

Philippians #9 - Contentment in Christ

Bible Reading

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:10-13

Today's message brings us to the end of our journey through the book of Philippians.

I had a lecturer who said that all good teachers,

Tell you what they're going to teach you.

Teach you.

And then

Tell you what they taught you.

Today I'm going to switch that around a bit, by telling you what I taught you first.

The book of Philippians was written by Paul from a prison in Rome, to a small group of Christian believers in Philippi who had become followers of Jesus when Paul visited them some years before.

Throughout the letter, Paul emphasises,

- the centrality of us making Jesus the Lord of every area of our lives
- how important it is that Christians work together despite our differences

— and how in doing so we experience the joy and fulfilment that comes from living our lives the way God designed us to live them.

Paul is aware that these are not easy things to do. And, writing the letter from a Roman prison, he knows that things don't always go the way we would like them to, even when we are doing our best to live godly lives. He encourages the Philippians to adopt the mindset of Jesus...

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Philippians 2:5-7

This mindset will help us transform the way we think about things, in particular it will help us avoid the temptation to move from trusting *fully* in God's grace and forgiveness and living generous and loving lives *as a result of it*, to doing good things as a way of *earning* God's grace and forgiveness.

Again, Paul has no illusions that this will be easy, but it is possible to move towards it, by focussing on Jesus, asking for and accepting his help minute-by-minute in our lives.

And one of the ways we do this is by rejoicing in the Lord...

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

Philippians 3:1

Our tendency is to focus on our problems, which causes us to become obsessed and overwhelmed by them.

I used the illustration of how police motorcyclists are trained to look away from an obstacle and fix their eyes on where they want to go, and

in doing so how their brain tells their body to steer *away* from the obstacle, rather than *into* it.

Paul encourages the Philippian believers not to focus on their problems (the obstacle) but on the one who can help them through those problems (Jesus).

And rejoicing in the Lord, his goodness and love, is one of the ways we can reverse our tendency to be obsessed with ourselves, one of the biggest obstacles to growing in our faith.

Praising God, reflecting on his love and goodness, helps us to see things from God's perspective, how much we are loved and held in his supernatural grace and strength.

It is what humans were designed to do, to delight in a loving, trusting relationship with our creator.

And in the previous message, we saw the way Paul tackled a very common pastoral issue of two people, Euodia and Syntyche, who didn't seem to be able to get along, by encouraging them to see past their personal differences to the bigger picture of the Gospel they were working for.

We then went on to how we should all be imitating Jesus' gentleness in our lives, putting God first, others second and ourselves last.

And we concluded with Paul's antidote to anxiety, putting our trust in God's grace and love, concentrating on what is good and eternal rather than what is shabby and transitory.

OK, so that's a summary of the last 8 messages.

Now on to today's lesson.

Paul opens this concluding section of his letter with his customary rejoicing in the Lord, this time for the Philipians 'renewing their concern' for him.

This is almost certainly referring to a monetary gift that the Philippians church has sent to him.

But why *‘at last* you renewed your concern for me’?

A possible reason is that Paul is probably dictating this letter to a scribe, which makes sense of the next sentence, as he realises that what he has just said could come across as him being negative about his beloved Philippian family.

I enjoy moments like these in the Bible, when we need to remind ourselves that what we are reading is composed by a real person, in a real place, in real time.

You can almost see Paul slapping his forehead as he dictates the next line, which I think is him saying...

‘I mean, I know you were already concerned, I know you continually think of and pray for me, it’s just that up until now you haven’t had the opportunity to send me a monetary gift.’

He follows this by a sentence that, again, at first glance seems odd.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

Philippians 4:11

To me it initially comes across as, ‘Thanks for the gift, although I don’t really need it.’

Rude.

This is where understanding the culture in which something was written is helpful.

If Paul had thanked the Philippians the way we would thank someone for a gift, something like, ‘Thank you so much for the generous donation, we are always grateful for your financial support’, the Philippians might have understood it as Paul asking for them to send him more money.

By saying he is not in need, Paul is saying ‘What you’ve sent is plenty’. And in doing so, the Philippians are freed from any cultural obligation to send more money.

And, ever the teacher, Paul goes on to emphasise one of his regular themes, that of learning to be content *whatever* our circumstances.

We tend to think of contentment as being in an ideal, care-free situation.

For me that is sitting in a comfortable chair with a glass of wine reading a book. Or chatting with a friend over a good meal.

For you it might be curled up on your sofa watching your favourite television programme. Or visiting different countries.

And these are all good things. But for the majority of us real life is full of other stuff...

Money worries, friends getting ill, cars and houses that need repairing.

The truth is, contentment is not found in a care free existence.

It is not found in money, health or fame. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to show that the richer people get, the more money they think they need, and the more discontented they become.

The fitter they become, the more they obsess over that last 1% of body fat they could shed.

The more famous they become, the more they worry about becoming even more famous, or losing the status they have attained.

As we’ve discussed in earlier talks, Paul is dictating this letter from a Roman jail, with the threat of execution an ever-present reality. Not what most people would call their ‘contented place’.

But Paul knows what the ultimate source of contentment is.

It is not circumstances.

It is not money.

It is not health.

It is not popularity.

It is Jesus.

He concludes this section with,

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:13

Philippians 4:13 is one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible, the way that many people quote it, it might as well read...

'I can do all things through a Bible verse taken out of context.'

For some Christians this verse becomes a 'promise verse' that God will help us to succeed in anything we choose to do.

But Paul is not saying this.

He is certainly not experiencing this.

Much like Jesus' teaching on prayer, it is a relational thing. What Paul is talking about is God giving him the ability to endure circumstances that he would otherwise collapse under the weight of.

It is about being content whatever our circumstances, because we believe God is in control of our lives.

And that is true whether we are rich or in need, well fed or hungry, even when we feel like we are at the end of our rope, even when we don't *feel* like God is there for us just when we need him most.

Caring for others, being gentle, being kind, putting others first and ourselves last, we can do all this through him who gives us strength.

It is not about asking Jesus to fulfil all our wants.

Rather about continually turning to Jesus and asking him to help us be the *person* he wants us to be, to be the *community of believers* he wants us to be.

When we do this, we will discover what it means to feel him strengthen and enable us.

It is Jesus who gives us the strength to be content, even when our circumstances seem less than perfect.

And while there are times when I enjoy my own company, this contentment is not a solo thing.

One of the main sources of discontentment is making everything about me. We follow Jesus best when we follow him with other people.

By turning our focus from ourselves to Jesus, and with his help to the needs of others, we move from selfishness to contentment.

It is Jesus who prompts us to pray for people and situations.

It is Jesus who motivates us to give financially to those in need.

It is Jesus who empowers us to forgive ourselves and others.

These are the things that God gives us strength for.

And so we move to the next section...

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

Philippians 4:14-16

Here Paul reinforces how grateful he is to the Philippians for their concern and practical support of his ministry.

For those who tend to idealise the early church as being somehow more 'Christian' than the modern church, it is worth noting that the Philippian church was the *only* church in the area that had supported Paul.

Also, note that Paul says...

*‘not one church shared with me in the matter of giving **and receiving**,’*
which probably indicates that Paul appreciated both the financial support, and the fact that the Philippian believers listened to and put into practice the things that he had taught them.

And so Paul continues...

Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 4:17-20

Once again, Paul makes sure that his gratitude to the Philippian church is not misunderstood as a request for them to send more money.

Paul has previously used the image of sacrifice as a metaphor of the Philippian’s faith and faithfulness (*Philippians 2:17*).

And it is an appropriate comparison. The majority of the Philippian believers would have been very poor. Giving money would have meant them going without things. It would have been a very real sacrifice.

Paul is aware of this, but he is also confident that God will provide for their needs.

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

The word ‘needs’ is important.

Paul is not promising that God will grant all our wishes.

Paul is not promising that we will never be ill.

Paul is not promising that we will never have financial worries.

Paul knows that God can do anything.

His becoming a follower of Jesus was miraculous. And he had experienced God bust him out of jail, and perform countless healing miracles through him.

But he also knew what it was to experience a wide range of hardships, including an ongoing health condition that he had asked God to heal. God's answer to him...

'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

2 Corinthians 12:9b

We all prayed for our sister Janet to be healed from the cancer that was destroying her. She wasn't healed. But she was content. And she regularly told me that a part of the reason for that was because she felt surrounded and supported by all the people who were praying for her.

And when Paul says that God will meet all *your* needs, he is not talking about you, singular.

The language the New Testament was written in was Greek, and unlike English, Greek has different words for 'you' singular, as in '*you*, Hazel', and 'you' plural, as in 'all of *you* here today'.

The form of 'you' that Paul is using is the plural, the *you* is the church, the community of Christian believers.

When he says God will meet all your needs, he's not saying 'Dennis, I'll meet all your needs' or 'Jean, I'll meet all your needs', he's saying 'I will meet the needs of the Christian community as a whole'.

And these needs are often provided by the members of that community. God didn't provide for Paul by throwing money down from heaven, he inspired other Christians to help Paul...

- By visiting him.
- By praying for him.
- By bringing him food, clothes and reading material.
- By acting as couriers for his letters.

This is the Jesus way.

Trusting in him to take hold of us.

Holding on to him.

Pressing on to what he calls us to do.

And as we do this, we discover the contentment of being in God's will.
We discover the empowerment of his Spirit. And we discover what it really means to have our needs met.

And so we come to the end of our journey through Philippians, but Paul can't help himself from adding a few more words...

Slide (Philippians 4:21-23)

Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Philippians 4:21-23

Amen!