

## **contentment & the sufficiency of God**

Well, today we come to the close of our winter/spring study in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

About 4 months ago, in our introduction to this letter (it was Superbowl Sunday), I shared a modified version of what's been written in the bulletin through this whole series – that:

*"this is a letter that speaks with striking relevance to our world and lives today. Within these 4 chapters, we find Paul naming reality for us in so many ways –exploring the challenge of following Jesus in the face of opposition; counseling us in the way of unity amidst diverse perspectives and agendas; inviting us to know the joy of Christ that no suffering can extinguish and no pleasure can surpass; and summoning us to the true freedom that comes from living as servants of Jesus.*

*In truth, this letter – as ancient as it is – feels like it could have been written yesterday – for all the ways it seems to be speaking directly to us."*

And over these last few months, I think we've experienced this – I know I have – and in the process, Philippians has changed from being this letter full of beautiful or maybe clichéd **life-verses** to being something of **a life-letter**. A letter I know I will return to often – as a core and essential text for following Jesus today...

Thank you to all of you who have shared with me along the way – ways that God has spoken to you through this ancient text, by the grace of the Spirit... It's been a weighty and holy privilege to live in and teach through Philippians in this last season.

And it is once again today – with our final text in this letter – **Philippians 4:10-23**. If you have Bible with you, open it there...

As we'll discover in reading it, as Paul comes to the close of his letter, he gets back to personal matters – between him and the Philippians. And yet, once again, as **we** listen in, we find Paul speaking to us with striking relevance. Once again, we find this to be a letter **as much to us**, as to the Philippians.

So, let's listen once more to what Paul writes - **Philippians 4:10-23**. (NIV)

*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.*

***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 for 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. 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.*

**(v.21) 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.*

**Let's pray.**

I don't know what stood out to you as I read this final portion of Paul's letter – there are a few verses that tend to grab our attention. But before we get to them, I want us to simply acknowledge that what Paul's talking about here – what stands out in his mind as he comes to close this letter – is nothing less than the most ordinary things. Real needs. Real money. Real hunger. Real people – the Philippians and Epaphroditus – working together to help out a real friend (who, in this case, is Paul).

And we need to notice this because sometimes spirituality – faith – life in the Spirit – gets presented as something completely consumed with the heart and the heavenly, but irrelevant to the real things like grocery bills and difficult neighbors.

Sometimes **becoming spiritual** is presented as **disconnecting** from the ordinary concerns of life – and this, as the ideal.

In a couple of weeks, we are going to move into a summer study on **life in the Spirit** – and I'm looking forward to it for the ways that we will be invited to discover and celebrate the ordinary, everyday life that is *in the Spirit*.

But here Paul take us there – as we find him wrapping up this letter – inspired by the Spirit – with a conversation about real money, real needs, and real people. Faith lived out in real ways.

Not just in thoughts and prayers (though those matter too – as this letter itself attests), but in taking up an offering from everyone and send off one of their own to travel on foot a fair distance to bring it to their friend in need – in prison...

This, to Paul, meant a ton. *As it would to any of us.*

Now if you've been tracking with us in Philippians, you'll know that Paul often talks about *rejoicing in Christ*, right?

But here, and only here, as he reflects on their gift brought personally by Epaphroditus – Paul says, "*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.*"

This is **the only time** in Philippians that Paul talks about **greatly** rejoicing in the Lord. What a beautiful affirmation that Paul is

a very human, very ordinary individual – **and** that true spiritual fellowship is more than an intangible matter, but something that gets this real, this personal, this practical...

And with that, in the midst of this, we find Paul talking about something else that is **so real** – so familiar... The battle for **contentment**.

Something I think we **all** grapple with at times, if not **often**.

*Young **and** old. Rich **and** poor. Single **and** married. Renters **and** home-owners. Women **and** men.*

I suspect this is the part of the passage that grabbed **many** of us as I read it a moment ago.

Hear again what Paul writes – **v.11f**.

*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."*

If we're honest, Paul's words – Paul's confession – Paul's claim here is a bit startling. Isn't it? What a thing to say, "**I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.**"

Not that I doubt or question the truth of his claim. Honestly, this letter itself is an incredible testament to the contentment that Paul knew in Christ – in the midst of imprisonment that could very likely

lead to his death! What Paul writes here could not come from the pen of someone whose life and heart was gripped by discontentment...

I **trust** Paul's words here. ***I just find them so rare.***

Because **discontentment feels like the norm these days...**

The air we breathe.

Or stated the other way: **Contentment** is **the elusive aspiration** of our age – and maybe of any age. If Paul chose to mention it, it must have been a real issue in his day.

Because **it is in ours**. It is for most of us. Maybe all of us.

*Young and old. Rich and poor. Single and married. Renters and homeowners. Women and men.*

Which is a surprising thought – because we tend to all live with a gut conviction, often unstated, that if we could just cross the barrier – from poor to rich, from single to married, or maybe a difficult marriage back to single, or from renting to homeownership, from young to old, or maybe old back to young – **then... then** we'd be content.

**Then** we'd be complete...

**Then** we'd be satisfied...

**Then** we'd have what we need...

Right? I know I often have these thoughts and feelings...

Truth is, we all have something – if not many things – that come to mind when asked: **What is the one thing that you think you need in order to be content?**

I read that question this week – and was stunned how many things came to mind for me.

***What is the one thing you think you need in order to be content?***

Paul's words are a startling reminder to us that contentment is not merely the struggle of the poor or the unmarried or the young. He says, (v.12b) "*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.*"

The implication being that being well fed, living in plenty **is no guarantor of contentment**. There are many who live in plenty and who's hearts are ravaged with **one thing**, if not **many things**, that they feel are needed if they are ever to be content...

And the same could be said of all sorts of scenarios that we often picture as the ideal...

Simply put, contentment is a battle for **everyone**.

Which should not surprise us since this is the story of the Garden of Eden – the ancient story that explains our story.

Think of it. And I want to quote here from Gary Thomas' wonderful book, Authentic Faith. **He writes...**

"The Garden of Eden is the definition, literally, of paradise—what we think of as the most blissful state ever known in human experience. Adam and Eve lived unencumbered lives. They were

naked, yet there was no lust, no shame. They didn't need to worry about famine, war, cancer, or death. Their relationship with God was something that mystics could only dream about—seeing God face-to-face, talking with him as though he were a next-door neighbor, taking strolls together in the most pleasant part of the day...

**Adam and Eve had everything they could want in the Garden of Eden, but contentment was still a stranger...** This is what the serpent capitalized on...

**There, in the middle of paradise, with no sin or shame present in the world, Eve and Adam weren't... content.**

***They wanted more...***

Discontentment is not a modern phenomenon. It is an age-old battle. One that we've all learned from our ancestors.

It's this ancient perception – conviction – often unsaid, but deeply felt – that without that **one thing**, we don't really have what we need... That without that one thing, we don't have **enough**. We're not **complete**... or **sufficient**...

In truth, this is what **the original word** for "contentment" literally means. **Aut-arkes = self-sufficient.**

And the Greek philosophers spoke of this – contentment – self-sufficiency – as the ideal. Having within yourself everything you need. The strength within you for all things. Having no needs because you are self-sufficient. *Autarkes*...



Which is not just what the ancient greek philosopher's preached, this is what most modern books on spirituality and empowerment preach – the sufficiency of the self. You have all you need. You are all you need.

But, here in **Phil 4**, Paul rescues this word – **and us** – by proclaiming to us another answer... a better answer... than simply a self-help mantra that requires us to mask our real needs and frailties. **But also** that rescues us from the insatiable, unquenchable grasping for more... and the discontent that fuels it.

Paul says, (**Philippians 4:11f**) –

*"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."*

That last line – v.13 – is the key – the secret, according to Paul.

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

Now here's the crazy thing. This is one of the most popular verses out there these days – in the Christian self-improvement conversation.

And yet so often, it is being used in ways totally disconnected from what Paul meant in writing it.

Sadly, one of the common translations of this verse fuels this misinterpretation. I'm sure many of us have it memorized this way. What is it? **Phil 4:13** – "*I can do **all things** through him who strengthens me.*"

There are **over 200,000** instagram posts with some version of that hashtag! And so many of them are pictures of what? Of people completing a Marathon, lifting weights, summiting a peak, losing weight or achieving a degree.

Which are all great things. ***But this isn't what Paul's talking about here.*** He's not saying I can accomplish anything I set my mind to because of him who gives me strength.

No, he's saying, *because of him who strengthens me, I can be content in plenty and in want... I can enjoy times of plenty and not cling to it, not put my hope in it, not find my security in it, not lose or give over my soul to it...*

*And I can experience hunger and need, downturn, limitations, **imprisonment** and not lose my footing and give into despair and fear...*

I can be satisfied – content – settled of soul – confident that I have all that I need – in the midst of whatever life brings me – ***because I am in Christ – and Christ is enough.***

As Paul says, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

This is the grace of the gospel. Not discovering our own strength or God-given self-sufficiency, but discovering and experiencing **the all-sufficiency of God in Christ** – that can hold us secure in anything and everthing...

A sufficiency – a strength – that enables us to say from the depths of our soul:

**In all of our pleasures, Jesus is better; in all of our suffering, Christ is enough.** (Steve Timmis)

Can we say this? Do our lives say this?

**In all of our pleasures, Jesus is better; in all of our suffering, Christ is enough.**

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

This is what the apostle Paul **learned** over the years – in and through times of plenty and times of great want... In and through his dependence upon Christ through times of plenty and times of want...

He **learned** contentment in Christ because of the **all-sufficiency of Christ**.

Which, counter to what many suggest, did not mean that Paul no longer experienced need, or that he no longer needed others. That all he needed now was Jesus.

It's simply not true.

As we listen to Paul describe here how he has learned to be content in any and every situation – through Christ who strengthens him... he still talks openly about **experiencing need** (v.14 & 16), times of trouble... and **the provision of God** through the people of God – the body of Christ...

Which, rather than diminishing the all-sufficiency of Christ, is an affirmation of and testament to the ***all-sufficiency of Christ***. For it is in and through ***the body of Christ*** that Christ meets many of our needs. It is in and through ***the body of Christ*** that we experience something of the ***all-sufficiency of Christ***.

**So, what about you today?**

**What *one thing* do you need in order to be content?**

I'm sure, if asked, the Philippians would have all had something come to mind.

Hear the words of the apostle Paul – written from his prison cell – to their needs and yours today.

**Phil 4:19**

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

... In the One who is sufficient and strong enough for all – for all that we face and will face...

Let us come to Christ today – with all of our needs and find in Him all that we need.

## → invitation to the Lord's Table

the benediction -----

It's interesting to be talking about this one day after Prince Harry and Meghan Markle got married. What an idyllic wedding day. With the world watching – dreaming – and feeling, **if only... Right?**

**If only... Then...**

**Then** I'd be satisfied. Content. Self-sufficient. Strong enough...

But as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are soon to discover, discontent can be found anywhere – **even in the Garden of Eden.**

If our restless hearts don't find their rest in God – in Christ – who alone is **all-sufficient.**

May God continue to teach us the all-sufficiency of Christ – that we might know contentment in Him...