

Contentment

in troubled times

by Glenn Parkinson

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“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 everything through him who gives me strength.”

Philippians 4:11-13

The Apostle Paul wrote these words while under house arrest for preaching. During that time, he not only faced considerable inconvenience and expense, but also the challenge of seeing his personal hopes and plans laid aside by events outside of his control. His response demonstrates a maturity that is easy to admire.

Everybody faces trouble at one point or another. Sometimes a whole society falls into troubled times. Economic instability, war, natural disaster, political oppression or hardened prejudice can plunge a nation into anxiety, anger and material distress.

I write this just as the first attempt at “mortgage bailout” failed Congress. Yesterday I heard an announcement that my bank failed – the bank with all my savings, along with those of my ailing mother. Later I discovered that my bank was actually purchased and, for now anyway, my money is “secure.” I know that the country will get through this. But I also know that this is not the last crisis we will face.

The time between announcements provided an opportunity to reflect upon three things from Paul’s comments ...

1. Contentment has little to do with material circumstances

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances ... whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

It would be foolish to think that circumstances make no difference in our experience of life and how we feel about things. “Poverty is the ruin of the poor”¹ and “all the days of the oppressed are wretched.”² The Lord God would not be “a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble”³, if he did not care deeply for hurting people.

But being *content* is not the same thing as being comfortable and prosperous. Prosperity and comfort are tied to our material well being. Contentment, however, is an inner peace flowing from a different source.

Contentment is rooted in relationships. Paul wrote his letter to people who cared about him and supported him as best they could without even being asked. The support of family and friends makes a huge difference.

Such support is multiplied by a spiritual fellowship. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”⁴ Better to be part of a community than to face troubled times alone. “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! ... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”⁵ Connections with others work to counter anxiety. We need people who will rally around us, people we are equally ready to help.

Christians ponder the statement that “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken,” and picture God forming a third strand between two friends. Surely the most important relationship of all is the one we have with God. Jesus said to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants ... Instead, I have called you friends.”⁶ Certainly, if we know that the Living God genuinely and personally cares about our

interests, it is only natural to rest content even when life hurts. We can expect God to sustain us today and deliver us in his time.

How sad that many Christians know this friendship more as a theoretical doctrine than as a day-to-day experience. Perhaps that is because friendship is a *mutual* involvement of two persons in each other's interests. If God seems distant in a sea of national troubles, we may want to consider whether our sense of his indifference to us is related to our indifference to him. Not that the Lord pouts if we don't give him attention, but real friendship is a two-way street. How can we be sensitive to God's blessing if we are insensitive about blessing him? How can our friendship thrive if we do not build our lives around God's will and ways? (We wouldn't expect the Almighty to build his life around our will and ways, would we? He is God, after all.)

Fortunately, God is very clear that "you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."⁷ "The LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion ... Blessed are all who wait for him!"⁸ He is more interested than we are in rekindling our friendship.

2. There is a secret to contentment in any situation

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation."

Paul's "secret," of course, is the three-fold open secret of the gospel. First: we were created to glorify God. "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor."⁹ In particular, the Lord says of those whom he draws back to himself that they are "called by my name ... created for my glory."¹⁰

The first part of the secret of contentment is a truth lost to most, that we exist for the express purpose of reflecting the Living God – his goodness, his integrity and his commitment to those he loves. This

divine purpose puts every personal goal and dream in a much larger context. Career, success, education, family, charity, justice, civic and artistic contributions – everything gains eternal significance when devoted to the glory of God.

Second: humanity is really messed up. “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear ... No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil ... So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes ... So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets.”¹¹ Such biblical passages describe every troubled society throughout history. They show us that sin is not only personal failure, but the repeated failure of the cultures we build.

The second part of the “secret” of contentment is a realization that we have blown our chance for happiness. Individually and collectively, we deserve divine judgment for the mess we have all participated in creating. Not a happy thought, but an honest one.

Third: Jesus Christ pulled unanticipated success out of what seemed certain disaster. Sent from heaven in a way that boggles the mind to contemplate, Jesus achieved the goodness, integrity and perfect love humanity was made for. Even more, he voluntarily exchanged reputations before God with those who trust him, so that he suffered the divine wrath we earned, while we benefit from the divine reward he earned. As the Old Testament described with uncanny accuracy, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”¹² As a result, God has “given us new birth into a living hope

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”¹³

The third and final part of the “secret” of contentment is a new relationship with God no longer based on how good we are, but rather on how good Jesus is. Such a relationship inspires, out of gratitude, a growing resolve to glorify God that crowns human life with its intended greatness. Circumstances do not generate or dampen this resolve, but only provide the context in which we freely return the love we have been freely given.

This secret of the gospel has been shared and discovered by millions all over the world and in every station of life. It transforms lost souls at the mercy of temporary distractions into spiritually adopted children who build every facet of life into an eternal Temple. It is the secret of contentment.

3. God empowers those who respond to him

“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

We cannot accomplish and experience everything we wish. But our dreams and goals are not the only path to a successful life. We can equally glorify God by successfully navigating unexpected detours. The key is our willingness to demonstrate God’s strength wherever we are, rather than only where we want to be. “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”¹⁴

That Temple we build can make good use of all our prosperity and comfort, but it needs none of it. Why should God be impressed with all our stuff when he made it all to begin with, and even gives us the strength to accumulate it? What pleases the heart of God is our desire to use each day, each opportunity and each breath to reflect his goodness, his integrity, and his inexhaustible love. “This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me,

that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD.”¹⁵

From a divine perspective, we can make each day a success regardless of our comfort and prosperity. This does not mean prosperity is no better than poverty, or freedom no better than oppression. What it does mean is that, rich or poor, privileged or disadvantaged, we can always enjoy the profound satisfaction of living in God’s good pleasure. We can laugh with him in our joys and grieve with him in our sorrows. All this, confident in his promise to supply our deepest needs now and forever. “In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”¹⁶

History shows that troubled times can surprise us in any generation. But they don’t have to crush our spirits – not if we deepen our relational roots. And no relationship is more important than friendship with our Creator. The “secret” of this friendship is really no secret at all when you know the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even in stressful times, a life resting in the love of God and committed to the glory of God will be saturated with meaning, hope ... and contentment.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Proverbs 10:15
- 2 Proverbs 15:15
- 3 Psalm 9:9
- 4 Psalm 133:1
- 5 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
- 6 John 15:15
- 7 Jeremiah 29:13
- 8 Isaiah 30:18
- 9 Psalm 8:4-5
- 10 Isaiah 43:7
- 11 Isaiah 59:2-14
- 12 Isaiah 53:4-6
- 13 1 Peter 1:3-4
- 14 2 Chronicles 16:9
- 15 Jeremiah 9:23-24
- 16 2 Peter 3:13



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