

Philippians 4:10-20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 March 2022

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] I've done a bit of reading on the issue of contentment. And I thought it would be really helpful for me to share some of that and what I've seen in Scripture.

And so this week and next week, I want us to look at this subject of contentment. And then we'll get into a series again after Easter.

Fanny Crosby was blind from six weeks old. She had a high fever. There were some complications in her body.

And a man who was a quack who pretended to be a doctor applied some remedies to her. Her life was spared, but she went blind. And she was blind from six weeks old for the next 95 years until she died.

And that was Fanny Crosby. You sing her songs all the time. You started the service with one of her hymns. Praise him. Praise him. Jesus, our blessed Redeemer.

[1 : 13] You know it, don't you? To God be the glory. Great things he has done. So, love to the world that he gave us his son. Blessed assurance. Jesus is mine. Jesus, keep me near the cross.

She wrote nearly 9,000 hymns. When she was eight years old, her kind of poetic instincts were already showing.

And she wrote a little ditty that went like this. She said this, Oh, what a happy child I am. Although I cannot see. I am resolved that in this world, content I will be.

At eight years old, this little girl, this little blind girl, resolved that she was going to find deep contentment, even though she couldn't see a thing. Later in her teen years, an older minister was speaking with her.

And the minister said this. He said, With all the gifts that God has given to you, it just seems so tragic to me that he didn't give you the gift of sight. Fanny Crosby's response was immediate.

[2 : 16] She said, Let me tell you, if I had one wish at birth, it would have been that I be struck blind. So that the face of my saviour would be the first thing I see when I get to glory.

That's amazing, isn't it? It's astonishing. This little girl, a little girl has found something very, very special.

She's found something that you and I, particularly in London, find very difficult to find. She found what the Apostle Paul found in Philippians chapter 4.

Because I don't know whether you picked it up as Joanna read to us, that the Apostle Paul is teaching us something that is at the very core of what it means to be a Christian. It is at the very core of Christian experience.

And that is the experience of contentment. It's a unique contentment that comes through the follower and the believer in the Lord Jesus. And I think in Philippians 4, Paul shows us how it works.

[3 : 26] And I want us to look at that with me. So if you've got your Bible open, I want you to see four ways that the Apostle Paul helps us to understand biblical contentment. So the first thing about this profound experience in Philippians chapter 4 is that Christian contentment doesn't make us unfeeling, ungrateful, or unholy.

Why do I say that? So look with me, Philippians chapter 4 and verse 10. Can you see that? He gives thanks for them. He thanks them for the relief. He thanks them for the physical relief and the emotional relief, the social relief that they sent him by the way of this guy, Epaphroditus.

You can read about him in the rest of Philippians. Epaphroditus, he was one of the deacons. And they sent him from Philippi on a 600 mile trip.

And there was a ship trip involved. And then 600 miles the other way, it almost killed him. And the purpose of Epaphroditus' trip was to take supplies to the Apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul is in prison. He is chained. He is lonely. He feels a lack of support. First century imprisonment, if you know anything about it.

[4 : 50] There was no resources given from the government. So if you were in prison, there was a prison guard there, but you weren't given food. You weren't given blankets. You weren't given toiletries.

All of that came from your friends. They had to feed you. They were the ones who had to bring you water and brought you clothing. The jail would supply you with nothing.

And so Paul felt all of this. And yet he was content. And so we need to get out of our minds a kind of Eastern Buddhist view of contentment.

That all evil is an illusion. It's not. A view that says your sense of individuality, it's an illusion. That personhood is an illusion.

That anything that attacks personhood is an illusion. So you have to play a mental trick on yourself. You need to treat pain as an illusion.

[5 : 48] And you become basically inert. If you're a really good monk, you become inert to sorrow and pain and loss.

You don't feel it. It's all in your past. But you never find the Apostle Paul doing that. He deeply grieves at loss. He experiences real pain.

He knows what it is to suffer and to hurt. And so you look at 2 Corinthians, for example. He talks about the shipwrecks that he endured. He talks about stonings and whippings.

And imprisonments. And his loneliness. Profound loneliness. And pressure that he knew. And so can you see? Christian contentment is not unfeeling.

Christian contentment is not insensitive. We feel it all. We are engaged with this world. We believe in the physical world. It is real.

[6 : 49] And we believe that pain is real. And so we don't deny the sufferings that we endure. Because we're content. No, not at all.

Contentment does not mean being unfeeling. But neither are we ungrateful. The Apostle Paul, he wants to explain here. How he appreciates all that the Philippians have done for him.

He goes on to say, doesn't he? I wasn't depending ultimately on your missionary support. But I'm deeply thankful for it. I'm really grateful that you gave towards me. And so contented people are thankful, grateful people.

We're ready to write the thank you notes. We're ready to send the thank you emails. We're ready to acknowledge all that human beings have given to us through their love and through their encouragement and through their gifts of service.

So contentment doesn't make you ungrateful. And it doesn't make you unholy. There's a book that was written about 400 years ago.

[8 : 00] It's still the best book on contentment. It was a series of sermons by a Puritan called Jeremiah Burroughs. He was an independent minister in the UK in the 17th century.

He was actually a member of the Westminster Assembly from which we got our Confession of Faith and the Catechism, which you confessed earlier. And he wrote a book, which is a brilliant book, called The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment.

And among the many wonderful things that Burroughs says in that book, in his sermons, he says this, the Christian's contentment is quite different from natural contentment.

Christian contentment is quite different from natural contentment. Now we all know what it is to be naturally content. Life is often, isn't it, very, very enjoyable.

There is the joy of living this life. There may be something spiritual in that, I don't know. But there's a natural contentment. Things are going well in your life. And that is not a distinctive Christian contentment, as we'll see in a minute.

[9 : 08] There's a natural contentment, which is rooted with a satisfaction in the way that things are going in your life. But then there's a deep, abiding, distinctively Christian contentment.

That transcends your circumstances and is rooted somewhere else. And so the first thing, can you see it in verse 10? Christian contentment does not make us unfeeling.

It does not make us uncaring. It does not make us ungrateful. It does not make us unholy. Jeremiah Burroughs says that the one who is naturally content with his financial circumstances, with his work, with his family, with his physical health, he's also content if the nation and the world go over the cliff morally.

He's just content no matter what. He's inert. And Burroughs says that is not true Christian contentment. True Christian contentment does get upset about evil.

It does get riled at wrongdoing. It does weep at the news. True Christian contentment does have what we can call a holy anger against evil.

[10:17] So the contented person is not unholy, not unfeeling, not uncaring. Not uncaring about God's kingdom or coming on earth. But the second thing I want you to notice in verse 11, and he says something that I think we need to be careful to study.

Can you see true contentment? Just look at the verse. In verse 11. Not that I'm speaking of being in need for, I have learned. I have learned. I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I have learned to be content. That's the second thing. Some of us have got a more phlegmatic personality, haven't we, which doesn't get riled.

Some of us have got another type of personality where we easily get riled. Some of us are high maintenance. Some of us are low maintenance.

Some of us are more easy come, easy go. Some of us have a more naturally thicker skin. But Paul says, no, that's not what I'm talking about.

[11:20] He's saying this contentment is learned. We know, don't we, from the Lord Jesus Christ, that amazing verse at the start of Luke's gospel, that the Lord Jesus learned obedience.

Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered. And the Apostle Paul is now towards the end of his life. He's about 60 years of age. He's been in Christian ministry probably about 25 years.

And he says, through all my heartbreaks, through all my disappointments, through all my shipwrecks, through all that hostility, through all the times I've endured suffering from the Roman government, all my imprisonments, all my stonings, all the hatred that I've experienced, through it all, what have I learned?

I've learned to be content. And so this morning, it doesn't matter how old you are, there are lessons ahead of you. And there are lessons right now.

And one of the purposes of whatever you're going through this morning in your life is that you would learn this deep secret of the Christian experience, contentment.

[12:34] That you would learn true spiritual contentment. So it's learned there is no microwave solution to this problem. There is no day conference that you can go to that will fix this.

You will not, and you cannot wake up tomorrow, and all of a sudden you're going to be a contented person. No, it is learned day by day.

And you grow more deeply in it all the time. And so if you are a Christian this morning, what is God teaching you in your life?

God is teaching you how to be content. And you might not like it. It might taste very, very bitter this morning. But that is God's purpose.

Are you learning God's lessons? So the first thing is, true contentment doesn't make you uncaring, unfeeling, or unholy, or ungrateful. But the second thing is, true contentment is learned.

[13:40] It's a process. But the third thing is in the latter half of verse 11, and the first half of verse 12. Can you see what he says in verse 11? For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.

I know I'd be brought low, and I know I'd abound in any and every circumstance. I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

Can you see the ennies and the everys? They're all over the place in Philippians 4. In every circumstance, in any circumstance. And so the Apostle Paul doesn't say, I'm so content when I'm on holiday in the Algarve.

He doesn't say, I'm so content when I preach in the synagogue, and there are some Jews who actually come to believe in the Messiah. That's when I'm really content. He doesn't say, I'm so content when I go to the lecture hall, and see some of the pagans renounce their devotions to the gods, and receive Jesus Christ as Lord.

How content I am when those things happen. No, he says, can you see it again? I've learned, whatever the circumstances, whether I'm hungry, or whether I'm well fed, whether I am abounding, or whether I'm down.

[15:07] In whatever circumstances, I've learned contentment. It is universal, and it applies to every circumstance. And so come with me to 2 Corinthians.

Just flick back a little bit. I want to go to 2 Corinthians, and just look at the Apostle Paul, and his life for a minute. So 2 Corinthians, I've got a page number for you. 2 Corinthians chapter 2. And I want you to see for a minute, just how the Apostle applies this to himself.

The Apostle Paul is pretty upset in 2 Corinthians. He is pretty upset with the church in Corinth for how they seem to be abandoning the gospel.

He is pretty, I think there's a discontent, there's a holy discontent, you can see it a little bit in Philippians, but in 2 Corinthians, it's much more explicit. They've gone away from the simplicity of the gospel.

And these people have done some things that the Apostle Paul just cannot get his head around. And so he says in 2 Corinthians chapter 2, and verse 15, he says, for we, that is the Apostles, we are the roamer of Christ to God, among those who are being saved, and among those who are perishing.

[16:30] To one, we are a fragrance from death to death, and to the other, we are a fragrance from life to life. So he says, in every case, we represent Jesus Christ.

We are a fragrance. To some people, it's an odor. You smell like death. The stench of death. Your very presence reminds certain people of final judgment.

You smell like death to them. But to others, you smell like the most beautiful roses you've ever smelled. It is the sweetest perfume that anyone has ever put to their nose.

And so when you come around to them, your smell is the smell of life. Same person, same gospel in your heart, but different odors to different people.

It's really simple. And Paul is saying, that is the way it is with ministry. He's the same person, but sometimes I stink to people, and sometimes I smell sweet to people.

[17:33] And look what he says, verse 16. He says, who is sufficient for this? Who is sufficient for this? Who's up to this? Who's up to being yourself?

Whether it's in junior school, or in high school, whether it's in university, or whether it's in work, whether you're in a firm, or whether you're changing nappies, whether you're teaching classes, whether you're digging ditches, or working in the home.

Who is sufficient to be a contented Christian in this situation? Turn over to 2 Corinthians chapter 12. And Paul continues his discussion.

2 Corinthians chapter 12. And let me read to you from verse 7. 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 7. Paul says, 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 7, he says, so to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh.

A messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

[18:39] But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.

Paul says, who is sufficient? Who is possibly up to this task? And the Lord says, you are. You are by my grace.

Because my grace is sufficient. In the Old Testament, one of the names for God was El Shaddai. Do you remember there was that kind of 1970s chorus, El Shaddai?

You would have sang, I didn't have a clue what it meant when I was growing up. But the word El Shaddai, it means God all sufficient. God is self sufficient.

In the beginning, God, he didn't need you and I. He is self sufficient. And you are insufficient. Like me.

[19:38] But when God takes up residency in your life, by his Holy Spirit, you become sufficient. Can we go ahead and say, can we say, you become self sufficient, because Christ, by his Spirit, is in your life.

And look what the apostle says, in verse 9 of 2 Corinthians chapter 12. He says, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

For the sake of Christ, then I am, can you see it? Content. With weaknesses. I'm content with insults. I'm content with hardships.

I'm content with persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I'm strong. Paul came to that point in his life, where he realized, naturally, I'm not sufficient.

But I welcome the sufficiency, the unique sufficiency, of El Shaddai, of God. And in him, and he in me, I become sufficient.

[20 : 53] And that is the reason that it applies to every circumstance you have this morning. So have you lost your health this morning? Maybe some of you who are watching have lost your health, and I'm deeply sorry about that.

You can be a contented person and still be sorry and ache when your friends ache. But I want to remind you, if you have lost your health this morning, you can still be content.

You are to be sufficient in these things. Why? Because, why? Because, Jesus Christ has died and is risen from the dead.

And he who was dead is alive forevermore. and he is the one who is going to come back again. And he is going to make us alive with him.

And until that time, he will hold me fast. And though the dread of night overwhelms my soul, he is here with me. I am not alone. Oh, his love is sure and he knows my name for my God is the Ancient of Days.

[22 : 07] none above him. None before him all of time in his hands. And he will hold you fast. He has rescued you from death and he has brought you to life in Christ and he has given you every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ.

So let me ask you this morning, what else do you want from God? What more can God give you than he has not given you? What are you lacking?

What makes you insufficient in such a time? In fact, the word that Paul uses in Philippians 4 is the word sufficient. In fact, contentment is, if I can put it like this, self-sufficiency.

And the natural person, the person who doesn't know God, they will try to be self-sufficient on their own. And they are completely and totally insufficient.

And actually, if people are honest and lots of wealthy people are honest and lots of successful people are honest, they ultimately discover they're not sufficient. They're not satisfied.

[23 : 19] But if you have El Shaddai, God, in your life, you can experience any circumstance. And so, a loss of health, the loss of a parent, the loss of a spouse, the loss of a child, the loss of your mind.

And Paul is saying that you can cope with that whatever the circumstances because of what God has done in the Lord Jesus Christ. Universally, the secret of contentment works.

So lastly, number four, let's look at the latter half, verses 12 and 13. And I want to tell you that Paul is teaching us here that there is a secret to contentment. There's a secret to contentment.

And he says, I've discovered a secret. I've learned the secret. Whatever the circumstance. So there's that famous verse, isn't there, in verse 12?

In verse 12, I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound in any and every circumstance. I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger and abundance and need. I can do, verse 13, all things through him who strengthens me.

[24 : 46] It's the kind of verse I would have read on the morning of exams not having done a pick of work and any revision. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. With man it is impossible but with God all things are possible.

But it's the kind of verses, now I see it a lot, verse 13, it's the kind of verse that Christian sportsmen send to each other, I hope. Well, I don't know whether Angus and Jan send it to each other but Christian sportsmen bang on about this verse.

I can do all things through him who gives me strength. But the problem is when Christian sportsmen send that to each other what they're trying to say is basically I can win with God on my side.

I think the verse is saying the exact opposite. I think that's the exact opposite of what the apostle means. The apostle does not mean that you've got strength to go out and win the game but actually that you've got strength to go out and lose the game and still be content.

Whatever my circumstances, whether I win or lose, I have a secret. I have a secret that allows me to be weak and allows me to be insulted and it allows me to be a loser in the eyes of the world.

[26 : 00] What is the secret? What is this mystery? It is none other than the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the secret. And that's the joy that made little Fanny Crosby so elated and so full of joy and so full of praise to God be the glory great things he has done.

So loved he the world that he gave us his son. It's the reason that she was able to be grateful for her blindness because she had the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. What a life.

What a life to find this secret through which you can do all things and endure all things with deep joy. And that's what it means to be content with our heavenly bridegroom satisfied by his love, ravished by his grace.

This one who came and lived for us and died for us and was raised from us. who is now ascended to the right hand of the Father and he has gone to prepare a place for us that we don't deserve and he loves us this morning and one day he will come and we will meet him in the air and we will see him and we will be like him and we will enjoy him all eternity.

And when you and I find Christian people who are truly contented when you find them resisting as I've seen in some of you resisting things which would be enjoyable and would be profitable when we see that in others people resisting things that would be enjoyable and profitable and they would love themselves but they resist them we say to them their saviour must be someone worth meeting someone worth living for.

[27 : 50] It's the reason why John Piper has kind of built his life around this statement that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. And so we pray for the gift of contentment which must be learned.

This gift of contentment which will make you more caring and feeling and loving than you were before. Which satisfies you in every circumstance which deeply roots your life in the Lord Jesus Christ and is seen in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Philippians in many ways is a letter written by a contented man. A man who's chained hand and foot on four hour rotations. He's been shipwrecked on his way to Rome and yet he's fully content and he can't wait to meet his saviour.

And so what excuses are you making for your lack of a contentment? And will you lay them at the foot of the cross? And will you acknowledge that by his death he has purchased everything for you? That your sins can be forgiven and your future secure? And you have the unspeakable privilege of his royal presence with you all the time. And so I want to finish with three applications.

[29 : 09] When I googled books on contentment and articles on contentment lots of articles are written but books written I would say in the last 10 to 15 years there's probably been about 10 books good biblical books on contentment.

One of them is a rip off of Burroughs and Thomas Watson. The other nine are all written for women. So it's really interesting isn't it?

And so if I was speaking on lust this morning I would mainly direct it towards the men. Lust can be an issue for women but it's mainly an issue for men.

And so I want to take my life in my hands and put the out of office in my email for a little while. And I do want to speak to the women in the congregation and say I think pastorally speaking that this is a bigger issue for you than it is for many of the guys.

Whether it's a partner longing to meet someone whether it's a child whether it's looking at what someone else has whether it's longing for a home whether it's longing for a bigger home whether it's seeing someone else's family someone else's husband.

[30 : 28] And I think that this is an issue for us as a church family. I don't say that judgmentally I say this is something that we need to talk about and we need to share with one another and care for one another in.

And so firstly to the women in the congregation. And then tied to that is friendships within the congregation. And so it is possible isn't it that we can have friendships which don't help one another.

And so you can have friendships where the only thing you talk about are the things that you don't have. And so let's not magnify discontentment.

And if we find ourselves talking about things that we've gone over over and over and over again leave us feeling more discontented at that point we've got to say let's talk about someone else.

And then the third thing for all of us is the witness of the congregation. We live in a city don't we that is so discontent.

[31 : 36] that is always looking for. And so at the moment it's that people are yearning they are living they are longing for summer holidays after having been cooped up for a couple of years.

But a people that are content a people that in the midst of suffering recognize the hand of God and the providence of God and that our times are in his hand and he will hold me fast is an incredibly powerful witness in our city.

what excuses are you making for your lack of contentment? Let's lay them at the foot of the cross and acknowledge that by his death he has purchased everything for you your sins are forgiven your future is secure what more could God do for you? And he's already done. Let's pray.