

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (29-11-1992 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 4:10-13

Additional Bible reading: 2 Corinthians 11:22-12:10

### Introduction

Someone once suggested that the only proper thing to do after reading these words is to pronounce the benediction. The preacher can only tremble as he approaches such glorious words, because they are the high water mark of Christian experience. Yet, however inadequately, these words have to be expounded and applied.

This is a remarkable testimony to Paul's experience of the Lord. What would the man of the world give to be able to say these things? What would many a Christian also?

Note the occasion on which Paul says these words. He has really finished his letter, but there is something more to be done. The Philippians had sent a gift via Epaphroditus, but this caused Paul a problem. He wanted to say thank you, but he also had to let them know he had not been waiting for it and hoping for it. He did not depend on them at all. He depended only on God. So as not to hurt their feelings, he expresses his gratitude to them; yet he makes it plain he did not depend on it. He relied on God, not them. He did not strictly need them. He only needed the Lord, for the Lord is perfectly sufficient.

So Paul acts as the Christian gentleman saying thanks, yet not doing so in a way that would let the Lord down or discredit Him. This leads Paul to speak of contentment in Christ.

### Paul's contentment affirmed

**I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances** (Philippians 4:11).  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha\rho\kappa\eta\varsigma$  does not mean self-satisfied or self-confident. It means self-sufficient and self-contained. Paul has got inner resources, inner power, inner spiritual riches, which make him sufficient. He did not need circumstances or pleasant conditions to make him happy. He had all he needed inside him. He had peace and inner satisfaction regardless of his outside state.

We can illustrate this by thinking of a block of flats, or hotel, which is "self-contained". All the people need is inside the complex, e.g. shops, laundry, post-office, food supplies. They do not have to go outside to get what they need. So it is with Paul, he is self-contained because Christ lives within. Of course if he has the chance to improve the situation and better his lot, he will take it, but whatever happens, he is not controlled by circumstances. He is not mastered by them. They do not get him down or control him. He may have to remain in that difficult situation, but he is in control, master of the situation. His happiness does not depend on what is going on around him.

Remember that Paul was probably chained to two soldiers when he was writing this, and yet he was not brought low or depressed. He rises above his situation. He is self-contained. He has all he needs within; a victor over, and not a victim of,

circumstances. Not like a thermometer going up and down with the temperature around him, but like a thermostat maintaining the heat, controlling the situation. Changing things, and not being changed *by* things.

Consider the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, **Whoever drinks of the water I give him will never thirst again... it will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life** (John 4:14). The well within is bubbling all the time. When Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten, had their feet in stocks, in the inner prison, in the worst imaginable conditions, they were still happy and satisfied. The fountain within, and not their external circumstances, made them sing hymns of praise to God at midnight (Acts 16).

Whatever Paul's "thorn in the flesh" may have been, he was not broken by it. He did not collapse because of it. The fountain bubbling within him led him to confirm that God's grace was sufficient for him. Ancient castles in medieval times had a well within the castle walls, so that the defenders could hold out for months and months. If they were dependent on water being carried in from the outside, they would quickly be seized by the enemy. As long as they had the well within, they were independent of circumstances and outside conditions. **Godliness with contentment is great gain** (1 Timothy 6:6).

#### Paul's contentment illustrated

**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** (Philippians 4:12). Paul is illustrating his point from his own life. It was not a matter of things being bad or good on the outside. He knew plenty of that alright. In 2 Corinthians 11:23ff Paul mentions hard work, beatings, imprisonment, stoning, shipwreck, hunger and thirst etc. Surely these things would discourage, bring him low, and knock him off balance?

How do we take adversity and knocks in life? Can we abound without a sense of grudge, taking second place, accepting hurt and insult, suffering physical need and pain? Can we abound without bitterness of spirit and anxiety?

Or is there something within which keeps us at peace, content, composed and patient. Not only did Paul claim to be "content", but also to be "in plenty". Such was his trust in God, no matter what he had to face, he still felt the fullness of God's riches, and he did not feel robbed or deprived. On the whole, prosperity is more dangerous to the Christian than adversity. The prosperous Christian more easily loses grip of spiritual things when things go well than when there are problems. When we are in need, we keep praying, but when we have all we need, we quickly forget God.

What happens to us when life is pleasant and comfortable, nice home, plenty in the bank, no health problems? We can be overtaken by pride, become worldly-minded, and forgetful of our need and indebtedness to God. In the pulpit of George Whitefield a notice was once placed, "A young man who has lately inherited a large fortune requests the prayers of the congregation." Here is a thought! We often pray for the poor, but never for the rich – but their spiritual need is far greater. When men have

too many of God's material blessings, they often have little of His grace, and little gratitude for the bounties received. "You need a steady hand to carry a full cup."

This is true not only of material blessings, but can be true of spiritual blessings also. There can be blessings on a man's ministry - a full church, a good bank account, the adulation of the crowd – this is far more dangerous to the minister than a struggling congregation, small salary and hostility of the world.

Paul's affirmation is that, regardless of circumstances, up or down, prosperity or adversity, it had no affect on him. Whatever happened, he was not put down, nor inflated with pride, nor upset and put off balance. He was independent of circumstances, not controlled by them, and able to rise above them. He was self-sufficient in the sense that he had the secret of life – an inner relationship with God. The outward circumstances were unimportant. His happiness and peace were not dependent on them.

### Paul's contentment enjoyed

What is this man's secret? Why was he self-sufficient, independent of circumstances? Paul, like us, had to learn the secret. He was not a super saint, or a special Christian. He knew failure and had falls like the rest of us. **I learned** (Philippians 4:11) - εμοσθον. **I have learned** (Philippians 4:12) - μεμυσημια - "let into the secret". As a result of many difficult and painful experiences, the Lord had at last got the truth into Paul's head. He did not instantly grasp it at the time of conversion. It did not just take five minutes to see it. But gradually, and effectively, the Holy Spirit taught him and applied the experiences of life to his heart. At last, the penny dropped. **The secret of the Lord is with those who fear him** (Psalm 25:14 AV).

It all goes back, as do so many matters in the Christian life, to the quality and depth of our relationship with God. The more strong and firm is our hold of Him who dwells within, the more we are self-sufficient. The more we are inwardly satisfied, so that we are indifferent to the outside. **'My grace is sufficient for you' ... that Christ's power may rest on me** (2 Corinthians 12:9). **Christ Jesus our Lord who has given me strength** (1 Timothy 1:12). **The Lord stood with me and strengthened me** (2 Timothy 4:17). **I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength** (Philippians 4:13). **Remain in me and I will remain in you... Apart from me you can do nothing** (John 15:4,5). To bear fruit we must remain in Him.

The secret is not in us and our resources, but in another who, by the Holy Spirit, indwells, lives within, empowers, satisfies, and fills us. The secret and the fountain is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the fountain which never runs dry. His sufficiency always meets the longings of the soul. Spiritual resources are abundantly supplied in Christ.

All of nature depends on hidden resources, seen by no one. Rivers have their source in snow-capped mountains. Great trees send roots down into the earth to draw water and minerals. The most important part of a tree, you cannot see. Likewise, the most important part of the Christian's life is hidden from the naked eye, seen only by God. Unless we draw on the unseen resources of God, we fail against the pressures of life.

When we draw on Him, the result is calm in adversity, and humility in prosperity. So we must cultivate an inner life with the Lord, and rely on the fountain within. See every situation as a fresh reason for relying on God and proving Him. Find satisfaction only in Christ, and in Him only. Talk to Him, listen to Him, rely on Him, walk with Him, and enjoy Him. Allow your heart to be so full with God that outward things matter little.

### Conclusion

People in the world are completely dependent on things outside for their happiness and enjoyment. It is easy for Christians to be the same. Material things have such an appeal, e.g. car, TV, clothes. Too often we allow the world to organize our life and we are dependent on it.

Some Christians are dependent on their round of meetings and the atmosphere to maintain their faith. They lean so much of their faith on others. So when these people are taken away and they are on their own, they collapse. This is one cause of failure on the mission field – maintaining faith on your own and in an alien environment. It reveals whether a man is self-sufficient and self-contained in Christ alone.

The answer to the problem has to be making the supremely important thing in the life my soul and my relationship to God. It is vital to find my pleasure and satisfaction in Christ, to depend on Him, know Him, be consumed by Him.

Do I know Him so well that if I became deaf or blind, and cut off from the world, this fountain would still be open, and I would still be happy because I am enjoying Him? Am I so dependent on Him that nothing else matters? If circumstances change, will my contentment in Him remain unchanged? Is this possible? Does it work?

Finish with the example of the life of W.E.Sangster. God was the harmonizing factor in His life, He was God-obsessed, his thoughts began and ended with God. It was as natural for him to talk about God as it was for another man to talk about his golf. He was constantly talking about God, and totally committed to His will.

He died a lingering and unpleasant death – an incurable sickness whose cause was unknown, and he gradually lost the use of his muscles and limbs, unable to walk, lost power of speech and ability to eat and swallow. In the last few months he managed to scrawl from time to time with great difficulty in a diary, using abbreviations and signs. This was the only record of his thoughts in this period for his voice had gone.

He wrote, “I am in complete peace with God”, “I count my blessings. How numerous they are.” “I have not the slightest doubt of God’s love and care for me.” “I covenanted myself afresh to God.” He prayed in love and faith for other needy people. “I am making progress in spiritual things. I was never quieter within. I was never more serene and unhurried. I was never more sure of God. I was never more grateful for his mercies.” “I am much with the Lord today.” He had many sweet thoughts of the risen Lord.

He had learned in health to be self-sufficient in Christ, and self-contained in God. So he was not dependent on outward circumstances. When infirmity, weakness and

incurable disease came, he still had the fountain within, bubbling up into everlasting life, and he was at peace, totally content.

**So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).**