

## THE LONG WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

### A Sermon on Philippians 4:8-20

by Charles Biggs

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<sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me- practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. <sup>10</sup>I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup>I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup>Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. <sup>15</sup>And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup>Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. <sup>17</sup>Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup>I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup>And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup>To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.  
(Philippians 4:8-20)

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**A**s American Christians we tend to seek out happiness and healthiness as the main goals in our lives just as much as anyone else. There is nothing wrong with having creaturely comforts, or of being happy and healthy, but we want to learn to be satisfied and truly happy in what God provides for us. God provides for different people in a variety of ways. As Philippians 4 teaches, we want to learn by his grace to rest content in what God provides for us, and to be thankful.

Being content can be so very difficult in our consumeristic culture today. We are constantly bombarded with advertisements, magazines, and catalogs reminding us of *what we do not have*. The main purpose of these catalogs and advertisements is to show us what we do not have and to spark a desire to obtain that which we do not have. I am told that we are tempted by an average of 1,500 advertisements on a daily

basis!<sup>1</sup> How do we as Christians rest content and become satisfied in what God gives and provides for us when advertisers are working overtime to get our attention and make a sell?

As long as we think as Christians that happiness will come with more products, we will never be truly happy. We can only be content and happy by knowing who we are in Christ Jesus and the incomparable great privileges that *we already have and abundantly possess in Christ Jesus!* The reality is that we have all we need, but if we don't believe it, it will do us no good. The reality will be the same, but if we don't believe it, we will continue to buy, buy, buy, while remaining discontent, dissatisfied, and ultimately disconnected from the needs of others around us each and every day!

What does the Apostle Paul say in Philippians 4 about contentment? Paul says we ought to meditate upon God's thoughts and reflect on his constant mercy and provision to his people (4:8-13). Paul was thankful that the Philippians provided for his needs while he was imprisoned, but he tells them that he had already learned to rest content in God, who ultimately provides for all of his needs even before they sent to him the money he needed. In others words, his trust was in the Living God watching over him.

Paul believed that God knew ultimately what it was he needed even before he asked (4:10-14). As Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6, we need to learn to seek first the Kingdom of God, because all of our needs will be provided. God knows our needs even before we ask of him. He is already working through others to provide for us! God who promised us ever to be with us and never to forsake us is the God who sees all of our cares and concerns, and will always be there no matter how dire the need. In fact, Paul reminds the Philippians that God will supply every need according His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (4:19).

In verse 14, it almost seems at first glance that Paul is rude to the Philippians for their gift. He says: "Yet it was kind of you to share in my trouble." Paul had told them that he had learned contentment before they provided the gift. He was thankful for the gift, but it was not the gift, or receiving the thing he so desperately needed that caused his contentment. Rather, it was his trust in the God Who provides. What he wants to teach them, as well as us today, is that it is not *when we receive something that should make us content*. Rather, it is the God Who constantly cares and watches over us, no matter how our situation seems. Paul says: "I can do all things through Him who gives me the strength." The focus in this verse is on the kind and generous Living God and not on the particular circumstances he happens to be going through at this point in his life. In other words, our constant meditation and foundation for our contentment ought to be in what *we already have in Christ Jesus*, and not in what we do not have.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This is a conservative number—[www.gyford.com/phil/writing/2003/01/31/000234.php](http://www.gyford.com/phil/writing/2003/01/31/000234.php) thinks it is over 5000.

Another important truth to learn about contentment from this passage is that contentment is *learned* (4:11ff). Paul had learned the secret of being content in Jesus Christ. He had learned through many painful and difficult experiences that Christ would never let him down (4:12; cf. 2 Cor. 12). As we believe God and grow in Christ Jesus, we learn more and more of the faithfulness of God through our experiences. This walking with Jesus and seeing his constant faithfulness to us helps us to be able to learn that he is faithful.

Paul knew that Christ saved his life, preserved his life, and had provided for him spiritually, and so he knew he would also provide for all of his earthly needs. Have you learned the secret to be content? Or are you constantly focusing on and seeking after what you do not have? Have you considered how God *has provided for you*? In other words, have you focused upon what *you do have in Jesus*, rather than looking merely at *what you do not have*? In this world, there will always be those who have more than us, as well as those who have less. Why do we so desperately choose to look only at those who have more? Shouldn't we be focusing on those who have less?

Paul was in prison and he was writing a letter to the Philippian Christians, encouraging their growth in Christ. Even though he had many needs at the time, he was ministering to others rather than merely thinking about what he did not have. Paul was reaching out to meet the needs of others rather than being concerned about himself. Think about it. Paul is illustrating the grace of God in how God provides for his own through each other (4:9). After teaching them their attitude of mind (4:8), Paul is now instructing the believers how to think concerning one another. He had told them in Philippians 2 that their focus should be on Jesus who considered others better than himself, and here is he illustrating that reality to the Philippian congregation.

Another important note is that if the Philippian Christians had been merely focusing on what they did not have, as we American Christians so many times do, they would not have sent a gift to Paul. Notice how in these verses of Philippians 4 the Lord God is showing how he provides for us by teaching his people to be others-centered and focused on their needs above our own (Phil. 2:3-6). It is extremely difficult in our time as Christians, particularly in our consumer driven culture, to avoid the draw and lure of discontentment.

The next time you get a catalog from a department store mailed to your home to "remind you of the sale" or to "let you know the new products available", think before you look. The catalogs are designed to appeal to your desires for more, more, more. The catalogs and advertisements achieve their purpose when they say quite loudly and in living color: "Look what you don't have!" "Look what you need!" "Look at what lifestyle or acceptance you have been missing!" Don't buy into the consumerist mentality, but think of God's grace and mercy to you already! Count your many blessings, as they say, so that the consumerist buzz will not win the day and you will come to realize the great riches of the Lord Jesus Christ and how we can truly learn to be content in him.

Is there anything in this world better than the life eternal we have in Jesus Christ? Is there anything in this world that we actually need as American Christians? So many things we want perhaps, but are we actually in need? No! Many of us are not. We are empty and trying to fill little holes in our soul with merchandise and "things". At the end of the day however, the only Person who can truly satisfy these longings and little holes is Jesus Christ. He can provide us with contentment in Him. Then we can look up and see the needs of those around us: From blind consumer, to the seeing servant of others!

As Christians, when we do not see the many blessings that God has provided for us in our lives and so desire and want more, we are blind to those who have needs around us every day! And that's not just the "way it is". By Christ's Spirit, let us ask God to change our hearts. Let us ask God to help us to be content in only knowing Christ better, being partakers in the fellowship of his sufferings, resurrection, and glorification one day. Let us meditate upon the future life when we shall be with the Lord Jesus forever and all of our discontent shall come to an end permanently.

Ultimately, let us all be thankful that Jesus was not content to stay at the right hand of his Father, but made himself nothing, so that we might live and reign with him. We all have dreams and we all have desires, but may God make our one great desire to know Christ better and the satisfaction that comes with this personal relationship. Let us be reminded that Jesus says where our treasure is, there is also our heart. This means that wherever our hearts are directed, in whatever and from wherever we find contentment, this is our treasure; this product or thing is our treasure and what our heart loves the most.

May we continue daily to ask the Lord Jesus to forgive us of our consumeristic mentality and to continue to work in us an undivided love and loyalty for Him, knowing that we truly will be able to find contentment when we rest in him. God has truly provided for his people according to his riches in Christ Jesus. May we be able to say: "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift" to us in Christ Jesus! Amen.

Meditate on the words of the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 9:7-15:

<sup>7</sup> Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all contentment in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." <sup>10</sup> He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. <sup>11</sup> You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. <sup>12</sup> For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. <sup>13</sup> By their approval of

this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,<sup>14</sup> while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.<sup>15</sup> Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

*Soli Deo Gloria!*