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## Living the Jesus Life: The Secret to Contentment

June 21, 2020

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TEXT: Philippians 4:10-13 (ESV)

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

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Dear friends:

Today is Father's Day, a day when dads receive cards from the children would say, "Thanks for being my dad and I appreciate all you've done for me." I have a couple of those cards waiting for me to open later today. This is my first year of not having a dad to send a card to. But if he were here, I would have told him, "Thanks for being a great dad to me," because he really was.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is not just some instruction on living the Jesus life, it's also "thank you" letter. We see him today expressing appreciation for the generosity shown him; appreciation for the Philippians' love and concern. He says that they caused him to rejoice. "I rejoice in the Lord greatly," Paul says, "that now at length, you have revived your concern for me. You were concerned for me, but you had no opportunity." These are the days before electronic communication; they couldn't just pick up a cell phone or write an email. Paul hadn't heard from them for some time. He didn't know how they were doing as a congregation. He might have even wondered

how they might be feeling about him these days. So they're reaching out to him, giving him support gave him great joy. He rejoiced in the Lord for them, he said, he saw them as a blessing from God, a gift from God to him.

We also know as we read the whole letter that they had sent him some money, some news about the congregation, some words of love, and a person (Epaphroditus) who delivered it. Paul has been living on short rations recently as he sits in a Roman prison awaiting trial. The money was sent to help with his upkeep and needs there. It must have been a pretty good sum of money to require young Epaphroditus to come all that way to deliver it to Paul. And I'm betting that Epaphroditus' company, and the update on the congregation, and the message that they sent to Paul meant a great deal to him, maybe even more than the financial help. I mean, there's nothing like receiving some company; having a human touch when you're feeling low, a person to serve and care for you as best they can.

Of course, Paul can't help himself, he remembers, or we need to remember that he's all about discipling these Philippian Christians. So even as he's expressing his thanks and appreciation, he uses this as an opportunity to teach them something that he's learned along the way: the secret to contentment. He writes, "Not that I'm speaking of being in need, for I've learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low. I know how to abound in any and every circumstance. I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. In other words, I haven't been complaining," Paul says, "or despairing, mind you, because of what's going on." And he says, "here's why: I've learned to be content in any situation I'm in."

Now, that's a statement one would expect to hear from someone who was a follower of a particular philosophy in Paul's day called Stoicism. Even today, we sometimes will talk of people as being stoic. They have great self-control over themselves and over their feelings, no matter what circumstance they're in. The Greek moralists back then, influenced by stoic thought, thought to praise those who could be content with little as well as much. They said that the wise man needed no one but himself and was completely independent. A stoic had mind control over circumstance.

Paul is sounding like a stoic with this declaration of his, isn't he? Paul, you see, has been to school, the school of hard knocks. He's had the ups and downs of life, and Paul says, "In this school I've learned how to be content. I've learned how to be brought low." First

of all, boy, he certainly has. I invite you to look up 2 Corinthians 4 and 11, those chapters, on your own and find Paul's reflections on the tough times he's been through for the gospel: the beatings, the shipwrecks, rejections, death threats, persecution, and imprisonments. I mean, Paul spent approximately one quarter of his missionary career in prisons as a prisoner. He also says he knows how to abound, he knows how to live content in the good times as well, the times when he had everything he needed. He knew that even during those times, there would be a temptation to want a little more than he had; to complain and compare, or to pat himself, pridefully, on his back for his own ingenuity in taking care of himself. Paul says, "I've learned to be content and not give in to that kind of thinking."

What does Paul mean when he says he's content? Well, let's look at what it doesn't mean: it doesn't mean, "I like it. I like suffering and pain." No, God would not want any one of us to say, "I like being sick," or, "I like being without a job. I like starving." And Paul doesn't mean "I've learned to settle, to settle for those things in life that are less than they ought to be." He's not describing a sense of resignation, a negative outlook, just expecting life to be bad. But what he does mean is something like this: "I've learned to cope and to deal with all situations that come my way." Wouldn't we all like that in facing the ups and downs of our own life? Paul really is speaking to our needs here, isn't he, because we've all had times of being brought low? Most recently with this pandemic, for example, we've been experiencing all kinds of negative things. There's loss of health, loss of life, loss of financial security for many people, loneliness. Some days we feel like life has brought us low.

And we've also experienced times of abundance, times of plenty, good times when we're healthy and well off. And those times in life, we know, hold their own temptations and dangers for us, which we need to be aware of. We need to learn the secret of handling good times as well: how to exercise humility and gratitude instead of being prideful and arrogant and complaining and comparing and jealous and envious of others. It's so easy to fall prey to discontent in the good times and make ourselves miserable by thinking, "I wish I had more. I wish I had as much that other person. Then I'd be content." I know so many people who are discontent, even though they have a lot. Pastor Bob Russell makes this observation: "It's a rare person who, when his cup frequently runs over, can thank God instead of complaining about the limited size of his cup."

So what is the secret to being content in every circumstance, if it's not yourself, like a stoic? Well, Paul writes, "In any and every circumstance, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." And now what's the secret, Paul? Paul says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." It's a familiar verse to many of us, isn't it? We've seen this verse quoted by athletes, for instance, who are headed into a competition. Basketball superstar Stephen Curry, for instance, even has this verse on his shoes. But now we know this is not really what Paul's getting at. We have to keep this statement in its original context. This person is writing about circumstances in life, not games or trophies to be won or records to be broken. He's testifying as to how he's able to cope well with every life circumstance; whether it is imprisonment or beatings or hunger or need or sickness or good times of abundance. I like the way J. B. Phillips, by the way, in his modern translation of the New Testament translates this. He says, "I'm ready for anything through the strength of the one who lives in me."

Paul claims no credit for himself. Though he has worked hard to advance the good news of Christ, there is no boasting of intellect and ability and personal resilience or strength, that says, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." He gives all the credit to the inexhaustible resources available to him through his communion with Jesus Christ. He points us to Jesus. Paul's contentment, his ability to cope and do all things, is through that relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul's learned along the way the faithfulness of the risen Christ in his everyday life, that Christ is more than enough; that He's more than a hero in a history book to be admired or a picture in a stained glass window. He is living. He indeed is at work in this world. He's always with me. He never leaves me.

I know sometimes we get scared when life takes difficult turns and we wonder, "Are you really there, Jesus?" Pastor Jim Bjorge, one of my favorite preachers, tells this wonderful story in his book, "40 Ways to Fortify Your Faith":

A mother was busy cooking supper in the kitchen and asked her five-year-old son to go into the pantry to get her a can of tomato soup. The little boy was afraid of the dark, didn't want to go into that old-fashioned dark pantry alone. He pleaded his case, "Mommy, I'm scared."

Mother responded, "Johnny, be a big, brave boy. Just walk it and get it. I need it right away for this food I'm preparing."

Johnny repeated his fear: "Mom, I'm scared to go in there."

Mother used a different approach: "It's OK, son. Jesus will be in there with you. Now go and get Mommy the soup."

So Johnny went to the door and opened it slowly. When he peeked inside, it was so dark, and he was scared, and his hands trembled. And then an idea popped into his little head. He said, "Jesus, if you're in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?"

Paul testifies in this passage that Jesus really is there; no ifs, ands, or buts about it. "I have learned," Paul says, "that the Risen Christ never deserts his own or leaves us as orphans." Our risen savior, by the way, is here, not just watching us from a distance. He's active. His spirit is at work in me. Paul says, "It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." That's what he says in the book of Galatians. Paul says that that goes for anyone who trusts in Jesus. He'll work in you. He's changing you, giving you a strength that empowers you to keep moving in life. He works through you as you live for his glory. He provides for you and sustains you. Friend, I have to testify myself: that's been my experience as well, in living with Jesus. And there've been millions who have had that same experience.

Henry Ward Beecher, a preacher from the colonial times in America, claimed the "I am with you always" promise from Jesus as his own when he was converted. In describing his life with Jesus after his conversion, he said: "Time went on, and next came the disclosure of a Christ ever-present with me; a Christ that was never far from me, but always near me as a companion and friend to uphold and sustain me. This was the last and best revelation of God's spirit to my soul." Samuel Medley wrote a great old Easter hymn testifying to Christ at work in his life after conversion. He says:

I know that my redeemer lives, what comfort this sweet sentence gives.

He lives. He lives, Who once was dead. He lives, my ever-living head.

He lives to bless me with his love, He lives to plead for me above.

He lives my hungry soul to feed, He lives to help in times of need.

And this Jesus loves you. He cares about you. He went to the cross to make you His own and rose again to rescue you from sin and death's grip. And He's promised to never leave your side. He's breathed this Holy Spirit, who He calls "the Helper, into all who believe in him. What more does he have to do to prove his love and faithfulness for you?

So there's our answer. The secret to contentment is not my own self-sufficiency or the answers the world offers me. The secret to contentment is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You can do all things through Him, who will strengthen you.

Friend, do you have this kind of contentment in your life? You can. The secret is out. It's no secret at all. That this truth that Paul states, and millions upon millions have claimed and discovered since, is yours to receive and claim for yourself. The secret to contentment in any situation is having the risen, living Jesus in your life. Every person needs him, whether we know it or not. Christ alone can save us for eternity, and Christ alone gives us true contentment in life. If you have never had that relationship, or you find yourself having strayed from it, that same Jesus Christ that Paul points to today is present and available to all who will open the door of their life to Him. He's knocking on that door right now and waits for you to open it, to invite him in. Turn your life over to His care and His leadership. You see, the greatest relationship you'll ever have is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

And as you invite Him in and then follow Him and get to know Him through the Bible and prayer and fellowship in his church, you'll discover that living life with Jesus really does provide you with the strength to cope with any and all circumstances. And so that's my prayer for you today, may this discovery of Paul's be your personal discovery in life as well. Trust Jesus; He is risen and available to be your savior, companion, and friend. And you can do all things through Him who will strengthen you.

Amen.