

## The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4:10-13 (NASB 1995)

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Not that I speak from want, for **I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.** <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

### Introduction

In October 2012, Super-storm Sandy hit the northeast coast, and my family lost electricity for ten days.

At first, it felt like an adventure. We gathered candles, found flashlights, and checked on neighbors. And because everything in our freezer was slowly thawing, we spent the next several days eating dumpling after dumpling after dumpling!

But after a few days, the novelty wore off. We missed hot showers. We missed refrigeration. We missed normal life.

That experience reminded me how much we take for granted — and it caused me to think seriously about contentment. It's easy to be content when the lights are on, the bills are paid, and life is going smoothly. But what happens when life becomes uncomfortable? What happens when the power goes out — not just at home, but in your health, your finances, your relationships, or your hopes?

Can you still be content?

That is exactly the question Paul answers in today's passage. And his answer surprises us, because it doesn't begin with circumstances at all. It begins and ends with Christ.

Here is the big idea this morning: **Contentment is not found in better circumstances. It is found in a better anchor, which is Christ.**

Paul calls it a secret. He says in verse 12 that he has "learned the secret" of being content in any and every situation. The Greek word he uses for to "learn the secret"—

μυεομαι — was an initiation word. It described someone who had been let into a mystery, like a guild member finally shown the trade secrets after years of apprenticeship. Paul is saying: *I have been initiated into something most people never discover.*

This morning, I want us to be initiated too—learn the secret. Let's look at three truths Paul teaches us about contentment.

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## 1. Contentment Is Learned, Not Natural

Paul says in verse 11: *"I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am."*

Notice that one word: *learned.*

Paul does not say, "I was born content." He does not say, "I became a Christian and instantly became content." He says, "I learned." That is one of the most encouraging statements in the New Testament. It means contentment is not a personality trait some people have and others don't. It is not a spiritual gift reserved for a few. It is something God teaches — and that means it is available to all of us.

The Greek word Paul uses here 'to learn'— *εμαθον* — is to learn **by experience**. It carries the full weight of hard experience behind it. He didn't read about contentment. He was trained in it.

**Think about learning to ride a bicycle.** Nobody jumps on a bike for the first time and rides perfectly. You wobble. You fall. You scrape your knees. You get back up. You try again. Eventually, you learn balance. And once you've learned it, you never forget — because the lesson was written into your body through the falling.

The same is true of contentment. We learn it when prayers are answered. We learn it when prayers are delayed, even when they are denied. We learn it through gain and through loss, through abundance and through want.

God uses every circumstance as part of His classroom.

And what a classroom Paul had. By the time he writes Philippians, he has been imprisoned, beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked. He has been hungry, thirsty, and cold. He has faced danger on open roads and in city streets. And he is writing this letter from a prison cell, awaiting trial before Caesar.

Yet he says: *I have learned to be content.* Notice what he does not say. He does not say, "I have learned to avoid suffering." He says, "I have learned to be content in it." The lesson is not how to escape difficult circumstances. The lesson is how to trust God inside them.

Perhaps some of you are in God's classroom right now. You may be facing financial pressure, health challenges, grief, or unanswered prayers. Do not assume God has forgotten you. Perhaps He is teaching you exactly what He taught Paul—to be content. Don't quit the class. Keep trusting. God is not wasting your circumstances.

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## 2. Contentment Depends on Christ, Not Circumstances

Paul continues in verse 12: *"I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity."*

His circumstances changed constantly. Sometimes he had plenty. Sometimes he had nothing. Sometimes he was full. Sometimes he was hungry. But one thing never changed — his relationship with Christ. And because Christ remained constant, Paul could remain content.

Most people believe: *When my circumstances improve, I will finally be content.* We tell ourselves, "If I had more money... better health... fewer problems... a better job... — then I would be at peace."

But contentment built on circumstances is like a weather vane. A weather vane spins wherever the wind blows. It is always responsive, always moving, always pointing somewhere new — but it has no stability of its own. The moment the wind shifts, the vane shifts with it.

Paul had learned to be an anchor, not a weather vane. An anchor doesn't argue with the storm. It doesn't negotiate with the waves. It simply holds — because it is connected to something fixed and immovable.

That is exactly what Paul means when he implies, throughout this passage, that his peace did not come from his calendar or his bank account. It came from Christ.

Now, Paul's world in the first century Rome had its own philosophy of contentment. The Stoic philosophers taught that inner peace came through self-sufficiency. Their motto

was essentially: *I have enough strength within myself. I don't need circumstances to go my way, because I am master of my own soul.*

But notice the crucial difference. The Stoics said, *Look within yourself*. Paul says, *Look to Christ*. The Stoics relied on self-control. Paul relied on Christ's control. The Stoics pursued self-sufficiency. Paul embraced God-sufficiency. This is not a small difference — it is everything. Christian contentment is not about becoming stronger in yourself. It is about discovering that Christ is sufficient for every situation you face.

So, ask yourself honestly: What currently determines your joy? Your bank account? Your health? Your career? Your retirement plan? Or Christ?

If your contentment depends on circumstances, it will always be fragile. But if it is anchored in Christ, it can hold steady through every season of life — because Christ does not change with the seasons.

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### 3. Contentment Comes Through Christ's Strength

Now we arrive at one of the most famous verses in the Bible. "*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*" (v. 13)

Many people love this verse — and many people misunderstand it. It gets printed on athletic gear. It gets quoted before big games and job interviews. And while there is nothing wrong with drawing courage from Scripture, this verse is not primarily about achievement. Read it in context.

Paul is talking about contentment. He is saying: through Christ's strength, I can endure poverty without despair. Through Christ's strength, I can face abundance without pride. Through Christ's strength, I can remain faithful — and at peace — regardless of my situation.

This is not self-confidence. It is tether-confidence. It is Christ-confidence.

**Think of an astronaut on a spacewalk.** Outside the shuttle, in the silence of space, everything is hostile. There is no oxygen, no pressure, no ground beneath their feet. Yet they can work calmly — because they are tethered. That tether connects them to the oxygen supply and to the vessel. Sever it, and they are lost. But as long as it holds, they can function in an environment that would otherwise be fatal.

Paul is on a cosmic spacewalk — prison walls, an uncertain trial, the threat of execution — and he is calm. Not because he is brave. Not because he has found inner peace through self-discipline. But because he is tethered. Connected to Christ. And Christ is supplying what he cannot supply himself.

How does that connection work practically? Look at the very letter you are reading. Paul receives a gift from the Philippian church — real, material help from real people. He prays without ceasing. He meditates on what is true, honorable, right, and pure (verse 8). He stays connected through the Word, through prayer, through the fellowship of believers. The tether is not mystical and vague. It is maintained through means God has given us.

Perhaps someone here is thinking: *My situation is genuinely hard*. Paul would understand. More importantly, Jesus would understand. He knows rejection. He knows hunger. He knows grief. He knows what it means to trust the Father in the darkest possible moment — in Gethsemane, on the cross, in the silence of Holy Saturday.

And because He has walked that road, He does not ask us to carry our burdens alone. He walks with us. He sustains us. He strengthens us.

The strength does not come from us. It comes from Him.

So, when challenges come, don't ask, *How strong am I?* Ask instead, *How strong is He?* When troubles arise, don't focus on your weakness. Focus on His faithfulness. Because, when you are weak, you rely on Christ's strength and power. The same Paul declares, "*therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). The same Christ who sustained Paul in a Roman prison is able to sustain you today.

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## Conclusion

So, what is the secret of contentment?

First, it is *learned*. God teaches it through every circumstance of life — through the wobbles and the falls, the abundance and the hunger, the answered and the unanswered prayers. Don't despise the classroom.

Second, it *depends on Christ, not circumstances*. Circumstances change. Christ does not. Don't be a weathervane. Be an anchor.

Third, it comes through *Christ's strength, not our own*. Stay tethered. Stay connected through prayer, through the Word, through the body of Christ.

Paul can say all of this with confidence because he knows what he writes just a few verses later: *"My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."* (v. 19)

That is the foundation beneath the contentment. **God provides.** Not always in the form we expect. Not always on the timeline we prefer. But always according to His riches — which are inexhaustible — and always in Christ Jesus — who is unchanging.

So, when life is abundant — thank Him. When life is difficult — trust Him. When life is uncertain — follow Him.

And in every circumstance, declare with Paul: *"I have learned to be content."* Not because life is easy. Not because circumstances are perfect. Not because we are strong enough. But because Christ is our anchor — and He holds.

**Amen.**