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I Have Learned to be Content 4: 10-13

I have learned to be content DIG: What is contentment? What are Paul's circumstances at this time (1:13-14)? How do you think Paul discovered the secret of contentment while under house arrest? How can our contentment be a witness to the lost? What does Isaiah say about overcoming the limit of our physical strength and resources? What does it mean to be independent of circumstances?

REFLECT: In what areas of your life do you struggle with contentment? What outside force is most likely to upset your contentment? Since God doesn't always change negative circumstances, what might you need to change so that contentment is possible for you? Are you content with little? Are you content in abundance? How can you help others in this area of contentment this week?

Contentment is the ability to be utterly at peace in spite of negative circumstances.



Contentment is a highly prized, but elusive virtue. Though it comes only from being rightly related to **ADONAI** and trusting in **His** sovereign, loving, purposeful

providence; nevertheless, people seek it where it cannot be found . . . in money, possessions, power, prestige, relationships, jobs, or freedom from difficulties. But by that definition, **contentment** is unattainable, for it is impossible in this fallen world to be completely free from problems. In sharp contrast to the world's understanding of contentment is this simple definition of spiritual contentment written by the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, "Christian **contentment** is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in **God's** wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."¹⁸¹

As John MacArthur relates in his commentary on *Philippians*, before concluding this letter to **his** beloved **Philippian** congregation, **Paul** wanted to express **his** deeply felt gratitude to **them**. **He** had a special relationship with **them** since the founding of the church at **Philippi**. At one point in **Paul's** ministry years earlier, **they** were the only church that had supported **him** financially (**4:15-16**). Now **they** had once again sent **him a gift**, and **4:10-19** is **Paul's** thank-you note back to **them** for **it**.

Beneath the surface of **Paul's** expression of thanks to **the Philippians** is the picture of **a man** utterly **content** in spite of such severe **circumstances**. In the direct statement of **4:9**, **Paul** offered **himself** as an example of spiritual stability. In **verses 4-10**, as **he** thanked **the Philippians** for **their gift**, **he** indirectly offered **himself** as an example of contentment. **Paul** knew how to rejoice in every circumstance and be free from **anxiety** and **worry** (**to see link click [Bn](#) - Do Not be Anxious about Anything**), because **his** heart was guarded by **the peace of God** and **the God of peace**. **His** example is especially relevant today in our discontented culture.

Five principles of contentment flow from this seemingly mundane conclusion of **Paul's** letter. A **contented** person is confident in **God's** providence, satisfied with little, independent from **circumstances**, strengthened by divine power and preoccupied with the well-being of others. **(1)** A **contented** person is confident in **God's** providence (**4:10**); **(2)** A **contented** person is satisfied with little (**4:11**); **(3)** A **contented** person is independent of **circumstances** (**4:12**); **(4)** A **contented** person is strengthened by divine power (**4:13**); and **(5)** A **contented** person is preoccupied with the well-being of others (**4:14-19**).

(1) A contented person is confident in God's providence: I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last you revived your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it (4:10 NIV). Ten years had passed since **Paul's** ministry in **Philippi** had resulted in the founding of

the church in that **city**. **The Philippians** had generously supported **him** when **he** left **Philippi** to minister in the Macedonian cities of **Thessalonica** and **Berea (Acts 17:1-13)**. When **Paul** moved south into **Achaia**, **the Philippians** continued **their** support as **he** ministered in **Athens** and **Corinth (Acts 17:14 to 18:18)**. As the years passed, **they** had consistently been **concerned** about **Paul**, but lacked any **opportunity** to provide support for **him**. The reason for that lack is not given. Perhaps it was due to **their** preoccupation with **their** crushing poverty (**Second Cor 8:1-2**). **He** did so not primarily because **the gift** met **his** need, but because it gave evidence of **their** love for **him**. **His joy** overflowed **that now at last**, after ten years, **they** had **revived their concern for him**.

The Greek verb translated **revived** is a botanical metaphor, meaning *to blossom again*, like perennials or Spring shoots of trees or bushes. So, **the Philippians' generous** support for **Paul**, after lying dormant for ten years, had once *again blossomed*. **The apostle's** statement **indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it**, was intended to allay any misunderstanding on **the Philippians' part**. Both verbs in this clause are imperfects, implying continual **concern**. So **Paul** knew that **their** lack of support had nothing to do with **their** concern for **him**, **they** merely lacked the opportunity to express it (**Second Corinthians 8:12**).

But recently an opportunity arose when **Epaphroditus** arrived in **Rome**, bringing with a generous **gift** from **the Philippians (4:18)** for which **Paul rejoiced in the Lord greatly**.

Paul's gracious attitude reflects **his** patient confidence in **ADONAI's** sovereign providence. **He** was certain that in due time **God** would arrange **his circumstances** to meet **his** needs. There was no panic on **his** part, no attempt to manipulate people, no taking matters into **his** own hands. **The apostle** was content because **he** knew that the times, seasons, and opportunities of life are controlled by the sovereign **God who works all things after the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11)**, thereby causing **all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28)**. Those who seek to control their own lives will inevitably be frustrated. A confident trust in **God's** providence is foundational to contentment.

(2) A contented person is satisfied with little: In case **the Philippians** misjudged **his** statement in **verse 10**, **Paul** quickly added a disclaimer. **Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever**

circumstances I find myself (4:11 Greek). Though the situation was extremely difficult and stressful, **Paul** was not unhappy. It didn't matter that **he** was a prisoner, living under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier, subsisting on a sparse diet. None of that affected **his** contentment, because **he** was satisfied with what little **he** had. **His** contentment was not affected by **his** physical reality.

The Greek word translated **content** in verse 11 appears only here in the B'rit Chadashah. In extra-biblical Greek it was used to speak of being self-sufficient, having enough, or not being dependent on others. True **contentment** comes only from **God**, and enables believers to be satisfied and at ease in the midst of any problem. This is seemingly impossible in today's society. People are not content with either little or much. Instead, people are obsessed with explaining their needs and loudly demanding that they be met. Need has become the number one value in our culture. Starting from the humanistic premise that **God** does not exist and mankind is therefore the ultimate and the goal in life becomes getting their needs met. They think that at the end of their life, the ones with the most toys wins.

Adding to the discontent is the blurring of the distinction between needs and wants. In today's world, almost everything has become a "need." Thus people "need" better jobs, fancier cars, and bigger homes; women "need" careers outside the home, and paradoxically, "nee" children; young people "need" unending sexual encounters to liberate their repressed egos; children "need" the freedom to express themselves outside the "bondage" of parental control. Like a hamster running around and around on a wheel and going nowhere, people desperately chase **the contentment** that is always tantalizingly just out of reach. But **Paul** knew that the chief end of mankind is not to have our "needs" met, but to glorify **God** and enjoy **Him** forever. Because of that, **he** was satisfied with whatever **God** graciously granted **him**. **He** worked hard, and was content to let **God** control the results. When difficult times came, **Paul** remained **content** because **he** was satisfied with little.

(3) A contented person is independent from circumstances. 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 (4:12 Greek). **Paul** explains what **he** alluded to in the previous verse. The twice-repeated phrase **I know how . . . I also know how** reveals that **he** had learned by experience and spiritual maturity to live above **his circumstances** and not to let them affect **his contentment**. This is an important lesson for us to learn for it's the difficult **circumstances** in life that most frequently steal our **joy** and our **contentment**.

Like **Agur** (see the commentary on **Proverbs Dt - The Sayings of Agur**), we need to find the sweet-spot in life: **Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread** (see **Proverbs Du - The Prayer of Agur**). That is **contentment**.

Paul's statement: **I know how to get along with humble means**, to be **hungry**, and to **suffer need** indicates that **he** had had **his** share of poverty. **He** knew what it was to get by with meager material things. But **he** also knew how to **live in prosperity**, to be **filled**, and to **have** an **abundance** when **God** granted **him** more than **he** needed. All six of these terms refer to the material, earthly needs of this life, not to spiritual needs.

Paul was no ivory tower theologian; **he** had lived and ministered in the trenches. **His** life was not exactly a testimonial for the prosperity gospel! **The apostle's** trials began at **Damascus** shortly after **his** conversion. At **Lystra** on **his** first missionary journey, hostile **Jews** came from **Antioch** and **Iconium**, and having won over **the** **crowds**, **they stoned Paul** and **dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead (Acts 14:19)**. Many of **the Philippian** believers no doubt remembered what happened to **Paul** and **his** fellow preacher **Silas** at **Philippi (Acts 16:22-24)**. And things didn't get much better for **the apostle** at **Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-10)**. Trouble, in the form of hostile, unbelieving **Jews**, followed **Paul** from **Thessalonica** to **Berea (Acts 17:13)**. Forced to flee **Berea**, **Paul** went to **Athens** where **he** was mocked and ridiculed by the skeptical Greek philosophers gathered at **Mars Hill (Acts 17:18-34)**. From Athens Paul went to Corinth where **Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat (Acts 18:12)**. After ministering for three months in Greece, **a plot [to kill Paul] was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria (Acts 20:3)**. When **he** got to **Jerusalem**, **Paul** was attacked and savagely beaten after **the Jews** from Asia Minor recognized **him** in **the Temple (Acts 21:31-35)**. Rescued from certain death by the quick action of **a Roman officer (Acts 21:31-35)**, **Paul** began his long stay in Roman custody. Two years later, after hearings before the Sanhedrin and the Roman governor failed to resolve **his** situation, **Paul** exercised his right as a Roman citizen to **appeal to Caesar**. After a harrowing sea voyage, which included a terrifying, two-week-long storm that ended in a shipwreck (**Acts 27**). **Paul** finally arrived in Rome (**Acts 28**). As **he** wrote this letter to **the Philippians**, **the apostle** was under house arrest in Rome. In summing up **his** hard, difficult, painful life, **Paul** explained it all to **the Corinthians (Second**

Corinthians 11:22-33).

In all of **Paul's** unique and constant sufferings, **he** had **learned the secret** of rising above them. In the midst of all **his** trials, **he** kept **his** focus on heavenly realities (cf. **Colossians 3:1-2**). In **Second Corinthians 4:17**, the **apostle** wrote: **For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond comprehension.** With that perspective. Is it any surprise that no amount of suffering could affect **his contentment**? We can't all be like **the apostle Paul** in regard to **contentment**, but that should be our goal.

(4) A contented person is strengthened by divine power. No matter how difficult his struggles may have been, **Paul** had a spiritual undergirding, an invisible means of support. **His** adequacy and sufficiency came from **his** union with the adequate and sufficient **Messiah**. **Paul** declared: **I have been crucified with Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).**

When **Paul** wrote: **I can do** (Greek: *ischuo*) **all things**, **he** had in mind physical, not spiritual **things**. *Ischuo* means *to be strong, to have power, or to have resources*. It is variously translated as overpowered (**Acts 19:16**), prevailing (**Acts 19:20**), and effective (**James 5:16**). The Greek text emphasizes the word translated **all things** (the context is a reference to physical needs in **verses 11-12**) by placing **it** first in the sentence. **Paul** was strong enough to endure anything **through Him who strengthens me (4:13 ESV; cf. First Timothy 1:12 and Second Timothy 4:17)**. The **apostle** does not, of course, mean that **he** could physically survive indefinitely without food, water, sleep, or shelter. And notwithstanding the reality of martyrs in our world even to this very day. But what **he** is saying is that when **he** reached the limit of **his** physical resources and strength, even to the point of **death**, **he** was infused with the strength of **Messiah**. **He** could overcome the most dire physical difficulties because of the inner, spiritual strength that **ADONAI** had given **him**. In the words of **Isaiah 40:29-31: ADONAI gives strength to the weary and increases the power to the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in ADOANI will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not get tired.**

It is important to note that only those who live lives of obedience to **God's Word** and **His** will can count on **His** power to sustain them. Those whose continued sin

has led them into the pit of despair cannot expect **God** to bring them **contentment** from their **circumstances**. In fact, he may even add to their difficulties to chasten them and bring them to repentance. But **God's** power will bring **contentment** to those who have no strength of their own. There is no quick fix . . . no shortcut to **contentment**. It only comes to those strengthened by divine power, and that divine power does not come through counselors, therapy, positive thinking, or self-help formulas, but only from consistent godly living.¹⁸¹

*Dear heavenly **Father**, Praise you that I can be content as I focus and trust in **Your** love and power, no matter what is happening in this world (**Philippians 4:10**). What a comfort to know that **You** are almighty. **You** are in control. Trials of this life will soon be over and the joys of living and praising you will last for all eternity! **For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18)**. My heart goes way beyond contentment, to deep joy knowing that **Messiah** has promised to prepare a place in heaven for me. **Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be (John 14:1-3)**. When I rest in **Your** love, it brings me such **contentment**! My heart is full of praise. **You** are so worthy of my love! In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*