

The Secret of Contentment

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of August 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Secret of Contentment and is based on Philippians chapter 4 verses 10 to 20.

Well please keep open that passage from Philippians chapter 4 as I pray that God will speak to us from these words.

Heavenly Father we thank you that you speak to us still today through the words that you spoke and had written by your Apostle Paul so many years ago.

Give us not only attentive minds but willing hearts and wills to obey the word that we hear. And we pray this for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen. A little while ago the Dalai Lama dropped into town and at one point he was asked to sum up his message.

[1 : 12] It was a very simple message, be happy. Now no wonder the Dalai Lama is so popular. I reckon I could become as popular as him if I shaved my head, wore an orange robe and walked around saying be happy.

Who doesn't want to be happy? The trouble is that there's not a lot of substance in what the Dalai Lama says about how to be happy or why we should be happy especially in the midst of a fairly unhappy world.

Traditional Buddhism, as the Dalai Lama is a Buddhist, is that chanting makes you happy. So if you're unhappy keep chanting and chanting and eventually presumably you'll become happy.

I should also add that the other thing that the Dalai Lama added about his simple message to Australia was not only be happy but also to have more holidays. How much do you need to be happy?

How many possessions, how much wealth do you need to be happy? One of the multi-millionaires of the 20th century, John Rockefeller, an American who made lots and lots of money out of oil, answered that question, how much do you need to be happy with the answer, a little bit more than you have.

[2 : 29] That is, even if you're fabulously wealthy, there's always something more that you think you need or want in order to be fully happy.

Or maybe John Rockefeller should have started chanting and seen what would have happened. His response though echoes what our world thinks. You see, our world thinks, if only I had such and such, then perhaps I'll be happy.

If only I won tax lotto and a few million dollars, then I'd be happy. If only I had got married or got divorced or remarried or all of those things together, then perhaps I'd be happy.

If only I had a new car or a new job or a new house or a better holiday, then I'd be happy. If only I shopped at Peter's at Kensington, then perhaps I'd be happy.

I should explain that was an illustration last week about how to be made unhappy. You see, somehow in the end, it's clear that happiness is not directly related to wealth and possessions.

[3 : 40] We know that. We can see it in rich people who are unhappy as well as poor people who are happy. Where do we find happiness? Where do we find contentment?

Well, last week we saw in 1 Timothy chapter 6 that the path of discontentment is a dangerous path to tread because it ends up in idolatry and its consequent ruin and destruction.

Discontentment makes you vulnerable to the temptations of this world which feed your greed. It leads to being ensnared by your harmful desires and that leads to being plunged into ruin and destruction.

That's the path of idolatry, serving the gods that are the gods of materialism, of atheism, of hedonism, the gods of ourself. So where is the secret of contentment found?

Surely not in chanting. Surely not in the hip pocket. If discontentment leads to a path of idolatry, of worshipping false gods or humanly created gods, the path of contentment is found in serving the true God, the living God.

[5 : 04] Last week in 1 Timothy 6 we saw the dangers of discontentment and tonight we turn to another of Paul's letters, Philippians 4, to find the secret of contentment.

Paul has a special affection for the church at Philippi. He founded it, but we can read about that in Acts chapter 16. Philippi is in northern Greece, a ruin today that archaeologists have dug up.

The church there in the past had generously supported his ministry when he moved on from Philippi into other places in Greece, further south to Thessalonica and then to Athens and to Corinth.

But it seems that there's been a period, perhaps even up to 10 years of a break, where they have not financially supported Paul in his ministry of the gospel. But now it seems in recent times they've resumed that support.

And so here in this passage he expresses his thanks to them for the support that they have resumed for his ministry. He says in verse 10 of chapter 4, I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you've revived your concern for me.

[6 : 14] Indeed you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. But Paul wants to make it very clear that his thanks and his joy for their resumed support of him is not because of a great need or a discontent on his part.

He's not wanting to say thanks for helping me out as a sort of veiled way of being selfish somehow, that he's really wanting all the finance that they can give him.

So he says in the next verse, verse 11, not that I'm referring to being in need, not at all. You see rather Paul's thanks to the Philippians and his joy at their support is because he sees in their actions of generosity an expression of Christian partnership and sharing in the gospel.

And that's what he's joyful about. And you could read on verses 15 onwards and that's why he's joyful at their giving, not for his own benefit and the amount of money that he might receive, but because it's a tangible way that this church which he founded and cared for is now expressing a partnership in the gospel and in ministry.

Paul goes on at length in a sense to show that he's not in need of their money personally and that he's quite content in a sense without their money personally.

[7 : 38] So he says at the end of verse 11, I have learned to be content with whatever I have. And the way he writes that suggests that over a period of time, he's learned through experience, reflection, whatever, that he has become content in whatever circumstance he faces himself with whatever he has or does not have.

He elaborates on those situations in the next verse, verse 12. I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

And Paul certainly experienced those extremes. Citizens of Tarsus, of which he was one, would most likely have been wealthy people in order to be and stay a citizen.

But also, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as Paul's own letters to other places, that there were plenty of times when he was deprived. He indeed writes this letter probably from prison and therefore suffering some deprivation.

Prisons in those days were not like today's and probably the prison would not feed him. He would need to rely on people from outside the prison to give him food and so on. But Paul is, in this verse, 12, not just saying that he's experienced wealth and poverty, but rather he's saying that in the wealth and the poverty that he's experienced, he's learned from experience how to be content.

[9 : 12] That's the thrust of verse 12 here. Paul is saying too that he's learned contentment through both extremes. That is, he hasn't learned contentment in poverty alone, but he's learned contentment in wealth as well.

And that's an important balance to get right because we've already reflected that there are people who are wealthy who are discontented as well as people who are poor who are discontented.

Paul has learned in both situations how to be content. He's found the secret of contentment. Now, this is not dissimilar from what God wants of his people.

We see it in the Old Testament, way back with ancient Israel. For 40 years, having left Egypt, they were in the wilderness subjected to some deprivation, although a miraculous daily provision of food as well.

But through that wilderness deprivation, Israel was to learn, in effect, contentment, relying on God, though they failed the test all the time. They mumbled and complained. But then when they were brought from the wilderness into the promised land, a land that is flowing with milk and honey that has everything on tap, so to speak, the book of Deuteronomy makes it clear that the place of plenty, the land of plenty, is also a test, a test for contentment rather than pride and self-reliance.

[10 : 37] Well, Paul has faced both situations, poverty and wealth, and he's learned contentment in both. The word that's used for content here was one that was quite common in Greek philosophy, especially what's called Stoic philosophy of Paul's day and centuries before as well.

For the Stoic, it was to do with self-sufficiency, to do with independence from others and independence of circumstance. Stoic philosophy was a bit simplistically described as being self-denying, an ascetic way of life, giving up things in a sense.

One person wrote about this philosophy that the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what, reconciled to circumstances. Now, to an extent, that's what Paul means.

In a sense, an independence from the circumstance in which you find yourself, poverty or wealth. Paul is content in either, but he's not a Stoic philosopher.

And so he's, and he's a Christian, of course, and it's as a Christian that he finds the true key or the secret of contentment. Not in Stoic philosophy that's a bit resigned to the circumstances and sort of makes do in a relatively fatalistic sort of way, but rather something different.

[12 : 06] See, just like the Dalai Lama's be happy has no real basis, so too Stoic philosophy had no real basis for being content or happy despite your circumstance.

But Paul found the basis for that. As a Christian, what is it? The next verse gives us the clue. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

That's talking about Jesus. I can do all things through Jesus who strengthens me. Now that's a verse that's been horribly taken out of context over the years.

Is it that Paul is literally saying he can do anything at all? Walk on water? Fly to the moon? Beat Ian Thorpe in a swimming pool?

Now that's not what this verse is actually saying. Because in its context, what this verse is actually saying is that Paul can cope with, meet with, be content in any situation, any circumstance with all things, good or bad.

[13 : 18] That's the argument that he's running here in these verses in Philippians 4. Paul is saying through the strength of Jesus in him, he is able to be content in all things, in all circumstances, in all situations, whether it's wealth or poverty or anything in between.

Jesus then, and the strength that Jesus gives, is the key to contentment in this life. Well how is that? How is it that Jesus is the secret to contentment?

How could it be that a man that was crucified perhaps 30 years before these words were written could somehow make Paul content in a Roman prison somewhere in the Mediterranean world?

Or in poverty? Or when he's being beaten up? Or stoned? Or persecuted? Or even when he's wealthy? How could Jesus be the secret for contentment?

For Paul and for Christians in generally? Well in the previous chapter of this same letter, Paul's letter to the Philippians, we understand what it is about Jesus that makes him the key to contentment.

[14 : 34] Back in chapter 3 verse 7, Paul having reflected on all the great things of status and in a sense wealth that he had, says in verse 7, Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

The surpassing value of knowing Christ. That's what matters. It is worth more than anything else, more than the wealth of the world and its surpassing value is so great that it makes the circumstances of poverty in the world in the end inconsequential more or less.

All the wealth that Paul has had, all the status that he's had, all the education that he's had, the high standing in Jewish society as well as in Roman society that he's had, he says it's actually rubbish.

It's not even nothing, it's worse than nothing, it's rubbish. But the surpassing value of knowing Christ is all that matters and in any and every circumstance, in wealth, in poverty, in prison, in beatings, in persecution, in high esteem, the value of knowing Christ, that relationship stands.

[16 : 05] It's not taken away when you're thrown into a Roman jail. And he goes on in that section of chapter 3, verse 10, to say that even the sufferings of this world, they in a sense, one sense don't matter, in another sense they contribute to this great glory of knowing Christ.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. If somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Now Paul in this paragraph in chapter 3 when he reflects on the surpassing value of knowing Christ is looking to the future, to the resurrected, glorious life that Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of and the guarantee for.

It's that eternal perspective that gives Paul contentment in the present time. Life is fleeting in the end and what matters is the surpassing value of knowing Christ because that will last for eternity through the resurrected life, the glorious life of heaven.

But more than that, the sufferings that Paul faces now, he says, that is sharing in Jesus' death as a preliminary to the sharing in the resurrection life. So therefore, there's actually a positive value on sufferings, beatings, prison, etc.

[17 : 28] now because it's preparation for the glorious, resurrected life for eternity. And similarly, every circumstance, in effect, Paul can say, is contributing to that expectation and preparation for the resurrected, glorious life.

You see, Paul's contentment lies in a theological worldview that looks forward to a glorious, heavenly resurrection life guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection.

And so when he can stand back and see his own life in the midst of this span of eternity, that's where he finds his contentment. But you see, discontentment is in the end an expression, as I said before, of idolatry or atheism.

That is, it is an expression of not trusting in a God who is sovereign and living and has good promises for us. If this world is all we have, which is an atheistic view, a discontented view, then you might as well be discontented and grasp for what you can.

Please, sir, can I have some more? But even now, we've not quite struck the core of the secret of contentment. I think we can pin this down a little bit more sharply.

[18 : 43] What holds this together is the aspect of certainty. The certainty that Christians can have, that Paul had because of Jesus, is what is in the end the secret of contentment.

Now, I'm sure you all know the old saying, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. And the reason why a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush is because the two birds in the bush are so uncertain.

They're likely to fly away if you try and grasp the two. That is, they're unlikely, they're uncertain. There may be more of them in the bush than in the hand, but you might as well settle for what you've got because of the uncertainty of actually grasping the two birds that are in the bush.

One now is worth more than two that are uncertain. It's the same sort of thing with money. Before I was trained to be a minister, I was an actuary. An actuary is a person who works out when you're going to die.

It's a fairly glamorous job as you can imagine. The point of working out when you're going to die is to work out how much money you should pay in insurance, in life insurance, in superannuation and so on.

[19 : 58] Now, imagine that you wanted to have an insurance policy that would give you one million dollars at your 65th birthday. Now, in effect, that's what an actuary tries to work out.

So, let's say you're 30 years old. How much are you going to pay now, let's say, as a lump sum to get a million dollars then? Well, you're not going to pay a million dollars now. You're going to pay a lot less than that.

It's a bit like the bird in the hand and two in the bush. The million at the age of 65 is not actually, it's going to be worth a lot less than a million now because in the span of years to then, there's interest in this inflation as well as the uncertainty of you living to the age of 65.

That's what actuaries do. They work out all those sorts of numbers and figures and so on. So, if you want to find out when you're going to die, come and ask me. I've forgotten that but now that I'm a theological minister, I can tell you that you will die and that's much more important in the end.

Now, too often, you see, Christians live according to the bird in the hand, the two in the bush sort of philosophy. That is, we see what's down in the future, the two birds in the bush, the million dollars at age 65, the glorious promises of heaven way off in the dim distant future and we think it is so remote, so uncertain that I'm going to keep hold of the bird in the bush, in my hand.

[21 : 22] That's what I'm going to keep. That's what is valuable to me. That's what matters most. But do you see the thinking that leads us to take that view? That is, that heaven has an element of uncertainty about it.

You know, I'm not quite sure about those promises. I'm not quite sure I'm going to get there. I'm not quite sure it's going to be as good as it says. I'm not quite sure that when I get there it's going to be so devalued or decayed over time I might as well hold on to the bird in my hand.

That's how our society lives. That's how too many Christians live mimicking our society. We grasp for what we can now. We live for the now because the future is so remote and so uncertain and it spills over into our way we view the resurrected glorious heavenly life, heaven itself.

But you see heaven is both perfect and certain and that is where the key to contentment lies. You see heaven's certainty is because it's guaranteed by God demonstrated by the fact that Jesus rose from the dead the first fruits of all who one day will rise.

Heaven will never lose its value by inflation by being stolen or decaying or fading or perishing it will be as valuable as perfect as full of treasure then as it is now and moreover nothing nobody can take it away from us or us away from it.

[22 : 58] God guarantees that. So where does this certainty arise? It comes from the resurrection of Jesus. In that same passage in chapter 3 Paul said in verse 9 that his desire is not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ the righteousness from God based on faith.

You see certainty lies in the fact that our righteousness our salvation heaven if you like is based on Jesus not ourselves. That's why it's certain that's why it's guaranteed doesn't depend upon us doesn't come because of our good works or our merit or our religiosity it comes because of what's called God's grace and therefore it's certain it lies out there and our certainty for heaven then is not an arrogance like our world often thinks it's a confidence because it's based on Christ not us that's why Paul says in another place God's grace is sufficient because God's grace is certain and the promises of heaven are certain now this letter of Paul to the Philippians actually underscores in various places the certainty of the glorious heavenly life to come for example chapter 1 verse 6 one of my favourite verses in scripture

Paul says I am confident of this that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ that is confidence and certainty that the beginning of the Christian life will lead to perseverance to inherit the glorious heavenly realities in chapter 3 Paul says that our citizenship is in heaven an expression of great certainty of heaven and our belonging there and at the end of this chapter chapter 4 he expresses his certainty when he says to the Philippians my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus you see heaven is fully satisfying it's the best mansion prepared by God for us by Jesus for us it's the best clothes better than anything you'll buy at Country Road or Quicksilver or whatever it is fine white linen of righteousness the best home and garden you won't need to be looking at

TV better homes and gardens when you're in heaven you'll have the best neighbours and there's no room for improvement but what's more heaven is not only perfect but certain and there lies the key for contentment all the treasure of the world is rubbish by comparison indeed all the birds in your hand are just a featherweight compared to its value all the tempting sights and sounds of our world and our life promise so little and deliver even less but heaven delivers the goods certainly and perfectly John Bunyan who was a great Christian spent many years as a pastor in prison in England in the 17th century wrote I am content with that I have little be it or much and Lord contentment still I crave because thou savest such fullness to such a burden is that go on pilgrimage here little and hereafter bliss is best from age to age our world breeds discontentment and too often

Christians fall prey to its snares but the secret of contentment is the work of Jesus Christ his death and resurrection which guarantees heaven for us in the future but even now in the present he strengthens us in every situation and circumstance hold fast then is the exhortation of this letter to that which we have attained such contentment of course makes a difference in our life it means that through thick or thin for richer for poorer in whatever circumstance we face we will enjoy the peace that passes all understanding as Paul describes it in this same chapter 4 verse 7 it means that whatever situation we face in this life we have no reason for anxiety as he says in chapter 4 verse 6 and every reason to pray rather than chanting and hence whatever circumstance we face we can rejoice in all things at all times as he says in this same chapter 4 verse 4 you see this is far more than stoic resignation to the circumstances in which we face ourselves this is no sort of mere reluctant contentment because we're self-denying sorts of people this is

[28 : 29] Christian satisfaction confidence that all our desires are fulfilled in Christ for eternity this is Christian joy joy in the certain glories of heaven in the future but a joy that spills over into our daily living now full of contentment yeah this is Christian contentment because of God's work for us in Christ that makes heavenly realities certain for us let's pray our heavenly father we thank you that Jesus died for us and rose from the dead to your side in heaven and we thank you that in those events through faith in them we can have contentment here and now knowing that our eternal needs are fully satisfied in him and that the glorious heavenly future that you promise us will certainly one day be ours for our citizenship already belongs there we pray

Lord God that in a discontented world we may be so full of contentment in Christ that our world will notice and turn to him and find in him the source of contentment and joy as well and we pray this for his glory Amen