



The Secret

Introduction

Philippians 4:10-13

An airline pilot was flying over the Tennessee mountains and pointed out a lake to his copilot. “See that little lake?” he said. “When I was a kid I used to sit in a rowboat down there, fishing. Every time a plane would fly overhead, I’d look up and wish I was flying it. Now I look down and wish I was in a rowboat, fishing.” Contentment can be an elusive pursuit. We go after what we think will make us happy only to find that it didn’t work; in fact, we were happier before we started the quest.

It’s like the story of two teardrops floating down the river of life. One teardrop said to the other, “Who are you?” “I’m a teardrop from a girl who loved a man and lost him. Who are you?” “I’m a teardrop from the girl who got him.”

The lack of contentment that marks our nation is reflected in many ways. We see it in our high rate of consumer debt. We aren’t content to live within our means, so we go into debt to live just a bit better than we can afford, but then we suffer anxiety from the pressure of paying all our bills. Of course, the advertising industry tries to convince us that we can’t possibly be happy unless we have their product, and we often take the bait, only to find that we own one more thing to break down or one more time consuming piece of equipment to add more pressure to an already overloaded schedule.

Our discontent is reflected in our high rate of mobility. People rarely stay at the same address for more than five years. We’re always on the move, looking for a better house, a better job, a better place to live and raise a family, a better place to retire. Some of the moves are demanded by the need for decent jobs. But some of it is fueled by a gnawing discontent that we think will be satisfied when we find the right living situation. But we never quite get there. Our discontent rears its head in our high divorce rate. We can’t find happiness in our marriages, so we trade our mates in for a different model, only to find that the same problems reoccur. Our lack of contentment is seen in our clamoring for our rights, all the while claiming that we have been victimized. If we can just get fair treatment, we think we’ll be happy. We are suing one another at an astonishing rate, trying to get more money so we can have more things so that life will be more comfortable. We spend money that we can’t afford on the lottery, hoping to win a big jackpot that will give us what we want in life. But even those who win large settlements in a lawsuit or a lottery jackpot are not much happier in the long run.

In Philippians 4:10-13, a man who sits in prison because of corrupt officials awaiting possible execution over false charges tells us how to find contentment. The answer lies buried in the midst of a thank-you note. The Philippian church had sent a financial gift to Paul the prisoner. He wants to express his heartfelt thanks, but at the same time he doesn’t want to give the impression that the Lord was not sufficient for his every need. Even though he had been in a very difficult situation (4:14, “affliction”), he doesn’t want his donors to think that he had been discontented before the gift arrived; but he does want them to know that their generosity was truly appreciated. So he combines his thanks with this valuable lesson on the secret for contentment.¹

¹ Cole, Steven J.. Philippians: Enduring Joy (Riches From the Word Book 1) (pp. 259-260). Unknown. Kindle Edition.

Open it

1. If you were given one superpower, what would you want it to be? (Be creative!!)

Read it

Philippians 4:10-13

Explore it

2. Where did Paul point his joy?
3. What had the Philippians done that brought Paul joy?
4. What had Paul learned while in jail?
5. What can Paul do because of Jesus Christ?

Apply it

“Sweetest Thing”

Paul begins the final portion of the letter with another explosion of joy. Once again, the apostle is rejoicing! This time he adds the adverb “greatly.” Why is he so happy? He’s thrilled by the Philippians’ renewed support. He doesn’t say why they went for a period of time without giving. Perhaps it was due to their poverty (2 Cor 8:1-2) or due to Paul’s inaccessibility. Paul simply says that they lacked opportunity, but they never lacked concern. Bottom line: Paul is super-grateful for the Philippians’ concern about him and for their generosity.²

6. What types of things or unique needs might Paul had while in prison? Are any of these similar to the needs of those around you?

7. Besides those you live with, who are some people that you find yourself uniquely concerned about? How do you go about looking after them?

Paul had enough because other Christians contributed to his need, and he was glad to acknowledge his indebtedness. He thus enunciates a principle: one Christian has enough because another Christian is generous. Or, since ‘every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above’, the Lord uses generous Christians to help needy Christians.³

8. Who has been a recent blessing to you? How has their concern for you been fleshed out? Why has it been such a blessing?

² Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 186). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³ Motyer, J. Alec. The Message of Philippians (The Bible Speaks Today Series) (p. 215). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

9. Paul made it clear that he had needs. This type of vulnerability is lost on most American Christians. Why are we so averse to speaking about our needs and what can we do to be more aware of the unspoken needs of others?

“I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For”

Paul says he has learned to be content even when life isn't the way he would like it. Contentment can be described as seeing God's hand and surrendering to His plan no matter whether it seems good or bad, happy or unfortunate. The key word here is seems, because from our limited perspective, something may seem bad, but in the end, God creates good out of it. That was Paul's perspective. Paul made the choice to surrender to God's plan for him even though he experienced the extremes of life: At times he lived well and had every need met. But more often, he was physically abused, persecuted almost to the point of death, deprived of food and water, and even experienced the deep grief of being misunderstood and called a heretic. Yet in the midst of all that, he depended upon God's strength to rejoice and trust that God's way and plan.⁴

10. **How would you define contentment? In what circumstances do you most typically struggle to be content? Why? Are there any recurring themes for you?**

11. **In what areas does our society struggle with contentment? What larger issues or struggles is a discontented life a symptom of?**

⁴Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 4271-4278). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

We might wish that a certain crisis would break us from our love affair with this world, but contentment isn't learned in a single crisis. It's learned through exposure to times of need and times of plenty. It involves a regular struggle to believe that Christ is enough. It involves us going through the school of need and the school of plenty. Both schools offer various tests that we must take.⁵

12. How can contentment be a problem for both those in prosperity and poverty? In what unique ways might their struggle be different?

“Moment of Surrender”

Paul learned to be content in all conditions. It didn't come naturally to him, and it wasn't an instantaneous transformation. It is a process, something that we learn from walking with God each day. Key to this process is understanding that everything, major and minor, is under God's sovereignty. He uses all our circumstances to train us in godliness if we submit to Him and trust Him. Our attitude in trials and our deliberate submission to His sovereignty in the trial is crucial.⁶

13. How is trusting God a major element to finding contentment in life? What happens to our relationship with God when we are discontented about our lives?

14. What is the proper balance between being content and yet trying to better your situation or alleviate certain problems?

⁵ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (pp. 189-190). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Cole, Steven J.. *Philippians: Enduring Joy (Riches From the Word Book 1)* (p. 262). Unknown. Kindle Edition.

We all can take comfort in the fact that even the great apostle Paul had to learn to be content. Of all people, we would expect that he wouldn't have had to learn it—that it came naturally. Yet, even Paul needed to go through a process that taught him to choose contentment.⁷

15. How would you counsel someone who is seeking to find a greater contentment in life? Who did you learn contentment from?

16. In what ways can discontent rob us of joy? How can a contented life make you more adaptable to the mission and calling of God?

“Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own”

Paul's great statement, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” was specifically referring to being content—the subject of the previous verse. But because he says “all things,” we can apply it to anything in our lives: whether it's strength to give a testimony when you're afraid to speak in public, or a need to believe God can heal your marriage. And at the core of all those “all things” is the need for contentment. When we are content, we show we're trusting God.⁸

17. Philippians 4:13 may be one of the most used scripture that Paul had written. How can this verse be used incorrectly? What does the greater context of this passage teach us about God's provision in our times of prosperity and poverty?

18. What is something that God is calling you to that you need his strength to accomplish? What can you be doing that will enable you to tap into his power in the days to come?

⁷ Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 4280-4282). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 4294-4298). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition. This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal—www.villagebible.church/smallgroups