

Learning To Be Content

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Contentment comes through a learning process. Paul had learned to be content whatever the circumstances. He faced the circumstances of his life by following Biblical principles and through these learned how to adjust to the situation so that he could rejoice and praise God all the time. Contentment is not complacency nor is it a state in which we are free from concerns. It is also not an escape from troubles.

In 2 Cor 3:4, 5, Paul shares the secret to his state of contentment: "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God." It is in knowing God that Paul learned contentment. Likewise, our knowledge of God and who He is should enable us to be content in whatever our circumstances.

Knowing God and believing in Him can help us learn how to be content in our own set of circumstances.

God's Provision

When God created man, He also provided for the total well-being of man. He did not abandon man to find a job and later a wife for himself. God planted all kinds of trees to provide food for man: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees to grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food... The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden'... The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man" (Gen 2:7-9, 15-16, 18, 22).

God is our provider. We must first understand and believe that He is our provider in order to learn to be contented at all times. Abraham was able to grasp and believe this truth. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to Him on Mount Moriah, he obeyed God and went as far as raising his sword to slay his son. God stopped him in time and provided a lamb for the sacrifice. To commemorate this incident, "Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided'" (Gen 22:14). Abraham understood and believed that the God he worshipped is a God who provides and that was the reason he did not withhold Isaac from God. His confidence in the LORD Who Will Provide gave him the assurance that God would provide for him.

The word "providence" comes from the two Latin words "pro" which means "before", and "video", which means "to see". When God, who sees ahead, becomes our provider, He will arrange circumstances and situations such that His purposes are fulfilled.

The story of Joseph also very clearly illustrates the providence of God (Genesis, chapters 37-50). All that had happened to Joseph was God's way of pulling him away from his family circle in order to prepare him to help the people of God in time of famine. When Joseph was sold as a slave (Gen 37:28) we could not see the providence of God. It only became evident when Joseph was put in a place of authority.

In Genesis 45:5 when Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers who had taken refuge in Egypt from the famine in the homeland, he told them: "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." God knew way ahead what would happen. He then arranged the circumstances so that He could meet the needs of His people during their crisis. This is the providence of God. Joseph's concluding remarks to his brothers were: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:20)

We need to believe that God provides for us. No matter what our circumstances – whether we are in the pit or the prison – God knows and He will prepare the path and provide for us. Trust Him. Walk with Him one step at a time. We who know and love Him and who are called by Him have this assurance which Paul gave in Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose."

Our lives are not made up of a series of accidents or coincidences. Things just do not happen accidentally to us who know the Lord. The Bible says: "A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" (Pro 20:24). God Himself will direct our steps and watch over us. He says: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you" (Psa 32:8).

Not only does God provide for us and direct our steps, He also gives us His strength to enable us to learn how to live a life of contentment.

God's Unfailing Power

Paul's secret to contentment is his knowledge that God's power will not fail. Paul's personal experiences of divine enablement prompted him to say: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13). The power of God supplies us with what we can have in Him, not what we have in ourselves. This divine enablement will stretch us beyond our limits, our inadequacies and weaknesses to achieve what we can – with His strength.

Paul knew what it was like to have little and to have in abundance. But he was content whatever the circumstances because he trusted in a God whose power could not fail. The root meaning of the word "learned" in Phil 4:12 is not the same as the one in Phil 4:11. The root meaning of the word "learned" in verse 12 is "to imitate the secret of being contented."

We are to imitate Paul who imitated Christ who lived in him. In Galatians 2:20 he said: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." God's unfailing power indwells us to enable us to rise above our circumstances and to give us the quiet assurance of His help. It gives us the confidence and contentment that will help us through every situation.

God's Promises

God also gives us His promises to help us learn contentment in Him. All of Paul's encounters with God during the good and bad times brought him to a place of fulfilment and contentment so that he was able to say: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).

In this context, Paul had received material blessings from the church in Macedonia. The church found an opportunity to give. God opened the door and gave them the opportunity. Likewise, God provides opportunities for us so that we may be able to respond by giving. Giving to God is God's means of supplying our needs.

The church that knows how to share in giving received its rewards. Paul recognised this fact for he said: "For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (Phil 4:16, 17).

What they gave materially was received spiritually in the account of heaven. God keeps the books and He will never fail to reward. The Macedonian church gave sacrificially. They gave of themselves first to God, then, to the servant of God and to the ministry. They gave their best. Paul goes on to say: "I have received full payment and even more; 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" (Phil 4:18).

This is a beautiful Biblical pattern for giving. Paul saw these gifts as coming not only from people but as a provision from the Lord. They met Paul's need so in turn God will meet all of their needs.

We can learn to be content in every circumstance because we have adequate resources available from God. Our security lies in God Himself. We can depend upon the providence of God, the power of God and the promises of God. These made Paul sufficient. It will also do the same for us.