

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

### **The Secret of Contentment, Part 1**

Scripture: Philippians 4:10-12

Code: 50-43

What a joy it is now to come to the time of the study of the Word of God. Open your Bible with me, will you, to Philippians chapter 4. We come in this last chapter in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi to a new section, really the last large section of thought before some final conclusions that he brings at the end. We come to what is a very important section in these verses which will occupy us this Lord's day and the Lord's day to come. Now, as we approach this fourth chapter, I want to draw your attention to verses 10 through 19. I want to take that section as a unit because I believe it is a unit of thought. And as we explain the meaning of the Word of God, I believe you're going to find this extremely practical in your life, as I have found it in my own.

By way of introduction, let me say that contentment is a very, very rich word and that is the word I want to focus on in this section. In fact, if I were to title the message I would call it, "The Secret of Contentment." Contentment is not only a rich word but it is also a biblical word. In fact, the Bible has quite a bit to say about this matter of being content. Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:6, "Godliness with contentment is great gain," and then in verse 8 he said, "And having food and clothing, let us be content." The writer of Hebrews in chapter 13 verse 5 says, "Be content with whatever you have, for He said I will never leave you or forsake you." The Bible then not only identifies contentment as a virtue but speaks of contentment as a command. You are to be content with whatever you have. You are to be content with food and clothing. You are to be content with your wages. You are to be content because you understand that an utterly, and totally, and infinitely, and supernaturally resourceful God will never leave you or forsake you. Contentment is a virtue; contentment is a command.

Frankly, most people don't experience it. Most Christians don't experience it, obviously, to the degree that God desires us to. We tend to be a very discontent people. And I have this sort of personal theory that the more you have, the more discontent you become. If that is true, then this must be one of the most discontent societies in the history of the human race. We are called to contentment. We are called to be satisfied. We are called to say I have enough. Most of us don't experience that.

Paul did. Paul was a satisfied man. He was a contented man. Let's read about his contentment starting in verse 10. "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned before but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity. In any and every circumstance I have learned the

secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me and my affliction and you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone, for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs, not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice well pleasing to God and my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

Now, when you read that, it becomes immediately clear to you that this man Paul knew what it was to be content. He is a contented man. And if we look very closely at this particular portion of Scripture, as he shares his own contentment, we can find the secret to our own contentment as well.

Now, let me put it in context a bit. Most of us, when we write a letter to someone we deeply love will include at one point or another some expression of thanks for something that they have done for us. That’s fairly reasonable, fairly common part of the letter. And that is the case here. The apostle Paul, before he concludes this letter to the Philippians whom he loved very deeply, wants to express at some length his gratitude to them for their kindness. They have loved him ever since the beginning. Recently, they had opportunity to share that love with him by sending Epaphroditus who is mentioned in verse 18, and along with Epaphroditus they sent some gifts to meet his needs: perhaps some money, perhaps some food, perhaps some clothing. They sent to him the things that he needed. And this entire section from verse 10 through 19 is really his thanks for what they sent. The whole text is intended as a final statement of gratitude for the generous gift received at the hands of Epaphroditus.

Now, remember, Paul when writing this letter is a prisoner. He is chained to a Roman soldier. He is incarcerated in some probably small apartment in the city of Rome. He is in isolation. He is unable to move about. He has lost the freedom to work and minister at the capacity that he once had it. He is therefore much in need, probably existing on bare subsistence level. He is afflicted with the difficulty of being a captive. And in the midst of this need the Philippians having heard of it have sent to meet his necessities. This is, no doubt, the saddest part of the life of Paul up to this point, being chained to a soldier, able to touch only a few friends who could find him, anticipating a trial before Nero which could result in his execution, made it a very difficult time. FB Meyer wrote a number of years ago, “Deprived of every comfort, and cast as a lonely man on the shores of the great strange metropolis with every movement of his hand clanking a fetter and nothing before him but the lion’s mouth or the sword.” End quote.

A very trying time. The low ebb, as it were, when he had little or nothing of what this life considers benefits. And these dear Philippians, having heard about his need, had sent gifts and he expresses gratitude to them. So, that the primary intent of these verses is an expression of thanksgiving. But

very typically Pauline and certainly typical of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, beneath the surface of the expression of thanks is the vision of a contented man as the Spirit of God goes deeper than what we read initially to show us something that is profoundly impactful in our own lives. Here we find a contented man; therefore, we find the example of contentment which we so desperately need if we are to follow.

Now, remember in the first nine verses of chapter 4 we talked about spiritual stability. And in verse 9, Paul set himself as the example of that stability when he said, "What you've learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things." Let me be your example of spiritual stability. That was a direct statement. Now, in an indirect way, as we see him here expressing his thanks, we learn that he is also an example not only of spiritual stability but of contentment. Notice verse 11, he says it there, "I have learned to be content." Through experiences in life, through the provision of God, he had been put in to a process which was now completed, and he had learned to be content. What a tremendous thing that is to learn. Here then is the testimony of a contented man. And there's no better way to see that contentment than to see how he deals with his own distress and the gifts that some people give to him. It gives him the perfect environment to demonstrate his contentment.

By the way, let me comment at least briefly on the word "content." It's a marvelous word. It goes way back to the Greek term which meant to be self-sufficient, to be satisfied, to have enough. The term actually indicates a certain independence, a certain lack of necessity for aid or help. In fact, it was used in some places outside the Scripture to refer to a person who supported himself without anyone's aid. Paul is saying, "I have learned to be satisfied, I've learned to be sufficient in myself, and yet not in myself as myself, but in myself as indwelt by Christ." He had come to spiritual contentment.

This particular self-sufficiency had been made a virtue in Greek culture by the Stoics. 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 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 walk your nearest and dearest suffer and die and say, 'I don't care.'"

Now, that is the contentment of indifference. That is the Stoic contentment that abolishes feeling and abolishes emotion. As another writer said, "The Stoics made of the heart a desert and called it peace." That's not what Paul is talking about. When he talks about contentment, he may use the same word, *autarks*, that the Stoics used but he means something very different. He does not mean passionless carelessness. He does not mean indifference, for he was deeply compassionate, he cared greatly. But he was still content. So, he takes the idea of contentment much further than it was taken even in the Greek culture where the word found its meaning. Paul was content.

Notice again in verse 12 he says, in the middle of the verse, "I have learned the secret." This is a fascinating verb; it is a verb that is used to speak of being initiated into the mystery religions, of being initiated into 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." Truly the peace of God, in verse 7, was his portion. Truly, the God of peace in verse 9 was his portion. Truly, he was experiencing verse 6, he was anxious for nothing. He was content, he was satisfied, he was adequate, he had enough, he was sufficient.

What a marvelous statement. "I'm content." Why, Paul? "I've learned the secret." You say, "Paul, would you do us a favor?" "Sure, what?" "Share the secret." What is the secret of contentment? That's what we're going to learn in these verses. We are going to learn the secret of contentment, he shares it here. It comes right out of his heart. And I am so thrilled with what God is teaching me in this passage and I know you will be as well as you begin to see it unfold. Beloved, we live in a very discontent society. This society is so discontent it is diseased with discontent. We are more discontent than deprived societies. There are reasons for that. And we'll discuss some of those this morning. We need to learn how to be content.

Ask yourself, "Can I say in whatsoever state I am I am content?" Can I say that I'm content no matter what the circumstances are? That I am perfectly at peace, satisfied, I have enough? If you can't say that, then you have not obeyed the command of God to be content. You say, "But how?" Let me give you the strands, if you will, in the fabric of contentment.

Strand number one, confidence in God's providence, confidence in God's providence. Look at verse 10, "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed you were concerned, but you lacked opportunity." Let me give you a little background. Ten years have passed since the last Philippian gift was sent to him, ten years since he arrived in Philippi, ten years since he preached the gospel there, ten years since he was thrown in jail, ten years since the earthquake released all the prisoners, ten years since the Philippian jailer was converted to Christ and all of his household, ten years since he moved from there to Thessalonica and the Philippians gave him some support, ten years since he left Macedonia for Achaia, the cities of Athens and Corinth and the Philippians sent him another gift after he had left. Ten years since the last expression of their love. He was the founder of their church, they had a love bond, but for ten years there had been no support.

That was all right with Paul. He understood that. And he says I know it wasn't because you weren't concerned, it was because you lacked what? Opportunity, the end of the verse. You just didn't have the opportunity. The word is *kairos*, it means the season. You never had a time, an opportunity, not chronological time. You never had that moment when it could happen. We don't know why that is true. We don't know why they hadn't done it. We don't know whether it was their poverty, or whether it

was the fact that they didn't know what Paul's needs were, or couldn't locate Paul. But for some reason they had not sent to him any support for well-nigh ten years and he simply says to them, well, you didn't have an opportunity to do that. I don't hold that against you. I don't reprimand you for that. I understand. You had no opportunity for that until recently. And he says, "But I rejoiced," when? Well, when Epaphroditus came after ten years with a gift from the Philippians, that was a happy moment. "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly," he says. His joy was extensive as this expression of love came, "That now at last after all this long wait," is implied in the at last, "you have revived your concern for me." That's a beautiful word, that word "revived;" it's a horticultural term that means to bloom again. Your love has flowered again. Your love has bloomed again. It's always been there but it just didn't have an opportunity to bloom because blooms are seasonal and you haven't had the season. Oh, he says in verse 10, "You were concerned," and the implication is all along, I know you were concerned about me, I don't want you to misunderstand me, I know you were concerned. But you just never had an opportunity.

You say, "What's the point?" The point is this: the apostle Paul had a patient confidence in God's sovereign providence. You see that all through is life. He could do without and waiting on the Lord be content. He knew it was all in God's hands, and if God gave a proper season, and a proper time, and a proper opportunity, then those things that should be expressed would be expressed. There was no panic in heart; there was no need to manipulate people. There was no turning of the screws, as it were, to get what he thought he wanted or needed out of someone. He was certain that God, in due time, would order the circumstances so that his need would be met. He knew that there was nothing really between he and the Philippians that was at all negative, and so he didn't feel any responsibility to resolve conflict. He just waited patiently until the Lord made it happen.

Beloved, I would just take this simple little verse and sort of catapult it into this concept of providence and say look, the reason this man was content was because he knew that the times and the seasons and the opportunities of life were controlled by a sovereign God. And until you learn that, you will never be content, until you come to the place in your life where you understand that God is sovereign and is ordering everything for His own holy purposes, and is working all things after the counsel of His own will, and is making all things work together for good. Until you understand that, you will always be discontent because you will take on the responsibility to organize and order your own life and you will frustrate yourself if you can't control everything.

Paul has an amazing contentment. And it built on the idea that there never was given an opportunity. In other words, God never providentially made it possible. There is a quiet calm in that kind of faith. If I believe that God is sovereign, and He is, if I believe that God orders all circumstances to accomplish His own holy purpose, then I can be content in anything because everything is under control. Discontent comes when we want to control everything. That usually is a direct result of a failure to understand that everything is already under control, and somebody better than you is running it. God. See, Paul was fully confident that God was in charge and would order the events to meet his needs.

Providence, we call it. Let me explain what it is. Providence is a term to indicate that God provides, is connected to the term provide. That God provides, but it really means more than that. It means that He orchestrates everything to accomplish His purpose. Now, let me show you what it means by contrast. There are two ways that God can act in the world. One is by miracle, two is by providence. All right? If God wants to do something, let's say, in human society which, of course, He's doing at all times, He has two opportunities to do it. One is miracle. What is a miracle? Here you have the flow of natural life, the natural course of things. God just walls up both sides, stops the flow, and injects a miracle. It has no natural explanation. It has nothing to do with what is normal. He raises someone from the dead. He heals someone. God can intervene in history, stop the flow of normal history, do a miracle. And then, set the flow back in motion, just like stopping the Red Sea until His people could walk across. He stops the natural course of things, injects what is supernatural, and then let's the flow go again. That's a miracle, an invasion of the natural that causes the natural to cease and be invaded by the supernatural.

Providence, secondly, the way God acts is to take all of the diverse elements of the normal and orchestrate them to accomplish His own purpose. Now, which would seem to you to be the most difficult? Personally, I believe that providence is a bigger miracle than a miracle. It must be easy for God to just say, "Hold it, I want to do this," and do it. Much easier than to say, "Let's see, I've got 50 billion circumstances that I've got to orchestrate to accomplish this one thing." That's providence. But when you come to understand that a sovereign God is not only sovereign by supernatural intervention, but He is sovereign by natural orchestration, you have confidence and you have contentment. The contented person is the person who knows that God is ordering everything for His own holy purpose. You're content.

Paul's not frustrated. He says you just didn't have an opportunity, which means God never made it happen. And if God didn't make it happen, it didn't happen. If God wanted it to happen, it would happen. It's not fatalism. It's a confidence in providence. Read the story of Joseph. One of the great stories of God's providential orchestration of circumstances to effect His own purpose. Read the story of Esther, another evidence of God's providence. Read the story of Ruth, another evidence of God's providence. And Scripture is replete with such illustrations.

Paul was fully confident that God was in charge. And as long as God was in charge, and God was ordering everything for His own purposes, everything was going to be fine. So, he was content. Beloved, let me tell you: this is where contentment starts. You will never know a contented heart until you believe that a sovereign God is ordering everything for your good and His glory. And once you come to that conclusion, and it finds its way into how you live, you will experience contentment, not until. As long as you feel that things are out of control and you've got to get a hold of them and make them happen, you've got a problem because you'll frustrate yourself in the process.

You work as hard as you can and you're content that God is in control of the results. That's contentment. Paul had that. It shows up time and time and time again. He knew that the God whom he loved was ordering all the events of life. And that truth just barely sneaks through in verse 10. But it is foundational to contentment. Every time I see a discontent person, my first reaction is to give them a lesson on the sovereignty of God. Not to try to patch up their discontent with some kind of counsel, but to talk about the God in whom they evidently do not trust, or do not know, who is ordering everything according to His own plan. And that is why all things work together for good to them that love God and are the called according to His purpose because He's in charge.

Let me give you a second principle, a second strand in the fabric of contentment. Paul was content, number one, because of confidence in the providence of God; number two, because of satisfaction with little, of satisfaction with little. Look at verse 11. This is a quick kind of disclaimer after verse 10. He says, "Not that I speak from want," in other words, "Oh I rejoiced when your gift came, I rejoiced so much when it came," not that I needed it, "not that I'm speaking out of my own want. For I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am."

Well, what is this telling us? This is telling us that he was satisfied with little. He had bare subsistence. His need was deep and great, but he didn't acknowledge any discontent. He was so at peace with the providence of a sovereign God that he was content. He was so satisfied with very little that it didn't matter that he was a prisoner, in the sense that it took his contentment, it didn't. It didn't matter that he was chained to a Roman soldier, that he ate with bare subsistence, that he stayed in a place that was greatly lacking in comfort. That didn't really touch his contentment; he was satisfied with little.

Now, beloved, I want you to know this really hits this particular culture in which we live hard. We live in a culture that is not content period, with little or much. And my theory is that the more people have the more discontent they are. I mean, if you want, typically, if you want to meet a miserable, unhappy, wretched person, find a rich man somewhere. The attitude of people today is their needs can never be met. People are compelled to the meeting of needs and it's a consuming passion and they never get their needs met. The attitude of people today is anything but satisfaction with little.

We have developed need, I think, as maybe the number one value in the American system. Now, I could talk a lot about this, but I'll just talk a little bit about it, just to kind of give you a frame of thinking. We are developing a concept of life that says "the whole of life is a process of man meeting his needs." Where does that come from? Freud, Maslow, other psychiatrists. It comes from humanism. Since there is no God and man is ultimate, the all of existence simply is not to satisfy God but to satisfy whom? Man. And so, when you start with a humanistic premise that man is ultimate, and that man should be fulfilled, and that the whole of life is to meet the needs of man, now you have set man on an impossible course. Now he's going to spend all his life trying to meet his needs. That would be fine with the exception of one fact, where does he find out what his needs are? Because it's obvious

that he hasn't stopped with food and clothing. Who now is defining his needs? The culture is. The culture is now defining his needs. This is so different than Paul. Paul was satisfied with so little food and clothing, a place to sleep. And that's exactly what the Bible said, I read those scriptures to you, "Be content with your wages, be content with food and clothing, godliness with contentment is great gain and realize that the one who has all the resources will never leave you or forsake you," so be content with the bare necessities of life.

Paul was there, so he was content, because he was so satisfied with little. When he says, "Not that I speak from want," what he means is, "I really don't have any needs that aren't met." Maybe they aren't met as fully as I would want them to be met but they're met. He is so sensitive to this that it's amazing to me. When he wrote 1 Corinthians, he says in chapter 9 to the Corinthians, he says, "Look," he says, "I have a right to live off of the gospel because I preach the gospel," which means to make my living off of preaching I should be supported by churches. He talks about soldiers being supported when they fight wars, and why shouldn't preachers be supported when they preach messages, and he says I have a right to that. But he says, "Look, I'm not going to take anything from you 'cause I don't want to charge you for what I do." So, he says, I work with my own hands, I don't want to make the gospel chargeable to you; I don't want to cloud your thinking about my motives, so I work.

To the Thessalonians he says, chapter 2 verse 9, "You recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you we've proclaimed to you the gospel of God." Here comes the preacher preaching to the Thessalonians and in order not to have them support him he works night and day. And when he did receive an offering, to show you his mindset, when he did receive an offering, in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians he refers to it, verses 8 and 9, he says, "I robbed other churches, taking wages from them to serve you." When other churches did support him, he saw it as a robbery. Isn't that strange? He really did not like to do that. He says, "When I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone, for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you and will continue to do so," he says to the Corinthians. I don't ever want to be burden, I am content with very little. Some other dear friends came and met my needs so you don't have to and I feel like I robbed them. Boy, he would make a lousy televangelist. I mean, this guy is really hesitant about asking for money, support. Why? Because he was so confident in the providential care of God. He was so confident that God would meet his needs, and because he didn't want people to misconstrue his motives and because he was so satisfied with little. He was content.

"I have learned," emphatic I, "I have learned," points to the fact that this lesson is in the bag, folks, I've got this one down, "to be content, to be satisfied, to be self-sufficient in Christ in whatever circumstances I am." The word "content," by the way, is the same word in 2 Corinthians 9:8 translated sufficiency. I'm sufficient, I'm self-contained, I have no needs that aren't met. He's not denying difficulty. He's not denying hard circumstances. He is simply content in God's providential care and he



is satisfied with very, very little.

How different that is from today. How different that is. People today who preach the gospel think that gives them a right somehow to live a lifestyle that is way beyond the life of others. How different than those today who focus incessantly on their needs. Paul says, "Needs? I don't have any needs, I don't have any wants." Somebody might say, "Paul, you've got to get in touch with your needs, man. You don't even know what your needs are. Oh, you're in bad shape, don't you know that?" "No, I thought I was in pretty good shape, actually. I have a little food, and a little drink, and a place to lay down and have a warm blanket." You see, the culture in which we live is just propelled by need because the definition of man is, man is ultimate, therefore the satisfaction of man is the ultimate goal of life, therefore man must meet all of his needs. Now, what is really strange about this is how man defines his needs. There's a book out called "Need, The New Religion." I read it the other night, written by Tony Walter. He makes the major point that the key difference between Christianity and humanism arises with the question of whether human beings are alone in the universe. "In Christianity we are not. We look beyond ourselves to the creator. Humanism claims we are alone in the universe and grossly restricts our horizons and our experience by focusing on human beings and their needs." End quote. That is the new religion, meeting needs.

In fact, you see it on the television. The whole idea of television in one fell swoop is to produce in you discontent. Okay? That's the whole idea. I don't know if you realize this, do you understand what television is all about? Do you understand that the goal of television is to make you discontent so that you think you need something you don't have? You understand that? Do you know that the goal of television is not to put programs on? The goal of television is to make you buy things so that the primary issue on television is the commercials and the programs are only to get you there so you can see the commercials. And if the program doesn't get you there to see the commercial, the program is off the air, because the whole idea is to appeal to your discontent, create a need you didn't know you had, and drive you by that need to buy something. The program is incidental. The commercial is the capstone.

Now, what makes this so insidious is this: you will never see a commercial on television that tells you to go to the store and buy food because you need it. You know that. You will never see a commercial on television that implores you to drink water, to sleep, to get something warm when it's cold. You know that. And men will always find their basic necessities. They did in every generation prior to this one. Now, we have a whole new approach.

I remember when I grew up as a kid hearing my Dad preach a lot on the fact that the problem with a lot of Christians is they're not content with having their needs met. They're trying to get their wants met. Have you ever heard that kind of thing? Sure. You must be content with having your needs met and not your wants because I remember him saying, "Our wants always exceed our needs." Do you know that's been reversed? Do you know we now live in a society where our needs exceed our

wants? You say, "What in the world do you mean by that?" Follow this kind of thinking. Television doesn't appeal to us on the basis that "wouldn't you like to have this?" It appeals to us on the basis that "you need this." So, now what I'm finding is that I need things I don't even want. Have you noticed that? I didn't want them in the past, I don't want them now, but I need them. That's a whole new ballgame. I can't say in a sermon, "You can't allow your wants to exceed your needs." That isn't true anymore.

Everything is a need. Do you know there were millions of women who didn't want to be liberated and then they found out they needed to be liberated? Did you know that? Did you know there were millions of young people who didn't want to live in sexual liberation until they found out they needed to live in sexual liberation or they would wound their repressed egos? You see, the whole thing is perverted. Once you have a humanistic base and you say the goal of man's life is to meet his needs, you give the devil everything he needs to move out and then he just redefines what all your needs are. Homosexuals need to be free to live like homosexuals. Young people need to have unending sexual encounters to liberate their repressed egos. Women need to revolt against the suppression of their husbands and they need their own careers. Women don't want children, they need children. And your children don't want certain things, they need to express themselves. They need to be freed up from the bondage of parent repression.

See, the society then starts defining everything as a need. So, where does it stop? Because the premise is we're going to meet needs because that's why we are here, to get all our needs met. And what does Christianity do? Stupidly, blindly, ignorantly blunders into the same thing and says, "Oh, oh, so that's the theology." And comes up with health, wealth, and prosperity and says, "Good, since we all need to be rich and we all need to be successful and we all need to be liberated and we all, that must be what the gospel is, so we'll chase that." So, what do you get out of it? An utterly discontent culture and an utterly discontent church. The whole idea of this thing is to produce discontent. It's really tragic.

But, you see, Paul knew this. Paul knew that the chief end of man was not to meet his needs, but the chief end of man was to worship and enjoy God. Paul knew that it was not the meeting of human need that was the issue, but it was living to the glory of the God who created him that was the issue. And so, he was content with very little of this earth stuff, only what he really needed. And that was enough to satisfy him.

People, it's not easy to pull ourselves out of this, not easy at all. But when the worst of it is when you start redefining the gospel, and you make God this big need-meeting genie. You know, you're going to rub your lamp, He's going to jump out and give you everything you need, positive confession, whatever. You see it in the psychology of today; everybody is running to talk to the counselor because, "I have these needs that aren't being met in my marriage." What? Your husband is not feeding you? It's not warm in your house? "Oh no, I have need for expression and all these needs." I

didn't even know I needed horned owls until the Sierra Club came along, now I need horned owls. I also need green space; I didn't know I needed green space. A lot of people in New York don't know what green space looks like but they need it. You've got to preserve the green space, I need that. I don't know, who is telling me what I need? All of a sudden this culture is translating everything that it wants into a need by definition and then saying to man: you must meet this need or you haven't fulfilled your life. Get out of my way. I'm going after my needs.

How in the world are you going to get Christians in the middle of this to say, "I don't really care if I have little, I don't care if I have much, I'm perfectly happy, all I need is God?" Now, we've lost that. We've lost that satisfaction with little that Paul knew. I'll tell you, folks, you will never know real contentment in your heart until you have a total trust, a total confidence in the providence of God who is ordering every circumstance of life for His glory, and you don't need to manipulate, and you don't need to lose your mind in trying to control everything. And, secondly, you'll never know contentment until you are satisfied with little because your satisfaction is not dependent on what the world defines as what you need.

Let me give you a third strand, just in closing. A third strand in the fabric of contentment we'll call independence from circumstances, independence from circumstances. Now, he already alluded to it in verse 11 when he said, "In whatsoever circumstances I am, I've learned to be content." Now, he wants to expand on that in verse 12, so he says, "I know how to get along with humble means. I also know how to live in prosperity, in any and every circumstances." That's the key idea. "I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need, or lack."

So, what is he saying here? He's saying, look, the third element that you see coming out of his heart here in this contentment is that he was independent of circumstances. He says "in whatever circumstance," in verse 11, and then in verse 12, "in any and every circumstance, I'm the same. I'm the same." It's the part of contentment that is utterly indifferent and independent of all circumstances. Beloved, let me tell you, the one thing that steals our contentment most frequently is bad circumstances. Right? And we crumble, and we lose our contentment in the sense of sufficiency, satisfaction and peace because we are victimized by circumstances.

What does Paul say? "I know how." He says it twice in this verse, "I know how," and a little later, "I also know how. I know how, I've learned it." He says, "I've got the secret, folks, I'm living it here, I know how." What do you know how to do, Paul? "I know how, one, to get along with humble means." What do you mean by that, Paul? "I mean, I'm talking about physical things." He's talking here about food, clothing, daily necessities. I know how to get along with humble means, poverty is what he has in mind. I know how to be poor. I know how to have very, very little of daily sustenance. And this is very, very basic, just the basic needs of life. Then, he says, "Also, I also know how to live in prosperity," or to overflow, *perisseu*, to abound, to be filled. And he's talking again about earthly goods and earthly supplies.

“Hey, I can get along with poverty; I can get along with prosperity. In any and every circumstance I’ve learned the secret.” And then, he goes on. What secret? “The secret of being filled.” Well, that’s an interesting word, *chortaz*, it was used of foddering animals. It’s used of feeding and fattening animals. Hey, I know what it is to have a big meal. I know what it is to eat well. I know what it is to eat sumptuously. I know what it is to be well fed. And I also know what it is to what? To be going hungry. He had times of great deprivation. He had times when he didn’t have enough food to eat. He knew that. He experienced that. And then, he closes verse 12 by saying, “And I know what it’s like to have abundance, and I know what it’s like to suffer lack. But the point is: in everything I’m content because I live independent from the circumstances.”

Wow. He was never a victim of the circumstances. He had such faith in God’s promises. He knew what Jesus said. “You may have to weep now,” remember this in Luke 6:21, “but you’ll laugh later. You may have to be hungry now but you’ll be full later.” His eye was in the right direction, he was looking for the future glory. He never let the circumstances of this life devastate him. He had suffered greatly in the physical, greatly. And by the way, he is the worst imaginable illustration of prosperity gospel. He is the worst. I never heard anybody who advocates that ever preach on Paul. You couldn’t do it. I mean, he had a miserable life. I mean, if you were trying to sell Christianity on the experience of Paul, you wouldn’t get many takers. I mean, it sort of goes like this, Acts 14:19, the Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. Now, somebody today would say, “Well, he failed to bind them,” you know. Chapter 16, chapter 16 of Acts talks about Paul and Silas, they seized them in verse 19, dragged them into the marketplace, brought them before magistrates, verse 22, the crowd rose up together with them, the chief magistrates tore their robes off, proceeded to order them beaten with rods. When they inflicted many blows on them, they threw them into prison commanding the jailer to guard them securely. And he having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. Chapter 17 verse 13, “When the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there likewise agitating and stirring up the crowds.” Chapter 18 verse 12, “While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat.” Chapter 20 verse 3, this is how the whole story goes, “And there he spent three months in Greece when a plot was formed against him by the Jews.” That’s a plot to kill him. “He was about to set sail for Syria, he determined to return through Macedonia.”

One thing after another. He finally goes to Jerusalem in the sequence of the book of Acts. They get him in the temple. They take him and slam him in jail. And he winds up in prison in Caesarea for a prolonged period of time. They ship him all the way to Rome. He winds up in prison in Rome. The man had a very, very difficult life. He was deprived many, many times. He suffered lack many, many times. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4, in verse 11 he says, “We who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake.” He lived on the edge of death all the time. And then, in chapter 6 he

says, kind of chronicling his life, chapter 6 of 2 Corinthians, he says in verse 4, “In much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,” that was his life. And then, in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, you know that record, he says, “Look, in far more labors, far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death, five times I received from the Jews 39 lashes, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I spent in the deep, I’ve been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, robbers, countrymen, Gentiles, cities, wilderness, sea, false brethren. I’ve been in labor, hardship, through many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold and exposure, and then I’ve got the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.”

This guy didn’t live out any fantasy. This guy lived out a nightmare. This man knew what it was to be in difficult circumstances but he lived above them. And that is essential to contentment. How can you live above them? Because you’re looking and setting your affections on things above and not on things on the earth, because you count it all joy for the privilege of suffering for the sake of Christ. In other words, you have a heavenly vision, you have an eternal perspective. You’re looking to your eternal reward. He summed it up when he said, “This light affliction is not worthy to be,” what? “Compared to the glory which is to come.” I live in the light of the glory to come, not in the light of the pain here. Here was a contented man. Why? Because he was confident in God’s sovereign providence, he was satisfied with very little, and didn’t buy into the need values of his culture, and he was independent of circumstances because his affections were on another kingdom. Well, let’s pray.

Father, thank You so much for the reminder this morning of the need to be content in whatever conditions we find ourselves. Help us, O God, to trust in Your sovereign providence. Help us to be satisfied with little. Help us to rise above the circumstances, to live, as it were, in the heavenlies. Lord, make us content, minister to us with Your Spirit to grant us contentment for the Savior’s sake. Amen.

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