

Contentment in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Morning. Thanks, Tien, for reading that from Acts and from Philippians. Thanks, Dave, for leading us. It's lovely, isn't it, to get a letter or a card. On Friday, it was Valentine's Day. I had a card.

So it wasn't meant to be boastful. On the front of the card, it said something like, to my lovely husband, and inside the card, it said, happy anniversary. It wasn't our anniversary. But to be fair, if you looked at the card from the shop, it probably looked like a Valentine's Day card. It's just inside, it said, happy anniversary. So what I was expecting when I opened the card wasn't actually what the message was inside. Now, I wonder when the church in Philippi got this letter from Paul and they started to read it. I wonder what they thought, what's contained within it. They sent him a gift, and perhaps thinking, is this a thank you letter? Is he actually going to say thank you? He's written loads, and yet we get to chapter four before he sort of gets to the bit about saying thank you. Waits right till the end.

So here we are today at the end of Philippians, the end of our series thinking about the book of Christian joy. Just a quick reminder about the context. Paul, when he writes this, he is in prison in Rome, not the most comfortable of surroundings. He's probably under house arrest, even chained to a guard, and he writes this letter back to the church in Philippi. We don't exactly know what that gift was. However, we do know that Paul, when he was in prison, he would have needed provisions, things to look after himself because he was deprived of his freedom. So he waits right to the end of the letter to consider the gift, and if we read it closely as we did, he doesn't actually say thank you at all.

He does express gratitude, but there's some really careful use of language to make some important points. It's perhaps not how today we would write a thank you letter, when normally that's the first thing you start off with. Thanks, thanks very much. However, Paul does have his reasons, which we shall explore shortly. In fact, may I be as bold to suggest that this section is not about a thank you at all. Rather, it's about being content. So why do I say that? Well, let's have a look what Paul writes. So here in verse 11, he says, I'm content. And then in verse 18, he says, I'm amply supplied.

In fact, I have more than enough. So this section, I think, is about being content. So then that, I think, begs three questions. What is being content? How can I be content? And then finally, what happens when I am content? So I thought if we use those three questions, let's help the verses that we've read Philippians to answer those questions. Now, they're quite big questions, these. This isn't going to be a sort of quick change your life seminar this morning. So you're a Christian, here are three easy steps to Christian contentment. That's not what this morning is going to be about.

However, there are some real gems within this passage, some key components that I think we should consider, if you like, the contents of being content. So let's have a look. So firstly, let's think about what is being content, but also importantly, what it isn't. If I said the phrase to you, oh yes, no, I'm quite content. I think that might give the impression that I was in a good place. However, if I asked you the question, are you content with that? It perhaps implies that you might have missed out on something, or you're making do with second best. There's perhaps a relative element, a comparison is going on with what you have and what you might have. Perhaps there's been some sort of negotiation or making do. We're bombarded, aren't we, all the time with messages about having more, about having better things and achieving more, whatever sphere we might be working in. We can never have enough, or so the song goes. And it's hard, isn't it, to shake that message off when it's so prevalent and such the norm in society. Even if logically, in my mind, I can see the way that's a problem and not the right way to think. We just love to compare. And then when we start to compare, we then start to covet.

[5 : 13] I would like that. Therefore, I'm not content. In fact, I don't just like that, I need that. I can't be content unless I have whatever thing it is. So being content is the opposite of coveting.

Let me tell you about Joe and Dave. Now, Dave knew what it was like to have not very much and also to have it all. Now, the thing about Dave was he had the habit of not being content. On one occasion, when he didn't have much and was having a hard time, was being put under a lot of pressure, he decided he wanted a bit of peace, wanted something different. He was in trouble with the powers that be, and he even fled the country in search of a peaceful life. He thought that by doing that, that would make him content, although it didn't. There was another time when Dave had made it. He'd become wealthy and very successful. But even then, Dave was not content. There were things that he really wanted that were not his. And he schemed and he plotted and he misused his wealth and how successful he was. Now, Dave ended up having an affair. He got into more trouble. He got caught and then even more trouble. That's Dave. Let me tell you about Joe. Now, he also knew, like Dave, what it was like to have very little and also to have wealth and power. However, Joe, he managed to play things differently. Joe was a handsome chap and he was really good at what he did, like Dave.

Joe was so impressive that his boss's wife took a shine to him. She was very persistent in trying to entice him to sleep with her. He resisted and, in fact, did so many times. He didn't covet what he didn't have. And in the end, it got Joe fired. Now, have you guessed who Dave and Joe are?

So, they're usually known as King David and Joseph in the Old Testament. So, just to explain the stories a bit more, David, when he was on the run, when Saul was king, David was on the run. He left Israel, went to the land of Philistines to escape Saul. He stayed there for over a year because he was not content with his lot, even though he knew what God wanted and God had planned. You want to read a bit more about that? That's in 1 Samuel 27. Then, perhaps a more familiar story with David. He was king in his palace, spots a beautiful woman, thinks to himself, thank you very much, and breaks a few of the Ten Commandments, including not coveting your neighbour's wife. She gets pregnant, he gets her husband killed, he then lies about it. If David were playing ten-pin bowling with the commandments, he knocks four of them down with one ball. If you want to look that one up, that's in 2 Samuel chapter 11. So, if we have a problem with coveting, then we're in really good company with David.

[8 : 33] Joseph, on the other hand, he was the chief in Potiphar's house. He had a good job. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him on many occasions. He fled, leaving his coat. She then claimed that he had tried to rape her. He ended up in prison. That story is in Genesis chapter 39. Now, there's an important point in that story. Joseph states as his reason for not succumbing that he is focused on honouring God and not himself, which is an important part of being content. Who are we honouring?

So, the difficulty of coveting is real, as we've illustrated by those examples from the Old Testament, no matter what our current material circumstances. We love to look around, don't we, and we place ourselves in some sort of pecking order. We might do this at work, we might do this at church, with our friends, who our friends are. We might do it with our abilities, at sport or creativity or financial circumstances. We might even think about the characteristics of other people's relationships, or even spiritually, we might like to rank people. We love to judge, don't we?

And if we're honest, well, we're pretty good at judging as well, aren't we? And then once we start to compare and rank, then the temptation arises to covet. And I think there's something else that we do if we're honest, or if I'm honest. We perhaps look at people who have more, and we've put them higher up our ranking scale, and we might think, they don't need to covet. I mean, if I was in their position, of course I would feel content. I can't believe that these people don't feel content. Surely this isn't a problem for them. Or we might do the opposite. We might think, these people who have less than me, they don't know the life I'm part of. They are lucky, and they should be content.

Don't they know the trials I have to bear to be content when I see the people in my circle? Surely this isn't a problem for other people. I wonder what it would be like to grow up in a well-off situation. Would we be comfortable if then we ended up being forced to live in poverty? Would we be able to handle that in godly ways? Or perhaps we start life really poor and suddenly become wealthy? Would it corrupt us, or would we feel guilty and not be able to look in the mirror? Now, this morning is not anti-rich, or anti-poor, or pro-rich, or pro-poor. It's not about social policy, or politics, or inequality.

Those are important matters for discussion. That's not the point this morning. The passage that we've read is about being content in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Paul points out that he was content in all his circumstances. Have a look at verses 11 and 12.

[11 : 34] I've 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. Now, these opposites here that he describes are quite powerful opposites, from lacking to abounding. Two ends of a spectrum of have and have not. Paul describes himself as being content. He puts simply, I do not need more than I have.

So, potentially, there could be an arrogance of wealth, and also an arrogance associated with poverty. Here, Paul neither revels nor complains in either. He finds a restful contentment, not striving for more, and it brings a freedom for Paul, to the extent that the whole book of Philippians is about bringing joy. And this facet of joy here is not kind of bouncing off the ceiling or grinning like a Cheshire cat with a false smile. It's a deep sense of contentment, no matter the circumstances that Paul finds himself in. Paul says in verse 12, I have learned to be content in whatever the circumstances. And then he says, I have learned the secret of being content in any situation. I wonder what Paul means when he says, I've learned and I found the secret of being content. Let's have a think about that.

So, I think there are three elements that we can think about in terms of this learning. The first is about learning. The second is about trusting. And then the third is about giving. And together, if we take trusting, learning, trusting, and giving, those produce growth or Christian maturity when we think about contentment. Now, all three are important. Learning, trusting, and giving.

Now, I wonder, naturally, we might be drawn to one or more of the others, and we may be more challenged by some of the others. But let's consider each of them to perhaps think which of those resonate with you, which may actually be challenging us this morning. So, Paul says in the passage that he learned to be content. So, the problem here is that it's not going to be a quick fix. Paul doesn't describe a prayer of, God, please make me content. Ping, prayer answered, I'm now content. It requires a resolve, a decision, and a commitment, not something that passively happened to Paul. He had to learn. Now, I don't know about you, but sometimes I fall into temptation of, if I have whatever it is, then I will be content. So, somehow, my contentedness depends on achieving or having something, rather than an attempt to being content whatever I have or don't have.

So, that's something we need to learn, learn to reverse that way of thinking that Paul describes here. There's a wise expression, sometimes attributed to a US president, not the current one, but Roosevelt, who apparently said this expression, comparison is the thief of joy. Comparison is the thief of joy. And I think Paul understood this. So, he makes this disconnection between his Christian life and his finance or his circumstances. He also talks about it in other of his letters, 1 Corinthians 9, if you want to look that up later. Again, there's a specific example. He illustrates how he disconnects his preaching and his work for God from his material life. So, he makes this rule that he maintains in different circumstances. He separated how content he was from his situation.

[15 : 38] Now, I don't know about you, but I think Paul's extremes were perhaps more than I've experienced. I have not been beaten up and thrown in prison. But Paul describes he managed to be content in all those circumstances.

This doesn't also mean being wooden or a robot, or that Paul didn't appreciate what he had or others giving. It's not having a lack of emotion or appreciation of circumstances or good things. Paul describes it as a guard against coveting. It doesn't mean emptying our minds of everything or not celebrating good things. We didn't read this, but if we have a look back at verse 8, just before this passage in Philippians 4, Paul says, finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things. So, Paul doesn't say it's off limits, looking around and celebrating goodness and excellence and finding joy in these things. What he is saying is that there's required decision not to covet and a recognition that we fail and we get it wrong just as David did.

So, while it's also not being wooden and a robot, it's also not about a stoic act of will and cold indifference, but it does require commitment. An important note, this is not describing in any way that our efforts secure God's mercy or his grace or salvation. This, Paul is describing his life as a Christian. So, if you're not a Christian here this morning, what we're not saying is you need to earn your salvation through discipline and self-denial.

This is, he's talking here to Christians. So, how does Paul do this? How does he make this disconnect? Well, he does give us some clues. Paul detaches his circumstances from the gift. [17:46] If we look at verses 11 and 17, here he describes he's in need, so his circumstances, and then in verse 17, not that I desire your gifts. So, Paul, like all of us, he would need food and drink and warmth and shelter and sleep, but he disconnects that from his desire, his want.

So, this illustrates, I think, Christian maturity. Paul describes it as a mystery of being content. He sort of always describes it like he has to have a qualification in being content.

This is part of his growth and maturity in Christ. Now, this maturity and growth comes through experience, and it's hard. Last year, we looked at the book of Numbers, and the people of Israel were wandering through the desert, and at various points, they were tested, and it didn't go so well. It was really difficult. It is difficult. Paul found it difficult. However, Paul says he learned and almost graduated from the University of Contentment, or found this mystery and the secret.

So, that's the first point about learning. But it doesn't stop there. It's not just about learning. We also need trusting.

[19:11] Now, I like a good children's cartoon film, particularly one that has silly jokes in it. That's kind of my level of humor and intellect.

A few months ago, I was watching Puss in Boots 2, The Last Wish. I don't know anybody's seen that. And there was a line in it that really tickled me.

So, one character in this film is describing a plan to two other characters. And after this character has described what is a very elaborate and complicated plan, the two characters' response is to say, I don't believe you.

To which the answer comes back, it doesn't matter if you don't believe me, you just need to believe in yourself. Well, it tickled me, anyway. Which was a dig at the, you can do anything you want. Be who you want to be, just believe in yourself. Don't let the world tell you no, don't let them put you down and oppress you. Of course you can do whatever you want, you just need to believe in yourself. Now, as Christians, we might say, oh, I don't buy into that modern kind of psychobabble.

[20:20] Intellectually, we know that that doesn't work. But it is really pervasive and sometimes does enter into our thinking. And if it does, then it doesn't help with that wanting more and then into coveting and then moving us away from being content.

Now, we may, of course, say, as Christians, the Christian line goes, of course I am nothing. I don't believe in my own ability. It is God who gives me strength. But I think there's also risk in that saying as well.

And we can fall into the trap of using verse 13 here out of context. So verse 13 says, I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

People say, oh, look at this verse. Where's the emphasis on it? It's on I and what I can do. Look what I can do if I have God's strength and power. So there's a risk that we just Christianize, if you like, the expression of not believing ourselves.

We can do everything because God who gives me strength. And then we sometimes apply it in a secular sense. Of course I can be this or pass all my exams with no revision or find the perfect partner because I have God's strength.

[21:28] Or we can use it perhaps out of context in a Christian setting. Of course you can leave the youth group, even though you've never done that before. You don't particularly get on with children and don't have a calling in this area because you have God's strength.

But what does this verse actually say? And what is the context that Paul writes this verse? So there are some really important words in this sentence. One of the important words is this.

So when it says, I can do all this through him who gives me strength, what is the this that that refers to? Well, we have to look at the verse before, which is verse 12.

So I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

So the this refers back to being content. So the this is really important. The other words that are important are through him, or sometimes it's translated in him.

[22:35] So the self-sufficiency that we often think of, or the world thinks of, becomes a Christ-sufficiency. So we need to move from looking at others and what they have, considering our own circumstances and detaching ourselves from their relative value and be centred in Christ.

And in order to do that, that's why we need God's strength. And the word here has got an image of being dynamite. It's that kind of power that's there that God provides us with.

So being content is hard, and it requires a supernatural power to do it. And that requires belief not in ourselves, but trusting in Christ.

This passage shows us that Paul has trust and has a real faith. And in verse 13, he describes his need. And then in verse 19, he's met with a supply.

And God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Jesus Christ. So we have learning, we have trusting, and then finally, giving.

[23 : 49] So Paul has enough in this passage because other Christians were generous.

In this case, the Philippians had sent him a gift. Whilst what he's writing here about is a specific gift, the meaning in verse 10 has the implication that they were always concerned.

It's just that they didn't always have the opportunity to show it. And there now came a time that they could show it. Later on in the passage, it also describes how they'd sent him gifts previously. So this wasn't a one-off guilt trip when an appeal was launched.

They weren't all sat in Lizzie's house back in Philippi, watching comic relief. And a video came on with Paul in prison, and they rang up and they gave a donation. That wasn't what was going on.

They knew where he was, and they'd sent aid. This was an ongoing concern that on this occasion met with some very specific giving. And this was part of a sense of Christian fellowship or belonging.

[24 : 59] Verse 14 describes how they shared in his troubles. It was an admirable thing to do, and it wasn't a remote or a gift to someone they didn't know.

Now, whilst the gift helped to meet Paul's needs, he really carefully deflects the effect heavenwards.

And the language here is that of a financial transaction. He describes the credit being treasure in heaven. Now, Paul didn't covet the gift, and he was quite clear to make that plain.

But what he did covet, if you like, was a reward for the givers in heaven. So his desire, while he was in prison, was the Philippians to get rich, which is a completely different way of coveting.

Imagine coveting for others, as opposed to coveting from others. That other people might have treasure in heaven. That the gift is registered on the heavenly ledger as interest.

[26 : 10] And that is Paul's desire. So Paul is saying here, are you earning interest in heaven with your giving and service?

And I think that's another part of the secret Paul is revealing. As Christians, when we give and give in service, we're earning interest in heaven. And it doesn't stop there.

There's something really amazing in verse 18. So it describes how the gift that they sent becomes a fragrant offering.

Now, that's really powerful stuff. And the same sort of phrasing is used way back in the Old Testament, in Genesis 8, when after the flood, it describes how Noah made a sacrifice, and that was pleasing to God.

So when a gift is given to those in need, Paul says it's the same thing as when Noah made a sacrifice. So imagine that, that Christian giving, when we give, becomes equated with something Noah did, and is pleasing to God.

[27 : 21] Isn't that an incredible sort of thought or comparison? However, Paul also is really careful to demonstrate this wasn't sort of a mutual back-scratching short of friendship.

It wasn't, I'm in need, you send me a gift, thank you, you feel better because you're given. His joy was God-centred, and the payback for the givers was heavenly, which I think is a wonderful thought.

So there's a partnership here, and friendship, centred in the gospel. They are suffering together, with a focus on the needs of others, which I think helps to distract from my own wants, from our own wants.

Even more so, when there's a need of others in the gospel. So when we give to the church here, or as a church here, we give to Christians in Nepal or Ukraine, we are participating in that same partnership that the Philippians and Paul are expressing here.

And it's also important to remember that the Philippians were praised for this not being a one-off.

Now, Tian very kindly read to us from Acts 16, which describes when Paul was actually in Philippi, the people he's writing this letter to.

[28 : 37] And when he was there, I don't know if you noticed, but he enjoyed great hospitality. So he met this businesswoman, Lydia. She was a dealer in purple, which tends to suggest she probably would be quite well off.

He goes back to her home, and he spends time there. Then, shortly afterwards, he ends up getting beaten up, thrown into prison, because he was spreading the gospel. Then, we didn't read all the story, but it's worth a read next scene, what happens in prison there.

And then he was released from prison. And where does he go? He goes back to Lydia's house, and dines again with the people wealthy in Philippians. So they knew, because when Paul was with them, this experience of him suffering hardship and having plenty was exactly what happened to him when he was with them.

So they have this real understanding about what he's writing to. And I wonder, what does that tell us about how to be content in our friendship and gospel partnership with Christians elsewhere?

So I think giving is a really important part of being content and our Christian maturity alongside learning and trusting.

[29 : 44] And that's what brings heavenly contentment. So I wonder, perhaps, which of those things do we think we might need to work on? Learning, or trusting, or giving, or potentially, all three.

So finally, just to draw things to a close, is what happens when I am content? So the challenge is to move away from a perspective of wanting more, of never enough, and coveting what others may have, to disconnect our thinking and be content in whatever our circumstances.

We do need to acknowledge that that takes effort and maturity. It's not always a walk in the park. However, God provides the strength of dynamite to help us in doing this.

And our coveting should be for others to have treasure in heaven with a genuine gospel partnership. And the point is that real joy flows from this.

And that's the whole point of this letter. The sort of, the verse that we've taken as our theme for this study has been Philippians 2 and verse 18. So you two should be glad and rejoice with me.

[30 : 57] So to get to joy in this last section, we've had to go a long way, haven't we, from coveting through learning and trusting and giving to be content all in God's strength.

However, real and deep-seated joy is the result. Not a superficial easy-come, easy-go joy. And then finally, let's just have a look at Paul's final outburst of praise in verse 20.

To God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. So a joy that should rise above this world, above what we naturally might want or feel we need, our joy comes from fixing our eyes on Jesus. Amen.