

Seeing Stars Through Prison Bars

INTRODUCTION

Can you say you are content today? Or would you have to confess that when someone has a new car, you wish you had a car like that? Or when you drive by a beautiful home, you wish you had a home like that? When you hear of someone winning the lottery, do you say, “If I had a million dollars, then I’d be content”?

We all fall into the trap of saying that if circumstances in our lives changed, then we would be content. We say we’ll be content someday—when we attain a certain promotion, when the kids are grown, when we retire, etc. Someday never comes. I looked up the definition of the word “content” in Webster's dictionary, and this is what it says. See if this applies to your life. “Happy enough with what one has. Not desiring something more or different.” Can you say that? Paul was genuinely content.

Philippians 4:10-13 says:

¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Philippians is nothing more than an expanded thank you note. The church at Philippi had sent a financial gift to Paul in prison, and he's writing them back saying thanks. What he's saying was, “I appreciate the check you sent. But on the other hand, I haven't been standing by the mailbox because I'm content. Whether I have plenty, or whether I have very little, I'm content.”

We're called to be content in a culture such as ours, which is so materialistic. And it's getting even more so. In 1967, a group of college freshmen were asked this question, “What is more important to you? To be well off financially or to discover a meaningful philosophy of life? And in 1967, 70% of those college freshmen opted for a meaningful philosophy of life. They wanted to be happy, not rich. In 1980, the same question was asked of college freshmen. And the trend was completely the opposite. About 80% said they wanted to be well off financially.

There is a trend to want more money. And even to admire those people who have lots of bucks. That's why every year when *Forbes* magazine publishes their list of the most wealthy Americans, there's always

an eagerness to find out who's the richest among us. In the decade of the Eighties, the subscriptions to *Money* magazine, more than tripled. We became interested in the lifestyles of the rich and famous. How do they live? Some people think, "If I could just live that way, I think I could be happy." Well, would you really? You know what the opposite of contentment is? Contentment is one side of the spectrum. Covetousness and greed is the other side. Where are you between the two of those?

Paul says, "Hey, I know what it is to have a lot. I was content when I had a lot." Now that's easy, isn't it? He adds, "But I also know what it is to be broke and have need. And I was happy then, too."

I. WE ARE ENROLLED IN GOD'S SCHOOL OF CONTENTMENT (4:12)

We are enrolled in God's school of contentment, whether or not you want to be. We're all in that school of contentment. Look at what the scripture says. Paul says he "learned" to be content, whatever the circumstances. Some people say, "I'm not wired to be content. I'm a driven person who always wants more and more and more. I'm just not like a person who seems to be gifted with the gift of contentment."

Hey, there's no such thing. Contentment is something you learn. It is a learned behavior. Paul says, "I wasn't always this way, but I've learned how to be content." Now the interesting thing about God's school of contentment is that God gives the test first, and then he teaches the lesson.

How would you like it if you went into class and the teacher said, "Here's the test!" But she hadn't taught you anything about it. You would say, "Teach us first. Then give us the test." God does just the opposite. He gives you the test. And then he says, now here's the lesson. And God's lessons are often very painful and very expensive. And that's why you need to pay close attention to them.

I want to mention two courses in the university of contentment. One is Poverty 101. The other one is Prosperity 401. If you know anything about college classes, 101 classes are the basics. They're prerequisites that you must pass before you become a sophomore or a junior. The senior classes, the most advanced classes, are the 400 classes.

1. Poverty 101

A. We learn to depend on God

What are the lessons that we learn in poverty? We learn dependence on God, poverty one-on-one teaches us dependence on God. Some people struggle to pay

their bills. It could be that you're just not very wise in your budgeting. You've incurred more expenses than you can pay for. If that's the case, cut down on your expenses. But some people are doing everything you can, and you have cut and cut from your budget, but there still isn't enough for the basic necessities like food and housing. America lived through the Great Depression when people were thankful to have any job at all and lived from meal to meal. They were thankful for every little thing they had, and you know what that taught them to do? Depend on God. When you don't have much, you seem to be so dependent upon God. You live on the edge, and God must provide, or you won't make it. You are that dependent on him.

That's like the Old Testament when the children of Israel were in the desert without water or food. God said he would feed them manna from heaven—a cake-like substance that appeared on the ground in the morning like Frosted Flakes cereal. Each morning, they gathered a certain amount for their family. God said not to save it, and it would not last from one day to the next. They had to depend upon God day by day. Let me ask you, are you living with that daily dependence upon God? Poverty teaches us to do that. Jesus said, “Give us this day our daily bread...” Jesus didn't say, “Lord, provide me with 60 days income so I can have a reserve.” He didn't say, “God, fill up my cupboard with plenty of food so I can hoard it and save.”

All my needs are taken care of. I am absolutely content, but there was a time in my life right out of seminary, when Cindy and I served a church where we made about a thousand dollars a month. And we had a baby on the way. There was only a certain amount of money that Cindy could spend at the grocery store. She would go to the grocery store with a calculator, and she would punch in everything that she bought. Her goal was to make it all the way up and down every aisle before she depleted how much money she had to spend that day on groceries. We used to literally pray over our bills and decide which one should we pay. That made us absolutely dependent upon God. And some of you can relate to that.

B. We learn interdependence on others

When you don't have much, sometimes you find yourself having to go to others and say, “I need some help. Can you help me with some food? Can you help me with my utility bill?” There is an attitude among many people who say they are too proud to ask for help. But that's a dangerous attitude. Someone who is living in poverty is part of the Body of the Christ. And when one part of the Body of Christ is hurting, the other parts go and help that person. And sometimes that means financially. Every week, members of this church come to us confidentially asking for help, and they become the recipients of our benevolence ministry.

One of the dangers of prosperity is independence. Have you ever heard somebody say they are “independently wealthy”? What that means is they don't depend on God. They don't have to depend on other people. They're absolutely independent.

They remind me of what Jesus said about the church in Laodicea, in Revelation chapter three. That church said, “I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing. I don't need anything. I don't need anybody. I got plenty.”

2. Prosperity 401

Some of you wish you were taking this class and wish you were prosperous enough to be in this situation. And some of you are there. What can we learn about the use of our prosperity?

A. God is the source of all our wealth

When God has blessed you financially and you learn this lesson, you will say, “God, thank you. You are the source of all my wealth.” There are plenty of rich people who say, “I made it. It's mine. I'm the only reason that I'm so wealthy because of my own intelligence and my own hard work. I earned this.” But when you've learned the lesson, you don't say that. You say, “God has blessed me with this income.”

B. We learn to share our resources with others

People who've learned the lesson of contentment in prosperity take Luke chapter 12, verse 48 very seriously where Jesus said to whom is given much, much is required. Throughout the kingdom of God, throughout the Body of Christ, there are many wealthy individuals who are good stewards of that which God has entrusted to them. They don't flaunt it. They don't hoard it. They are good managers of God's money. And they do give it away. A man in my former church was a CFO of a Fortune 500 company and had the gift of giving. He saw God was the source of all of his income. He gave throughout the year regularly to support the budget of the church. But before the end of the year, he would always say to me, “God has blessed me this year, and I want to give more.” And he would usually present our church with a check for about \$60,000, asking that it be used wherever it could best be used to help people who are hurting. That man is not alone. I thank God for all to whom God has given prosperity, who understand the responsibility it bears. You need to share it as God leads you. Some of you are saying, “I can't wait until I get in that class, and I can learn to give.” But unless you're giving at the level where you are right now, you will not give when you're prospered.

If you're making \$30,000 a year and you tithe, that's \$3,000. That may not seem like a lot, but if you'll discipline yourself to do it, God will bless you. But if you're making \$300,000 a year, sometimes it's a lot harder to give \$30,000 to the Lord. If you're not willing to tithe on 30,000, don't worry. God will never trust you with any more than that! Be faithful to give to God's work wherever level you are now.

II. WE CAN FIND GOD'S SECRET OF CONTENTMENT (4:11-12)

In verse 12, Paul says, “I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content. The Greek word used there is “mystirio,” where we get our word “mystery” from it. Now in verse 11, when Paul says I've “learned” to be content,

Discover Life Ministries • P.O. Box 131678, Tyler, TX 75713-1678 • 903-525-1106 • www.discoverlife.tv Visit www.gabc.org for available formats of this message

he uses a different word for “learn” than he uses in verse 12. Verse 11 is the kind of learning that you learn in school. But here in verse 12, it's the kind of learning that you can only experience personally; it is not something somebody teaches you. It's something you have to go through.

The difference in those two words is like taking swimming lessons. You stand on the side of the pool and the instructor says to kick your legs and turn your head to breathe. That's the first kind of learning in verse 11 where Paul says, “I've learned to be content. Somebody told me I ought to be content.”

But in verse 12, he says he's learned the secret. That word for “learned” is when you jump in the water and start to swim, or you sink! That's the way you learn the secret, the mystery of contentment. Paul had discovered it, and he wants to share it with us. Let me give you two suggestions on how you can experience contentment.

1. Contentment comes when we decrease our desires, rather than increasing our possessions.

Paul could have sat in prison thinking, “Oh, I wish I had money for food. I wish I had money for writing materials. I wish I had money to buy clothing.” When Paul was in prison, the Roman guards did not care for their prisoners the way our modern prison system does. Our prison system feeds and clothes prisoners, but not so in Paul's day. If he didn't get support from friends or family members, he could starve to death. He could languish in cold. Paul had very little, but he didn't say he wished he had more. He just lowered the level of his desire.

You know what that word “content” means? It's kind of like the word “contents.” It means self-contained and sufficient. It means, “I'm happy with what I've got.” The real problem we face in America is that we tend to equate net worth with self-worth. If I asked about your net worth, you could give it to me probably within 10 or \$15,000. But what if I asked you another question—what's your self-worth? Net worth has absolutely nothing to do with self-worth, according to the word of God. Jesus said in Luke 12: 15, “Foxes have holes. Birds have nests, but the Son of man doesn't even have any place to lay his head.” The net worth of Jesus Christ, his financial standing, was a big zero. When he had to ride a donkey into Jerusalem, he had to borrow it. When he had to stand in a boat to preach, he had to borrow it. When he had money due to pay his taxes, he had to send Peter down to the Sea of Galilee and catch a fish and look in the fish's mouth to get the coin out. Jesus lived in poverty.

We are unconsciously teaching our children that more is better. We're unconsciously tell our children that “the one who dies with the most toys, wins.” Teens want to wear clothes that have a certain designer label on them. They want to have the right kind of logo. They want to carry the right kind of purse, because they think that that increases their acceptance and esteem among their friends...as if that gives you a sense of self-worth. But net worth has nothing to do with self-

worth. You are somebody in Jesus Christ, whatever your bank account may be. Whatever securities that you may have, you are someone in Jesus Christ.

We've raised a whole generation of people who think that you've got to have more—even if you have to borrow to do it! A few years ago, do you remember what the bumper sticker used to say on the old clunkers? The bumper sticker used to say, “It ain't much, but at least it's paid for.” And now, you know what the bumper stickers say? “I owe. I owe. So off to work I go.” Larry Burkett, who is a Christian financial expert, says, “Some of the most anxious people I know are people who have slid down the icy slope of overspending into the deep, cold valley of debt. Now they're shivering at the bottom of the valley, realizing it may take years to regain a position of solvency. They never intended to end up in the valley. They're not bad people. They just got sucked in the rap of materialism.”

Jesus said to beware of covetousness. He said a man's life doesn't consist of his possessions. We've all got stuff. If you did an inventory of your household belongings, how would you add up all your stuff? Jesus said a person's life doesn't have anything to do with how much stuff they accumulate. He says there's more to life than possessions. And so the way that you find contentment is to decrease your desires, rather than increasing your possessions. Am I saying that you shouldn't try to provide for your family and make more money? Am I saying that you shouldn't try to advance in business? I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying you can obtain a sense of contentment and satisfaction wherever you may be right now. As you are faithful to God, he can bless you more.

2. Live in Christ, rather than “under the circumstances”

Paul says, “I've learned to be content, whatever the circumstances.” Have you ever asked somebody how they're doing, and they say, “Well, I'm doing all right under the circumstances”? You ought to ask them, “What are you doing *under* the circumstances?” Circumstances are kind of like a mattress. You get under the mattress, and it'll smother you, but you get on top of the mattress, and you can find contentment and rest. Did you know that 21 times in four simple chapters in Philippians Paul talks about “in the Lord” or “in Christ” as the only place you can find contentment? If you're living by your circumstances, your life is going to be topsy turvy, up and down. You're going to be happy, and the next time you're going to be sad. But if you're living in the security of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, you can find true contentment.

III. WE CAN RECEIVE GOD'S STRENGTH FOR CONTENTMENT (4:13)

Paul says, “I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.” Now here's the question you must ask yourself: “Is it that I can't be content? Or I won't be content?” Some of you think that if I knew your situation, I wouldn't tell you to be content. However, it's a dangerous thing to take a verse out of context. Don't ever read a single verse and just apply it to your life. Learn the context. You can't read

the Bible bits and pieces, here and there. Philippians 4:13 must be taken in its context. I had a man quote this verse to me and say, "This year, I'm going to make a million dollars in my business. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That is a perversion of that verse. What that verse is actually saying is that God can give you the strength to be content. Even if you make only \$10,000 this year. It's talking about the power of God to be content.

But did you know this principle relates to other spiritual challenges as well? God can give you the strength to love someone you don't want to love. Or forgive someone you don't want to forgive. Don't say, "I can't love that person." You can do all things through Christ. Don't say, "I can't forgive that person." You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. And if you insist upon saying, "I can't be content, I can't love that person, I can't forgive that person, I can't accept that person," take a knife and cut Philippians 4:13 out of your Bible because you don't believe it.

CONCLUSION

God never supplies the strength until the moment that you need it. He never gives his power as a down payment, right? It's always in the nick of time that he provides it. Have you ever read Corrie ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*? She was in a Nazi prison camp during World War II. She and her sister knew that they were going to be stripped naked and searched by Nazi guards upon entry. And as she was approaching the time that she would be stripped, she kept quoting, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Still, she said, she didn't have any courage. She didn't have any strength and was still trembling; she was so afraid. Corrie was tempted to think that verse doesn't work, but the moment they began to take off her clothes, that's the moment God gave the power. She saw a picture of Jesus Christ without his clothes, as he hung on the cross. And he seemed to say to her, "Corrie, they took my clothes away, too." And she said, she stood with dignity and peace while they searched her. Seconds before she needed God's strength, it wasn't there. But at the moment it was needed, God's strength was given to her. Some people say they don't find God's strength. Maybe it's because they don't ever put themselves in situations where they need God's strength. Because just at the moment you need it, God gives it to you. First Timothy 1:6 says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain for we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, I'm content with that."

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

I. WE ARE ENROLLED IN GOD'S SCHOOL OF CONTENTMENT (4:12)

1. Poverty 101

A. We learn to depend on God

B. We learn interdependence on others

2. Prosperity 401

A. God is the source of all our wealth

B. We learn to share our resources with others

II. WE CAN FIND GOD'S SECRET OF CONTENTMENT (4:11-12)

1. Contentment comes when we decrease our desires, rather than increasing our possessions.

2. Live in Christ, rather than "under the circumstances"

III. WE CAN RECEIVE GOD'S STRENGTH FOR CONTENTMENT (4:13)

CONCLUSION