Be Content in God's Providence
Scripture: Philippians 4:11–12
Code: B160825

True contentment can never be known by those who don’t know God.

Unbelievers are doomed to live their lives with a sense of helplessness surrounded by anarchy. Desires for true peace, safety, and lasting prosperity are unattainable, particularly for those who subscribe to atheistic and evolutionary belief systems.

Those worldviews teach us that events are random, our origins accidental, our lives meaningless, and tragedy inevitable. Those who close their eyes to the one true God remain blind to His divine plans and purposes. As John MacArthur argues, contentment can only be found through trust in God’s providence:

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. [1] John MacArthur, *Anxious for Nothing* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2006) 132–33.

The apostle Paul learned the secret of contentment through understanding and embracing God’s providence. “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” (Philippians 4:11–12).

When Paul spoke about learning to be content regardless of his circumstances, he was informing the Philippians that he knew God was providentially at work, regardless of whether they could send him financial support or if he had to do without for a time.

The Philippian church had been a major supporter of Paul’s missionary labor since his first visit to
Philippi:

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. [2] Anxious for Nothing, 131.

But, as Philippians 4:10 indicates, there was a subsequent period when the church at Philippi lacked the opportunity to send aid (perhaps due to their severe poverty) and their financial support dried up:

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. [3] Anxious for Nothing, 131–32.

Paul saw God’s fingerprints everywhere and was unswayed by the vagaries of life. He saw God’s providential purposes in every situation no matter how adverse they were. His imprisonment “turned out for the greater progress of the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). Suffering was an opportunity for profound fellowship with Christ (Philippians 3:10). Even death represented the greatest personal gain as he would “depart and be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23). In Paul’s economy there was nothing in this world that held any real value compared to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:8).

And for that reason, he was able to live through the sunshine and storms of life with unshakable contentment. That doesn’t mean that Paul took a passive “let go and let God” approach to life. As John MacArthur summarizes Paul’s example and work ethic throughout the New Testament: “Work as hard as you can and be content that God is in control of the results.” [4] Anxious for Nothing,