Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Secrets of Contentment, Part 1
Scripture: Acts 16:11-34; Philippians 4:11-12
Code: A250

In Philippians 4:11-12, Paul said, “I have learned to be content . . . I have learned the *secret*.” Here he useda Greek term pregnant with meaning—an allusion to the mystery religions of Greece. Initiation into those pagan cults involved becoming privy to certain religious secrets. Paul became privy to the secret of contentment, and it’s one he passed on to all who have been initiated by faith in Jesus Christ. Over the next few days we will consider several *secrets* to contentment, coming out of Philippians 4.

1. Confidence in God’s Providence

Paul said, “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that . . . you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity” (Philippians 4:10). Let me give you some background. About ten years had passed since Paul was last in Philippi. Acts 16 relates what happened during his first visit.

Paul and his traveling companions met a businesswoman named Lydia and preached the Gospel to her and her companions. Their conversion resulted in the formation of a church. During the early days of that church, Paul cast out a spirit of divination from a slave girl. The girl’s owners—livid over the loss of the income they had derived from her fortune-telling abilities—had Paul flogged, thrown into prison, and locked in stocks. Instead of complaining about the miserable situation in which he found himself, he praised God through thankful prayer and song far into the night.

God responded in an amazing way: He shook the foundations of the prison so violently that all its doors opened wide and the chains fell off the prisoners’ feet and wrists. That incredible experience, plus Paul’s incredible response to his dismal circumstances, led to the salvation of the jailer—and the jailer’s entire household. As the church at Philippi grew, it’s apparent they helped fund Paul for further missionary outreach.

Our text in Philippians makes it clear, however, that it had been awhile since they last were able to help support him in that endeavor. But that was fine with Paul. He knew it wasn’t that they lacked concern, but that they lacked “opportunity” (Gk., *kairos*). That’s a reference to a season or window of opportunity, not to chronological time.

In writing, “You have revived your concern for me,” Paul was using a horticultural term that means “to bloom again.” That’s like saying, “Your love has flowered again. I know it has always been there, but it just didn’t have an opportunity to bloom. Blooms are seasonal, and the right season hadn’t come along until now.”

The point is that Paul had a patient confidence in God’s sovereign providence. He was content to do without and wait on the Lord’s timing. He didn’t resort to panic or manipulation of others. Those things are never called for. Paul was certain that in due time God would order the circumstances so that his needs would be met. We can have that same certainty today.

Until we truly learn that God is sovereign, ordering everything for His own holy purposes and the ultimate good of those who love Him, we can’t help but be discontent. That’s because in taking on the responsibility of ordering our lives, we will be frustrated in repeatedly discovering that we can’t control everything. Everything already is under control, however, by Someone far greater than you or I.

A synonym for God’s providence is *divine provision*, but that’s a skimpy label for a complex theological reality. Providence is how God orchestrates everything to accomplish His purposes. Let me show you what that means by contrast.

There are two ways God can act in the world: by miracle and by providence. A miracle has no natural explanation. In the flow of normal life, God suddenly stems the tide and injects a miracle. Then He sets the flow back in motion, just like parting the Red Sea until His people could walk across and closing it up again. Do you think it would be easier to do that—to say, “Hold it, I want to do this miracle” and do it—or to say, “Let’s see, I’ve got 50 billion circumstances to orchestrate to accomplish this one thing”? The latter is providence. Think, for example, of how God providentially ordered the lives of Joseph, Ruth, and Esther. Today He does the same for us.

Contentment comes from learning that God is sovereign not only by supernatural intervention, but also by natural orchestration. And what an incredible orchestra it is! Appreciate the complexity of what God is doing every moment just to keep us alive. When we look at things from that perspective, we see what folly it is to think we can control our lives. When we give up that vain pursuit, we give up a major source of anxiety.

Paul was content because he had confidence in the providence of God. That confidence, however, never led him to a fatalistic “It doesn’t matter what I do” attitude. The example of Paul’s life throughout the New Testament is this: Work as hard as you can and be content that God is in control of the results.

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