

The Contented Christian

Philippians 4:10-23

John 19:1-3, 16-18, 25-30

A recent headline in the Times; "Depression overtakes obesity on GP list of most common illnesses", 42% of all marriages will end in divorce, 22% of girls and 9% of boys will self-harm. Is this because of wealth or poverty? Many of the lottery winners have had their lives torn apart; a 16year old £1.8m winner attempted suicide and now has £2,000 left after 13 years, £10m winner after 8 years bankrupt and living on the streets and the £148m winners had been married for 9 years but split after 15 months. I could go on; lotteries have a litany of tragedy in their wake.

Facebook, Instagram, Snap Chat, what is my image looking like – well there is little that can be done to improve the photographic image of an ageing, slightly overweight man with a receding hairline, but Anthony we still love you!

Latest fashions, constant advertising and marketing of the next new thing, envy and greed, leave the EU or stay. This is our society today, a society of discontent.

What is contentment? The shorter Oxford Dictionary gives the following definition:

"Having your desires bounded by what you have, desiring nothing more or nothing different."

As we come to the end of our study in Philippians Paul describes himself as a contented Christian, desiring nothing more or nothing different. How did Paul come to this point of view at the end of his letter? In order to answer this question I want to go back and look through the whole letter and draw out how Paul arrived at this conclusion to describe his state of mind.

Now the commentaries spend a lot of time trying to work out where Paul was when he wrote this letter but the letter itself and the Acts of the Apostles are not conclusive. Was he actually in prison, or under house arrest with a guard constantly by his side as Acts 28 implies. Commentaries also raise the question as to whether this was one letter to the Philippians or two or more that were joined together at a later date. In my opinion it doesn't matter as these issues do not alter the situation Paul was in or his relationship to the Christians in Philippi.

Paul was in chains awaiting trial and possible execution. But let's not speculate, Paul is not shy of spelling out to the Philippians the situation he is in. The following texts are taken from chapters 1 to 3 of the letter;

"I am in chains;

What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel;

I am in chains for Christ;

Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter;

Christ is preached and because of this I rejoice;

I will continue to rejoice, for I know what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance;

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

Paul is not in a good situation, a prisoner, held in chains, expecting to be executed, if executed as a Roman Citizen, beheading, if not either the arena to be devoured by wild animals or crucifixion. Paul is hoping that he will not bring shame upon himself as he dies, looking forward to be with Christ, he writes;

"Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the life and death: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far."

It is in the light of this struggle, facing the possibility of death we come to the last 14 verses of the letter in which Paul states;

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

I have learned to desire nothing more and nothing less whatever the circumstances. Paul how can you say that? You are in chains, facing trial and possible execution but you desire nothing more and nothing less.

Paul emphasises the point again;

"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."

I have learned the secret of not wanting anything more or anything less in any and every situation.

Here is our clue, I have learned, Paul's state of mind was not like the passengers in my little speed boat, abandon all hope all who voyage in her. Paul has learned to be content. Again I would like to go back through the letter to the Philippians and see what it was that Paul has learned.

"Through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." Paul knew Christians were praying for him and he knew the Holy Spirit dwelt within him.

"It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose." That spirit within Paul led to Paul to will and to act for God's good purpose.

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul’s faith and confidence in his eternal salvation leads him to look forward to his heavenly home with Christ, but if he continues to live it is in the service of the Gospel and Jesus.

“Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.” Paul knows that salvation which comes from forgiveness through the love and sacrifice of Jesus is all that matters in the end.

“I want to know Christ, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” Paul desire is to be as Christ like as he can, in the knowledge that he can only achieve this through the power of Jesus resurrection.

“One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.” Even Paul had to work at it, our salvation comes from the sacrifice of Jesus, but if we truly believe this there has to be a response, we cannot just sit back and wait for salvation to happen.

“Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” We are already saved and we are citizens of heaven, this is our home.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Even in Paul’s desolate situation he knew God heard his prayers and he was confident that God is at work in Paul to will and to act in order to fulfil God’s good purpose.

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. And the God of peace will be with you.” It is proactive; we have to direct our thinking to such things to receive God’s peace.

This why Paul could conclude his letter with these words; “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. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” These are the things Paul has learnt and the Peace which transcends all understanding was with him and he was content.

Finally Paul said; “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”

David

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