

# THE SECRET OF TRUE CONTENTMENT

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Texts: Psalm 46; Habakkuk 3:17-19; Philippians 4:11a-13

What is contentment? “Freedom from worry or discomfort,” says Websters. One of the native pursuits of the human soul, say the philosophers; something we all seek.

Contentment is not always a desirable thing. There are things in this life with which we should not be contented. Sometimes it is our very discontent that drives us to better things. We are discontented with ignorance, for instance, so we seek knowledge. We are discontented with injustice and war, so we seek justice and strive for peace. We are discontented with our own shortcomings, so we strive to improve ourselves. Discontent with the way things are is often the stirring of the very Spirit of God within us, spurring us to better things.

Still, there is a contentment we should all seek. The word Paul uses in the original Greek that is translated “contentment” in our Philippians passage of this morning gives us a strong clue to the kind of contentment Paul suggests we *should* strive for. The word is a contraction of two words in the original Greek: *Auto* which means self, and *arkin* which means sufficient. The word is, literally, *self-sufficient*. “I have learned,” says Paul, “to be in all things self sufficient.” He borrows the word from the Stoics. The Stoics’ aim was to be ruled by the inner impulses rather than by outer circumstances; to be so detached from the world’s loves and losses, successes and failures, passions and pains, that these things no longer moved the soul. This meaning comes down to our modern language when we say someone is “Stoic” about something. Detached. Unmoved. Unfeeling.

Paul takes this word and fills it with new meaning. For Paul, *autarkin* doesn’t mean being coldly aloof and detached from life’s troubles as the Stoic would be. It means being at peace within oneself even while engaged with life’s troubles. Not being above the fray, but calm within it. Not taking the boat out of the water, but keeping the water out of the boat.

A perfect picture of this kind of contentment was Jesus. Jesus was not a Stoic by an standard; not unmoved or untouched by the pains and injustices around him. If anyone was ever passionately engaged with the sorrows of this world, Jesus was. But even while the storms blew everywhere around him—of controversy, of hostility, of criticism, of poverty, of fear – Jesus was always at home within his own skin, always calm and collected of soul, always in control of his own inner climate.

I don’t know about you, but this is a brand of contentment that I could use more of. To be calm on the inside whatever happens outside. You too? In our New Testament reading, Paul gives us some clues to the attainment of this kind of contentment.

First of all, Paul makes it clear that it doesn’t fall on us like sunshine. “I have learned,” he says. It’s the picture of a student at the feet of a Rabbi. “*I have learned the secret* of true contentment.” Here again, Paul borrows an expression of Greek spirituality. In those days, there were religious and philosophical sects called *mystery cults* in which there were degrees of ordeal and discipline which initiates could pursue. Only a very few reached the level of mastery of the sect’s most guarded secrets which they took an oath never to disclose.

“I have been initiated,” says Paul, “into the secret of contentment.”

The meaning is clear. Contentment is not something that descends on us in our ease and luxury. No, contentment is a learned quality. And where is it learned? Through the ordeals of

life: through the degrees of life's changeable experiences of success and failure, ups and downs, highs and lows, gains and losses.

"I have learned the secret of being at the same calm within myself whatever the circumstance," says Paul. "I have learned it in the academy of hard experience."

Think about the things that steal your inner contentment away. I'll tell you what the biggest one is for me: *Fretting*, that's the word. My mother used to call it "fussing." *Fretting* about what circumstances may bring. *Fretting* about the swirling currents rising at my feet, that they may suck me down. *Fretting* about today's troubles and tomorrow's potential dangers. *Fretting about* my circumstances is what wears me out, interrupts my sleep, steals away my peace, much more than the circumstances themselves.

When the United States dug the Panama Canal at the turn of the last century, an army man named Colonel Goethals was appointed the chief engineer. One day after millions of tons of earth had been dug with huge machines, there was a great mudslide and all the earth slid back into the ditch. One of the supervisors came running to Goethals who was watching what had happened. "Oh my, oh my," cried the man, "what are we going to do, what are we going to do?" Goethals calmly struck a match, lit his pipe and said, "Dig it out again."

Now there's an approach worth acquiring! When life tumbles in, there's no use fretting about it. No use fussing about it. No use throwing a fit about it. Simply get to work and make the best of the situation; that's the smart thing to do, isn't it?

"I have learned whatever circumstances bring to me," says Paul, "to take things as they come, to keep my head, keep my calm and work the problem instead of letting the problem work me."

Reminds me of the story of Moses and his staff. God said to Moses, "Throw your staff down." Moses did and it became a serpent. Moses ran in terror from the staff become snake. Then God commanded Moses "Seize the serpent by the tail," and when he did the serpent became a staff in his hand again. So many of life's circumstance and potential dangers are just like that. Let go of them and they become frightful serpents from which you want to flee. But seize them by the tail and they become tools in your hand for a wiser approach or a changed perspective or a healing result.

Which brings us to something else very important in this passage, in fact vital: Paul goes on to say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." More accurately, it means "I am able or equal to any challenge, through Christ who infuses me with strength." This confidence, this contentment in the face of life's troubles and storms and surprises, whatever life may bring, is faith not ones own feeble and unpredictable powers, but in God's all-sufficient power at work within. Not a cocky "I can handle anything by myself (good luck!)," but a trusting "God is able within me to handle it." Psalm 46 paints the picture.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult ... God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

God is in the midst of the city; that is the key! Not the strength of the city's armies, nor the bulwarks of the city's defense nor the cleverness of the city's strategists." It is God in the midst, whatever comes; that is our confidence.

Years ago, we owned a vintage house whose chimney was disintegrating from old age. The cement between these wonderful old bricks was crumbling to the extent that some windy

night, the chimney could collapse. We thought it would have to be rebuilt top to bottom which would be quite a project, not to mention that many of the vintage bricks would be lost. But just about then, we heard of a new technology for this kind of problem. Instead of tearing the chimney down and rebuilding, a sleeve of strong ceramic was poured down along the lining of the chimney reinforcing it from the inside.

While I was reflecting on this technology, I happened to read this verse in Psalm 46 in my devotions and it took on new meaning: “God is in the midst of the city. Therefore whatever the storm,” says the psalmist in essence, “whatever winds blow, we will not fear.”

So says Paul: “This is the secret of true contentment, knowing and trusting that the Spirit of God within me will make me able and equal to any present challenge or future calamity.”

Does fear at times steal your contentment? It does mine. Does worry about what tomorrow may bring drain away your inner calm? It does mine. Do you find yourself wondering whether you will be able to handle and manage and endure some particular trouble of life if or when it finally comes to you? I do. “Be still and know that I am God,” says the Lord. **There** is the secret of contentment and a verse (Psalm 46:10) worth memorizing and meditating on.

After the great Chicago fire of 1871, a successful Chicago lawyer named Horatio Spafford made arrangements for his family to take a trip to Europe, Mrs. Spafford and their four daughters going on ahead, and Mr. Spafford joining them a little later.

The ship on which the happy mother and children sailed, the Ville du Havre, never got farther than half-way across the Atlantic before it was rammed in the dead of night by another sailing vessel and cut in two. In the confusion and calamity that followed, Mrs. Spafford saw all four of her girls swept away to their death. A falling mast knocked her unconscious and a wave freakishly deposited her body on a substantial piece of wreckage where, later, she regained consciousness. When she and a few other survivors reached Cardiff, Wales, Mrs. Spafford cabled two words to her husband: “Saved alone.” Taking the earliest ship he could get, he hastened to his wife’s side, the incredible ache of his heart going out to her and up to God. It was when his ship reached the approximate spot where the Ville du Havre had met its doom that God gave him the inspiration and courage to write:

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.”

Does not that song touch a chord in you? Is that not the kind of contentment we seek and that the Bible teaches? Not that we would wish upon ourselves or anyone else such tragedy and trouble, but having the confidence that  
whatever the circumstance, God’s peace will guard our hearts,  
whatever the quandary, God’s wisdom will guide our paths,  
whatever the storm, God’s unfailing inner resource will lead us on to healing and  
haven and ultimate happiness.

This is the secret of the un-rattled, unruffled, unworried soul. “I have learned ...” says Paul. And may we learn it too!