

We've Got a Secret

Philippians 4:10-23

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Today we are going to finish our study in the book of Philippians. This final division, verses 10 through 23 of chapter 4, is a section characterized by a great deal of warmth and affection. It contains a lot of colorful expressions, very keen expressions of wit, subtle word plays (almost "in-jokes" at times), and gentle pleasantries. You can see something of the spirit of the apostle Paul, an almost playful spirit, as he writes to these folks in Philippi -- people who were very close to him and whom he loved a great deal, and who loved him. It is a very fitting conclusion to this, the warmest of the apostle Paul's letters.

In verse 10 he returns to a theme he has touched upon earlier the gift they sent to him while he was in prison in Rome.

Paul writes in chapter 1 that they had fellowshiped with him in the gospel from the first day until now, referring to the gift which Epaphroditus had brought from the church in Philippi. They were accustomed to supporting the apostle Paul. It was not a new nor an unexpected gesture. Twice they had sent gifts while he was in Thessalonica after he had been released from prison in Philippi, at least once while he was in Corinth and, as Paul indicates in this closing section, there were a number of other times when they had wanted to give but had lacked opportunity for one reason or another. Perhaps he was out of touch with them and they were unable to apply his needs, but that was their desire. They wanted to help. So Paul writes in verse 10,

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last, you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity.

Here he is expressing again a word of thanks for the gift which he had received through Epaphroditus from the church in Philippi. But then he goes on to say,

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

That is, "Though I appreciate the gift and am very thankful that you care about me, I don't speak with respect to want. Your gift is not something which I necessarily covet because he says, "I have learned two things: [verse 12] I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need, and [verse 11] I have learned to be content . . ." "I have learned the secret of contentment. I have learned how to be self-sufficient. I have learned not to crave things."

Have you learned the secret of contentment? Patti says, "I have." He plucks two terms out of contemporary thought idioms which were well known in that day -- one from the realm of the Stoic philosophers and the other from the realm, of the Greek mystery religions. The term translated "content" is taken right out of Greek Stoic philosophy. It doesn't occur anywhere else in Paul's writings. It would have been a very powerful figure to these people. When they heard it, it probably didn't even sound like the Apostle Paul, because the term means "self-sufficient", to be master of yourself, to have no needs, no weaknesses. This, of course, was what the Stoics aspired to -- to be a self-contained man who was not touched by his circumstances, who was adequate, strong -- never weak -- always sufficient for every situation, Paul says, "That is what I have attained. I have learned to be content." Knowing what we know of his attitude toward his own resources, as expressed elsewhere, it seems strange that the Apostle would use this term.

And secondly he says, "I have learned the *secret* ." Here he uses a term used in the Greek mystery religions to refer to the candidates for initiation into the inner circle. These religions were very much like some of the secret orders we have in our society. Novitiates had to work their way through various stages of progression until they were qualified to be initiated into an inner circle and thus they had arrived. They knew the secret handshake, the secret Code, and all the inner mysteries. Paul says, "I have learned the secret I am on the inside. I am in the know." I am sure that he used both these terms in almost tongue-in-cheek fashion. "I have learned the secret of contentment," Paul says.

That is something which a lot of people in the world would like to learn! That is one of the lost secrets of humanity. The world is filled with people who are discontented, who can find no satisfaction in life. If the rate at which people buy sleeping pills and tranquilizers and other drugs are any indication, then this is a wide-ranging phenomenon. People simply do not know how to be content. But Paul says, "I have discovered the secret." And he goes on from this point to reveal what that secret is.

Now, it is not, certainly, anything that we can buy, because Paul says, "I am content when I have nothing, when I have no resources, no means. If you believe the media, contentment comes through what you buy what you roll on or spray on or ingest

or ride around in! I read somewhere that Socrates used to wander through the marketplace and among the stalls of the bazaars in Athens and ask the merchants and the consumers the question, "Where can we buy the things which are really necessary for life?" That is a question we all can ask ourselves. Where can we buy things which really can make us content? We all know that we really can't. There is nothing you can purchase which makes you really content. The more you purchase, the more you want. Our desires are insatiable. If we have more money, then we just buy more things, and we want still more things. So there is no end to what we can buy, and yet there is no satisfaction there.

But yet Paul says that the answer does not lie in possessing nothing, "I have learned how to live either in abundance or without money. It doesn't matter what my circumstances are." He is not denouncing wealth and saying that we ought to espouse poverty. He is saying that regardless of our circumstances, whether we have money or not, whether we have abundance or are in very strained circumstances, we can still be content because the secret is something other than what we possess or do not possess. And he tells us in the rest of this chapter what the secrets are which enable him to be content in any situation.

We will pass over verse 13 for the time being and come back to it later. I want to look first at verses 14 through 18, where Paul says,

Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Ephroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.

He picks up a couple of terms from the marketplace and uses them here, again almost tongue-in-cheek. One is translated, "I seek for the profit which increases to your account." The term really means "interest". "I seek the interest which accrues to you," as though they were investing in the apostle Paul and would receive a return on their investment. The results of their giving would feed back into their own lives. Then a bit later he says, "I have received everything in full." That is the translation of a term signifying payment in full, as though Paul takes out his receipt book and he writes on it, "Paid in full," and gives it back to them. "You are no longer indebted to me in any way. Your obligation to me has been discharged fully."

Do you see what Paul is saying? One secret that Paul has is the care and concern for him of the body of Christ. He has a family who cares about him. And whatever his needs are, no matter how distant he might be geographically, nor how isolated he might be, he knows that there are people who care about him and who are willing to give of their means in order to satisfy his needs. He knows that though there were times when they were unable to meet that need there was always the kindness to satisfy his needs, and that is a great source of encouragement. He is not too proud to admit that he needs the rest of, the body of believers.

There are two extremes that we may adopt in regard to the body of Christ. One is independence. We can say, "I don't really need the body. I am adequate in myself" But that is clearly contrary to Scripture. The other is the attitude of total dependence upon the body, so that we look to the body constantly for our source of strength and encouragement. That likewise is an imbalance.

The true picture, as Paul describes it here, is one of giving and receiving. It is not independence nor dependence but interdependence. We need one another. When one is weak, then another who is strong can help. And then when the one who has been weak is strengthened he can help a weaker brother. So there is this relationship of concern and care which goes on constantly within the body. And Paul says, "I need this. I am not too proud to ask for it nor to receive it. I am thankful that I have a family who cares about me. That is one of the secrets of my "self-sufficiency". My needs are met by a body who cares for me," That is his first point.

The second, and this is central to his argument, is found in verse 13:

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

And again in verse 19:

And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

In order to understand the force of verse 13 you must read verse 12 in conjunction with it, because Paul says there that he has learned how to get along with humble means, and also how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance he has learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. He can do all things through Christ who strengthens him. He can have abundance. He can have lack. It doesn't matter. In any and all circumstances, he says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." "Christ in us," Paul says, "is the interior secret of power." He is the one who gives us mastery over all the extremes of life. And if you can keep your head when everyone around is losing theirs, then you have learned

the secret. The secret is Christ in you, that adequate resource for every circumstance.

Paul says something very bracing in verse 13 when he says, "I *can* do all things. Whatever I have to do I *can* do it. I *can* ." How often do we say, "I can't"? "I can't stand my kids another week. I can't stand this house another year. I can't stand my mother-in-law. I can't cope with my temper. I can't change. I can't share my faith, I can't I can't, I can't, I can't!" Paul says, "I *can* . I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

And then he says in verse 19, "And my God, the one who strengthens me, will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." The apostle Paul is not unique in his capacity to gain strength from the one who indwells him. His God will supply anyone's needs, no matter what that need may be. And he will meet that need magnificently - according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

I visited the Pinnacles National Monument last weekend with my sons, and we were spending sometime down there with Dick Patterson's parents, Pat and Mary Patterson. Dick is one of our interns and Pat is the Head Ranger at the Pinnacles. He was telling us of a story he had read the past week about a little boy whose family was quite poor. This little boy needed a shirt. All of his shirts were worn out and he was ashamed to wear the one that he had to wear to school. So the family began to pray that God would provide a new shirt. Every night when they gathered around the table, they would pray for it.

After three or four weeks of praying, a merchant in town called his mother and said that he was phasing out some merchandise and had a number of shirts in the little boy's size, and he asked her if she would like to come and get them. So she went and got the shirts and stowed them away in a closet. That evening when the little boy reminded his father, "Dad, let's pray for the shirt," the father got up and, one by one, he brought out the shirts. There were twelve of them. He stacked them one on top of another at his son's place. And the little boy learned the truth of this verse; "My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches."

He will supply your needs and he will supply them magnificently. He is not stingy! And he supplies them according to his riches, not out of them. You see, if you need some money and you have a wealthy relative who writes you a check for \$100, then he is supplying your needs out of his riches. But if you go to that uncle and he gives you the key to his safety deposit box where all of his wealth is kept, then he is supplying according to his riches. And that is what Paul says his God will do: "My God will supply your needs according to the inestimable wealth, the infinite wealth, that he has in glory." That is what Paul wants us to know. The very Lord who strengthens him is available to us to meet our needs.

Note he does not say that God gives us what we think we need. Nor does he give us what we want, necessarily. He gives us what we actually need. I read this past week of a paper a sociologist has written regarding current needs in America. In it he reports that around the turn of the century someone conducted a survey and discovered that people thought there were sixteen things which were essential to life. Then last year a similar survey was conducted and it disclosed that in the United States we now think that ninety-eight things are essential to life'. That is the way we live: If some is good, more is better and too much is just right! Our "needs" expand with every passing day. And the Lord does not promise that he is going to give us everything that we want, nor what we think we need, but what we actually need. This is a promise. Paul says, "My God shall supply your needs."

Now, that is either true or it is a lie. If it is a lie, we might as well forget the whole thing. But if it is true, then we can believe it! He will supply our needs. If that is true then it is axiomatic if we need it, we will have it. If we do not have, we do not need it. It is just that simple. So what do you need? What do I need? Affection, understanding, appreciation, more physical comforts? Perhaps we do. If we need them, God will supply them. If we don't receive them, then we don't really need them.

I was reading through the book of Genesis in preparation for a class that I am teaching. I came across the story of Leah and Jacob. Leah was the first wife of Jacob. Jacob had two wives -- Leah and Rachel. He loved Rachel. The Scriptures say that Rachel was beautiful, and that Leah had weak eyes, which is probably the origin of the statement, "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses," -- although that is not true, because Carolyn, my wife, used to wear glasses! But Leah was unloved. Still, the Lord blessed her with a number of children. She actually had as many children as all the other wives and concubines of Jacob combined. Yet it appears that throughout her life Jacob never really responded to her, never loved her.

And her children's names are a record of her feelings at various times. Her first son was Reuben, whose name comes from the Hebrew word for "to see". And she said, "I have named him Reuben because the Lord has seen my affliction and now my husband will love me." But he didn't. So she had another son and she named him Simeon, from the word which means "to hear". And she said, "Now the Lord has heard me, and I will no longer be unloved. My husband will love me." But he didn't. And she had a third son and named him Levi from the word for "joined". And she said, "Now I will be joined to my husband." But she wasn't.

Then she had a fourth son, and she named him Judah. The word means "praise". And she said, "This time I will praise the Lord." Though she thought she needed the affection and love of her husband. The Lord saw fit for some reason to keep this from her, and she learned that the Lord himself would be the one who could meet her needs. He would be the object of her praise. The name of her son memorializes that change in her attitude. She realized that her God could meet all of her needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. She would praise him.

Now, what do you need? Well, the Lord will meet that need. He will meet it in a very special way and will meet it out of his riches in glory. You see, that is where contentment comes from. The secret of contentment lies in the realization that our needs, our legitimate needs, are met in Jesus Christ. He will meet every genuine need that we have.

Sometime ago I read the story of an attorney, Horatio Spafford, who lived in Chicago before the turn of the century. He was a very influential Christian layman, a friend of Dwight L. Moody, and instrumental in establishing the Moody Bible Institute. Right after the Chicago fire in 1871 he put his wife and children aboard a ship and sent them to Europe. He wanted to get them out of the city while it was being rebuilt. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean the ship was struck in the middle of a November night by another vessel, and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown, and she herself was struck by a falling mast and was knocked unconscious, but she was miraculously saved. She fell on some floating debris and later was picked up and taken to Wales. While she was in a hospital in Wales she telegraphed back to her husband two words: 'Saved alone.' He of course took the first ship to Wales. As it was sailing across the Atlantic it reached almost the identical spot where her ship had gone down. And as Dr. Spafford was walking on the deck he was moved to write the words of the hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*. The first verse goes,

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."*

The apostle Paul would have reveled in that! "Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.' " When joy attends you, praise the Lord. "It is well with your soul." When sorrows like sea billows roll, then the Lord is your adequacy. And you can say as Dr. Spafford did, "It is well with my soul." *That* is the key to contentment. That is the secret which enables us to rest. The Lord is our adequacy. "My God," Paul says, "will meet all of your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Paul concludes this section by discharging 2 threefold courtesy. First a word of doxology, in verse 20:

Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I think that if we had in our hands the original writing, the original scroll on which the book of Philippians was written, we would discover a break in the penmanship at this point. We'd find Paul's large scrawling script. He probably took the stylus from Timothy's hands and, in his own handwriting, penned these final words. That was Paul's custom. As you know, he was nearly blind, and he employed a scribe to write for him. But usually he would take the pen and write with his own hand a word of conclusion. This was, as he said, his sign, his mark. And he must have written these final words of doxology. "Praise God," Paul says, "from whom all blessings flow." He is the source of all glory. As he has said repeatedly in the book, "Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice *in the Lord* !" Then in verse 21 a brief word of salutation.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. [Every saint -- the dull ones, the carnal ones, the ones who are growing and maturing.] **The brethren who are with me greet you.** [That would be Timothy, Tychicus, Mark, Luke, and other young men who accompanied the Apostle.]

Then he enlarges the circle to include the other saints there in Rome:

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

This is a reference to those fine, choice young men who were Caesar's bodyguard, men who had been led to Christ as a result of Paul's imprisonment in Rome. And finally a word of benediction in verse 23:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The noun "spirit" here is singular, rather than plural as you might expect. This is confirmation again of what Paul has said earlier that they are one in spirit -- the Holy Spirit. He can address himself to one spirit there in Philippi. They were one in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. And here he prays again that grace would be their portion. The book opens, in verse 2, with a word about the grace of God, "God's Resources At Christ's Expense," and his adequacy for all of life, and it closes on the same note; "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,"

So this warmest of epistles from the apostle Paul comes to a close. He rolled up his scroll and handed it to Epaphroditus, and the next day Epaphroditus strode back to Philippi. And for more than nineteen hundred years this little letter has been a source of encouragement and inspiration for all who have read it. If we can pick out one predominant theme, it is, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!" Have you learned to rejoice in the Lord? Are you rejoicing in him and in him alone? Are you still trying to find your security in other things, or is he the source of your joy? If he is the source of your joy, then you know what

Paul is talking about. You can be content. You have learned the secret. You have learned that your God will supply all of your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Father, we would echo Paul's words, because we too, through the Word, have learned the secret. We know the secret. And now, Father, make it a part of our experience, so that in every circumstance, in times of abundance and in times of lack, we might be content, knowing that you are the one who meets our needs. We pray, Father, that we might learn with the Apostle to rejoice in you always, in every circumstance. We thank you for the work that you have begun in our lives. And we know that you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ. We ask in his name, Amen.

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