. He noticed that she had very little. She had just a chair, a table, a candle, a bed, and a few food items in her cupboard. The minister asked, “How do you manage to cope?”. “Oh”, she replied, “I have all this and Jesus too!!” The Bible says in 1 Timothy 6 verses 6, “Godliness with contentment is great gain”. What is desperately needed in the materialistic West is a return to the simple lifestyle and firm faith in God. That’s an unbeatable combination for real deep contentment of the soul. In a society caught up in the rat race, and the scramble to win the Lotto, God says this in 1 Timothy 6 verses 7 to 10, “For we brought nothing into the world and we can’t take anything out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil”. The blessing of knowing Jesus is that he provides us with self control which is one of the fruit of the Spirit. In times of prosperity he enables you to exercise self control and avoid extravagance. In times of need he quietens your heart by his presence and his promise to sustain you. In both he brings his peace that stops that endless and futile struggle for more, or the temptation to be bitter in difficulties. In Christ we can do everything as it relates to the shifting sands of time, and the changing events in our lives. We can face any trial in him. We can perform any duty, and resist any temptation, as we draw strength from him. Paul relied on Jesus Christ. He didn’t trust in his own ability, or any mental or physical skill. It was through Christ that he triumphed regardless of the circumstances. So can you!