

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

Phil 4.10-13

INTRODUCTION

Gordon McBain was the first missionary ever to be sent out from one of the churches I pastored in Scotland, the Baptist Church in Renfrew. He went to Zaire (DR Congo, as it is now) with the BMS.

- But while he was there, he developed gallstones, and so was flown back to the UK for treatment. His medical insurance entitled him to treatment at a private hospital, and so he ended up in a Nuffield Hospital on the south side of Glasgow.
- Naturally, as he was a member of my church, I went to visit him there. It was the first time I had been inside a private hospital, as opposed to an NHS one.
- And I'm not kidding you when I tell you that it was like a five-star hotel. There was colour television in each of the private rooms, and the meals' menu would have done the Ritz proud.
- So as Gordon lay back in his hospital bed, he said to me (with a twinkle in his eye), "*The Lord has been so gracious to me, in enabling me to 'learn the secret of contentment, whether living in plenty or in want'. In Zaire, I experienced the want; and now he's taught me to enjoy the plenty!*" Did he feel guilty in any way, about being surrounded by such luxury, whilst his wife was left holding the fort back in Zaire? Not at all! Not Gordon – he revelled in it!!
- I hasten to add that after his recovery, he returned to Zaire, and is now working with the BMS in North Africa.

What an important passage this is for us to study this morning.

- You see, there's something in all of us that makes us prone to grumble about our lot in life from time to time, isn't there?
- All of us from time to time have wished that our circumstances were different. Perhaps we've longed to be living somewhere else – in a different street or town altogether. Perhaps we've longed for a change of job, because we feel we're in a dead end one with no prospects, or one that carries too much responsibility and is getting us down.
- We might have wished from time to time that our financial circumstances were different, so we could do all the things and buy all the things that our heart has been set on.
- But back in **2.14**, Paul has called us to *do everything without complaining or arguing*. And he has told us ***why our lives should be a grumble-free zone (2.15-16)***. It is *so that we may become blameless and pure, [true] children of God [bearing his likeness - like Father, like son] without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which we shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life*. It's our witness to the world that's at stake. As we hold out *the word of life* to people, they are hardly likely to accept it if our life is characterised by grouches and grumbles!

And so here in 4.10-13, Paul present us with the positive counterpart to grumbling and complaining: contentment. So let's see what he has to say to us on this very practical subject. First, he tells us that

1. CONTENTMENT IS A DISCIPLINE TO LEARN (vs 11,12)

You will notice that Paul speaks about having *learned* to be content (v11). He doesn't simply write, *I am content* or *I have been content*. He speaks about having *learned* to be content. It suggests that contentment wasn't something that came naturally or easily to Paul. It was a discipline that had to be learned.

- The word Paul uses here is the one from which we get our English word 'mathematics'. It's connected to the word for a disciple, or an apprentice, someone who has to apply himself to learning a trade. 'Mathematics' is a discipline to be learned. It's not something we're born with. Some people may have a greater aptitude for it than others, and some people may be faster learners than others. But the subject is still a discipline to be learned. It's not something we're born with – like sight or hearing.
- And so it is with contentment. Some people, temperamentally, are very laid back. Nothing ever seems to faze them. They take whatever life throws at them in their stride. They wouldn't really notice whether they were living in a palace or a hovel; it wouldn't concern them whether they had designer

clothes to wear or not – because they're not very fashion conscious. So contentment is something that comes relatively easily to them. But it still has to be learned.

- Other people, though, are very restless by nature. They're not happy unless everything is perfect – which it never is – so they're never content with the way things are! So for perfectionists in particular, contentment (of the right kind) is a very hard discipline to learn – as hard as mathematics for someone who is hopeless with numbers!

But we need to be careful to understand what kind of contentment Paul is speaking about here. You see, in the first place, it's a

2. CONTENTMENT WHATEVER OUR CIRCUMSTANCES (vs 11-12)

Contentment arises from being willing to accept whatever circumstances we happen to find ourselves in, as part of God's providential ordering of our lives. In fact, in **verse 12**, Paul simply says, *I've learned the secret, in any and every situation*. The word 'contentment' doesn't appear in his original Greek. He is using the language of initiation, which was associated with the mystery cults of his day. It's almost as if he is telling us that God has let him into the secret of contentment, by deliberately exposing him to a wide variety of situations.

- Some people may say, one way of learning contentment is by avoiding extremes, steering a middle pathway through life; but that isn't always possible. Sometimes we will find ourselves in situations that are very testing indeed.

And so what Paul is telling us here is that the contentment he has learned is capable of coping with both extremes - *plenty and want, abundance and hunger* – and everything else in between. It's not a fair-weather contentment, dependent on favourable circumstances. It's a contentment *whatever the circumstances*.

2.1 Need

God, in his providential ordering of our life, might place us in a situation in which we have very little materially.

(a) God does this to test our ***dependence*** on him, our trust in him.

- In **Exodus 17.1-7**, we read of a time when the Israelites were travelling from Egypt towards the Promised Land. They came to a place *there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?" But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarrelled, and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"*
- God sometimes deprives us of what we think we need so we learn to trust him better. You see, he has said to us, "I know what you need, in terms of food, clothing and water – to survive and serve me. So seek first my kingly rule over your lives and my righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (**Mat 6.33**). God sometimes tests us through times of deprivation to ensure we've got our priorities right.

(b) God also tests us through deprivation to test the genuineness of our ***love*** for him.

- Are we being a Christian simply because of the benefits it brings us – materially, socially, and in many other kinds of ways?
- Or are we being a Christian out of our sheer love for Christ – our sense of indebtedness to him - in view of all that he gave up for us, his own life in death on the cross? Beware of being a 'want's-in-this-for-me' kind of Christian – because Jesus has called us to take up our cross for his sake, to die to self.

The strength of our faith and the depth of our love for Christ can often only be proven by us being placed in situations of deprivation. And we need to rest content in what God is seeking to do through them.

Deprivation may take many forms, not just *material* – a shortage of food, water, clothing or housing. The deprivation that the Lord leads us into may be *social*. We may find we lack friends, people we can truly relate to - people with a similar background or with similar interests, people of our age and stage in life. It's a situation many pioneering missionaries face as they work in isolation amongst remote tribal peoples, on Bible translation work for instance – or even in inner city areas. 'Being in need' might be about 'being in need of good friends' – people we can relate to well, people with similar interests and outlooks. A person may be the only Christian in their family or place of work.

- It's worth bearing in mind that Paul was writing this letter from inside a prison cell. He had been deprived of his *liberty* – one of the worst deprivations we can imagine, especially for a man who was so passionate about taking the Gospel to places it hadn't yet reached. Yet back in chapter 1, Paul has expressed his contentment at being where he was, because he knew God could use him there. Indeed, the language he uses suggests that God had allowed him to end up in prison as a kind of special assignment or posting - for how else would the Praetorian Guard ever get to hear about Christ? It needed an insider to reach them! And so Paul says in **1.12-14**, *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly*, he continues. And then in **1.18** he concludes, *What does it matter [that I am where I am]? The important thing is that in every way ... Christ is preached, and because of this I rejoice!*
- Paul had got his focus right. What mattered most to him was not his own personal liberty – or fun, or fulfilment, or enjoyment, or comfort - but the advance of the Gospel. And so he was able to be content with where God had placed him to bring that about.

Part of the secret of being content with our circumstances is to resolve to use them to share Christ with others.

Illustration. Peter Barber, who was General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Scotland, during my time north of the border, died of cancer at the early age of 64, just before he was due to take up a global role for Christ, with the Baptist World Alliance. One of the nurses in the hospital where he was being treated was a member of our church. She told me one day about Peter doing his pastoral rounds every morning within his hospital ward - chatting to his fellow patients, offering words of encouragement, comfort and hope. He would sometimes pray with his fellow patients, or read a word of Scripture with them.

- You see, if we have this goal in mind – to share Christ with other people, wherever he happens to take us – our circumstances hardly matter to us. They are secondary to our overriding goal in life – to glorify Christ through whatever means he chooses.
- The phrase *in need* in **verse 12**, is very closely related to the word used in **2.8** to describe Jesus *humbling himself*. It means to accept a lowly position, willingly and voluntarily (cf **2.3**). It's what Paul speaks about in **2 Cor 11.23-27**. *I have been in prison more frequently than other people; I have been flogged more severely than other people. I have been exposed to death again and again. Five times, I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times, I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times, I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. But in all this hardship and humiliation, deprivation and lowliness, Paul was content to be serving Christ.*

2.2 Plenty

But sometimes God places us in a situation where we have *plenty* – we're literally *overflowing* with all the

good things he has placed in our lap.

Illustration. Peter Cotterel, the former principal of the London Bible College, was a missionary in Ethiopia for many years. He used to regale us with some very entertaining stories of his adventures in his lectures. He had passed through some very tough times. He had experienced famines and times of acute poverty. Many of his fellow pastors had been imprisoned for their faith. There were at least two military coups during his time in the country. On one occasion, he was due to be evacuated from the country, because the situation was so dangerous out there. But the flight out of Addis Ababa was delayed for 24 hours, so the airline put him up in the Intercontinental Hotel, he told us. "It was fantastic," he enthused, "wall-to-wall carpeting everywhere; my own private en suite bathroom; colour television in the bedroom; air-conditioning; plenty to eat; good room service – and best of all, it was all *free*! So how do you think I felt about it," he went on. "Did I feel uncomfortable amidst all this luxury? Did I feel guilty? Did I say to myself, 'It isn't right for me to be enjoying all this luxury when some of my fellow pastors are suffering in prison'. No," he said, "I revelled in it. I hadn't sought it for myself, nor would I have done. But when it freely came my way, I enjoyed it for what it was – a gift of grace from my father in heaven."

It's important to learn how to be content when God gives us plenty, as much as when we're deprived. The trouble is, the more we have, the more we tend to want. We can so easily acquire an appetite for the good life – an appetite that's never quite satisfied, but always wanting that little bit more.

- We're content to walk everywhere, or use public transport, until we get a bike. And then once we've experienced the benefits of a bike, we want to upgrade to a motorbike, because it's faster and less effort to use. But once we've ridden a motorbike, our sights are set on a car. Then having enjoy the comfort and ease of travel a car brings us, we want a slightly better one – faster, bigger, brighter, with a CD player instead of just a cassette radio. Our appetite for things is insatiable, once we've tasted the good life.
- And that's why Paul tells us here to *learn* to be content in times of plenty, as well as in times of deprivation. We need to learn how to resist the craving for more.
- When soldiers encountered John the Baptist's fiery message of repentance, they asked him (**Luke 3.14**), "And what should *we* do?" "Be content with your pay," John replied.
- In **1 Tim 6.7-10**, Paul reminds us that *we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing [the basic essentials for survival], we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*
- *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, Hebrews 13.5* tells us, *because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*
- We can be content with having plenty, not wanting more, when we realise that most precious possession we have is God's presence with us day by day. And when we bask in that fact, our craving for more and more things will diminish. *Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.* Our appetite for more will diminish, when we content ourselves with Jesus.

But as well as speaking about being content whatever our circumstances – humiliation or plenty, abundance or deprivation – Paul also speaks about

3. CONTENTMENT IN ANY AND EVERY SITUATION (v12)

And this is something slightly different. Paul is speaking here about us being content *in* any and every situation, not about us being content *with* any and every situation. And there is a world of difference between these two things. We can be very content, whatever our circumstances – because we can use every situation God places us in to prove his trustworthiness and demonstrate our love for him. Every situation we find ourselves in is an opportunity to point others to Jesus - by our words or actions, our attitude or speech.

But there are some situations we shouldn't be content with. We shouldn't be content with the status quo

when we know that things could and should be better.

- We are very grateful for all the growth we have seen here at the church over the past 3½ years, in terms of our Sunday morning attendances. But we shouldn't rest content with it, as if to say, "We've arrived. This is it!" Having broken through the 50 mark once or twice this year, we should have our sights set on 60, 70, 80 and on to 100.

Illustration. A few years ago, a new player was picked to play cricket for England. He was very excited as he went out to bat for his first innings. And he was even more excited when he reached 50. He ran up and down the pitch, waving to the crowd, jumping in the air for all he was worth. And I remember the commentator at the time saying, "This is all a little premature. He ought to have his sights set on a 100, not just 50." He was out soon afterwards, and dropped for the next match. I don't think he's played for England since. You see, his attitude was wrong. He was content with 50 instead of setting his sights on 100. He was like Abraham, settling down in Haran, halfway to the Promised Land, instead of pressing on to reach everything that God had pledged to him.

- In **3.12-14**, Paul has spoken about *pressing on* from where he was; and *straining toward* what was still ahead of him. He freely admits that he *hadn't yet taken hold of everything for which Christ had taken hold of him*. There was still a long way to go. There were still prizes to be won and goals to be reached.

Christian contentment isn't about being complacent or taking things easy. There's a sense in which we should never be content with the status quo. Indeed, it's our *discontentment* with the status quo that opens the door of our life for God to come in and do new and exciting things amongst us.

- Think of the church at Laodicea. They were the most content bunch of Christians you could ever come across. *We're so rich, we don't need a thing,*" they were saying (**Rev 3.17**) – not even Christ, who was left standing outside the door of that Church, waiting to be let in.
- We mustn't confuse contentment with smugness or complacency.
- A holy discontentment with the status quo paves the way for God to move in and work amongst us in fresh ways; whereas if we are happy with the way we are, God can do nothing.
- We have to learn to be content *in* any and every situation, but not necessarily content *with* any and every situation. We should always be hungry for God to move in fresh ways amongst us, to lead us on in his purposes.

So what's the *secret* of true contentment – whatever our circumstances and in any and every situation. Paul tells us in **verse 13**.

4. CONTENTMENT – ITS SECRET (v13)

It's our confidence in Christ – the sufficiency of his strength to enable us to do his will and glorify his name – whatever the circumstances we happen to find ourselves in. You see, Paul pictures contentment in this verse as something dynamic, not passive.

- It has to be with what we're able to achieve; it's not a fatalistic, blind resignation to what's going on around us.
- It's about us accomplishing everything Christ sets before us by way of his goals for our life; it's not about us tamely accepting there is nothing we can do to change the world around about us.
- It's the picture of being given the strength we need to scale a mountain; it's not a picture of lazing on the beach, sunbathing.
- There should be a holy restlessness about our faith, a striving to accomplish everything Christ sets before us.
- There should be a confident 'can do' aspect to our faith. "*You can do it with B&Q it,*" the famous DIY store slogan tells us. And to that, we would reply as Christian, *We can do it with Christ within us.*
- The word translated *content* in verse 11 was popular amongst the Stoics of Paul's day. They prided themselves on their self-sufficiency. Nothing could touch them. They were impassive in the face of adversity, and also when success came their way. They were devoid of any emotional response, because they reckoned it betrayed a weakness on their part. They were above being influenced by the world around them.

- But here Paul is rescuing the word from its very negative overtones and instilling it with a new, rich Christian significance. Contentment stems not from a proud sense of our own self-sufficiency. Contentment stems from a humble sense of Christ's sufficiency! *I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*
- Paul isn't setting himself up as some kind of a superman here. His confidence is in Christ. He is the one who enables us to fulfil his purposes.
- *Apart from me, you can do nothing*, Jesus told his disciples in **John 15.5**. *But if you remain in me – united to me, in fellowship with me, drawing your strength from me - I will remain in you, and you will bear much fruit – to the glory of my Father God. The secret of contentment is not self-sufficiency. It's our dependence on Christ's sufficiency. He will never let us down. He will test us in times of deprivation. He will bless us with times of plenty. Most importantly, he will empower us so that we will be able to fulfil his purposes for our life, whatever circumstances he chooses to lead us through.*