

The Rare Jewel of Contentment

by D.A. Carson

Tucked away towards the end of Paul's letter to the Philippians is a half-verse that is often quoted, but sometimes quoted out of context: 'I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation' (Phil 4:12). In an age of restlessness and rootless malaise, we do well to reflect on what the Puritans used to call 'the rare jewel of Christian contentment' (which expression, of course, was the title of a book by Jeremiah Burroughs). One could not responsibly treat the entire topic from this passage, but this is an excellent place to begin. Five observations will help us focus on what we ought to learn, with our heads and in our experience, from this part of Scripture.

1. We must not infer that there is some esoteric 'secret' to Christian contentment. The NIV might leave you with that impression: 'I have learned *the secret* of being content' - as if it is a matter of uncovering something mysterious or secret that the general run of Christians could not possibly discover. I have learned the 'secret' by which illusionists apparently 'levitate' their helpers, and pass a hoop over them to 'prove' there is no suspension device; most people do not know what the 'secret' is. But one could not responsibly speak of the 'secret' of contentment in the same sense. There is not a trace of that notion in the original. The idea, rather, is that Paul has learned how to be content under all circumstances. The NIV has paraphrased the passage to include the word 'secret', but although this rendering makes for easy reading, the word 'secret' should be given no weight at all. What this passage emphasizes is not the special preserve of Christians on the inside track, Christians who are one or two steps ahead of the common herd by virtue of their specialist knowledge, but something that is in principle open to all believers.

2. Nevertheless, not all Christians breathe contentment. Paul himself has *learned* to be content, over the course of very diverse ministry. The operative word is 'learned': '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' (4:12). In the flow of his argument, Paul surely gives us to understand that he has 'learned' contentment by living through periods of prosperity and periods of want. He is not suggesting, of course, that everyone who lives through such circumstances will learn to be content. But he is suggesting that he himself has learned contentment, in God's providence, through the diverse circumstances he has experienced.

'I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation'

It is not hard to understand why. The rich pagan or the rich secularist is unlikely to be content; the rich Christian may achieve a certain sort of contentment, honestly grateful to God for all the good gifts he or she enjoys. But it will be very hard for such Christians to be instantly content if they are suddenly stripped of their material possessions. Even if they are mature enough to avoid wondering if they are being punished, and to avoid pining for the past, they have some enormous adjustments to make.

On the other hand, really poor believers, even if they have by God's grace avoided jealousy, and have learned to delight in God's provision of their necessities, and to think all the more fondly of the glories to come in the new heaven and the earth precisely because their attention has not been diverted by all that glitters here, may feel very troubled if they suddenly come into wealth. They may be embarrassed by it; they may feel guilty about it. Oddly enough, they were content when they were poor; now they are content no longer.

I recall a missionary who returned to Canada about 1950. He had been in China

for a couple of decades. He and his large family were interned by the Japanese, and suffered greatly. Released at the end of WWII, they continued on in ministry in extraordinarily difficult circumstances until they were expelled by the Chinese communists - one of the last Western missionaries to be given the boot. But when he returned to Canada, instead of assuming the pastorate of one of the many churches that pursued him, he took a job, for two years, as a manual worker for one of the railroads. He told me, years later, that he felt he needed that period of re-adjustment so that he would not be too critical of Canadian Christians who had never faced the sort of privation he and his family had endured, but who certainly faced a range of other challenges and temptations about which he knew little. Subsequently he served very fruitfully as a pastor for almost three decades. He was a wise man: he knew that Christian contentment often has to be learned from both ends, from both plenty and want.

3. Clearly, the least that Paul is saying is that his Christian contentment is independent of physical circumstances. His contentment does not depend on how well off he is, or even, by a kind of inverted spirituality, on how deprived he is. His point is that his contentment is independent of his physical circumstances.

The Philippians had witnessed something of Paul's remarkable maturity in this regard when he first visited their city. Arrested and beaten up, he and Silas, their legs in stocks, sang praises to God at midnight, in defiance of all customary expectation. Doubtless in this case they viewed their sufferings as a badge of honour, as did the original apostles who rejoiced when they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (Acts 5:41). But Paul's contentment does not abandon him even when what he is going through is simply a time of relative plenty or relative want.

In this passage, Paul does not explicitly spell out what it is that keeps him going.

But casting an eye over the entire epistle, we discover plenty of clues. His passion is to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings (3:10). He fully recognizes that he serves as a model for believers in all the churches (3:17). Having received so much benefit from the gospel (2:1-4), he recognizes his obligation to follow Christ wholeheartedly, and in particular to follow him in a fundamental attitude that does not stand on rights and privilege but that awaits God's final vindication (2:5-11). In fact, what Paul eagerly looks forward to is not another round of material plenty, but the return of Christ, who will one day transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (3:20-21).

With perspectives like these, it is entirely understandable that Paul is content in every circumstance. His contentment cannot be purchased by transient external circumstances, for all his hopes and all his heart are fastened on realities at this point unseen. Doubtless we could find other reasons in his letters as to why Paul gives voice to this stance. For example, he clearly believes that God is sovereignly in control, and can be trusted to act not only for his own glory but also for the good of his own people, regardless of how bleak their present circumstances appear to be (Romans 8:28).

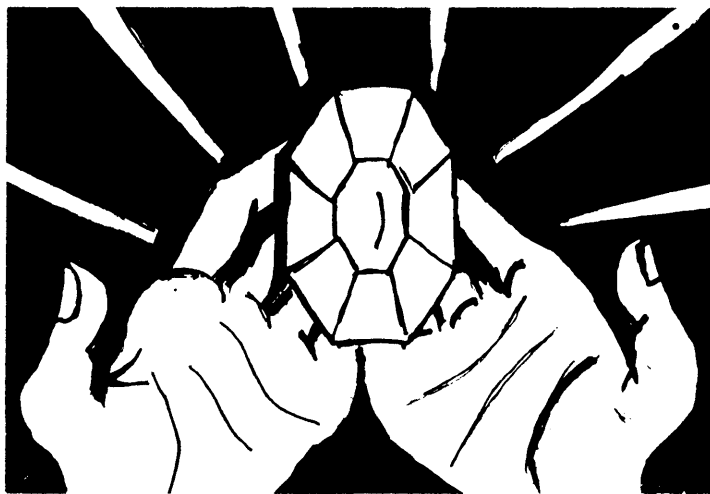
From this we may infer that passing through diverse circumstances in life will not be used by God to make us thoroughly content followers of Jesus Christ, regardless of our physical circumstances, unless at the same time our hopes and aspirations are gospel hopes, Christ-centred aspirations.

4. Paul's resolution turns on the God who strengthens him (4:13). After insisting that he knows how to be content in

any and every circumstances, Paul writes, 'I can do everything through him who gives me strength' (4:13).

It is important to recognize what this verse does not say.

Paul is not claiming that he can understand everything about nuclear physics or the life cycles of sea turtles, that he can walk on water or build a cold fusion reactor, through Christ who gives him strength. Nor does he give any warrant here for manipulating people into doing things they



probably should not be doing. You know the kind of thing I have in mind: the Christian leader who badgers Ms Brown into teaching a class of grade four boys (even though she feels she has neither the gifts nor the calling) on the ground that she can do all things through Christ who gives her strength. Doubtless the 'everything' is as wide as what God really does want us to do. But Paul's 'everything' is constrained by the context: he can live life with contentment regardless of his creature comforts, in every circumstance, through Christ who gives him strength.

It is this latter clause that is most important. Paul does not claim that he can live contentedly because he is now experienced enough, or because he is disciplined

enough, or because he is now spiritual enough. He recognizes that his resolution and maturity in this matter of contentment are utterly dependent on Christ. Without Christ's strength, Paul's diverse life-experiences would be inadequate to make him a content person. This is nothing but a particular outworking of what the apostle has taught earlier in his letter: where Christian virtues abound, where Christian resolution prevails, there we find evidence that God is working in his people so that they will and act according to his good purpose (2:12-13).

(5) Paul's attitude must not be confused with stoic independence of circumstances.

Paul is engaged emotionally as well as intellectually: read, for instances, the emotional pathos that characterizes his relations with the Philippian believers, even his prayers for them (eg 1:3-8). Even in this context in Philippians 4, Paul is thanking the Philippians for their recent gift (4:10), and insisting that when he expresses his thanks he is not surreptitiously hinting that they should send more (4:11). Far from it: he could not be asking for more, when he is

content as he is (4:12-13). In any case, he is more interested in the blessing of God that will fall on them because of their generosity than he is in the gift itself (4:17).

What this suggests is that Paul's Christian contentment must never be confused with a grim, stiff-upper-lip kind of resolution, or with a dispassionate, disengaged aloofness, that some mistake for the genuine article. It is passionately Christ-centred; it diligently seeks the good of other believers; it is displayed in the context of the tenderest love for other believers.

Pray God that the rare jewel of Christian contentment will become a little less rare.

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