

## The Secret of Contentment Philippians 4 May 2020

While in 'lockdown' in the Mamertine prison in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome, the Apostle Paul has been keeping busy, writing letters that under the inspiration and supervision of the Holy Spirit would become valued sections of the New Testament. *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, *Philemon* and this short 'thankyou' note to the Christian fellowship he helped found in Philippi Macedonia were all written from confinement.

With real warmth and affection Paul has thanked the Philippians for their support and reassured them that in all kinds of circumstances, including his imprisonment and even should he be executed, God is working for ultimate good, the spread of the Christian message and many coming to salvation and fulness of life through Jesus. He has taken the opportunity to instruct them, reminding them that what really matters is knowing Christ by faith and following the Lord's example of humility, obedience, kindness and self-sacrifice. Christians are to 'press on', to persevere on this path of discipleship in happy anticipation of one day being with our Master in glory.

While these are serious principles for living, Philippians is far from being a sober or dull read. It's sometimes called 'the Epistle of joy' because of its positive, almost bubbly tone! 'Rejoice in the Lord always' Paul writes here in ch4, 'Let me repeat that, *rejoice!*'

We know from Paul's letter to the Galatians that joy is one of the 'fruits', one of the results of being indwelt and influenced by God the Holy Spirit. Now make no mistake. The Apostle is not being trite or naïve. Paul is experiencing real personal hardship and he carries a burden of responsibility and concern for individuals and congregations facing 1<sup>st</sup> challenges of poverty, disease and persecution yet the presence of the Lord strengthens him to be positive, even cheerful.

Let's consider three aspects of this which we find here in Philippians ch4 and we'll call them Confidant, Controlled and Content.

First of all he is **confidant**, not in himself but in God and the Lord Jesus. He has already stressed in ch 3 that he no longer puts any reliance on his own background or personal achievements, he rests everything on what Jesus did for us at the cross and does for us in giving us the Holy Spirit as our Comforter and Guide. Now listen to the promises he shares with his fellow believers:

v7 'The peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

V9 'The God of peace will be with you.'

V19 'My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.'

God gave His Son to die for us, He will generously provide 'all things'. Christians can rejoice, even in difficult times, for the Lord is with us, bringing His peace to our hearts, providing our every need.

This confidence prompts Paul to live a life under careful **control**. Self-control is another fruit of the Spirit and here is what might seem an irony to some, that self discipline is actually the way to greater freedom and even more joy. Look at how this is to work in practise.

He urges his readers to pray about everything. We are to pray frequently every day, thanking God for His grace and love thus far and bringing to Him our natural concerns. Is something on your mind? Don't be overcome by fear or anxiety. The Lord invites us to bring Him our requests. Whether we are released from prison or executed for our faith we are promised the resources we need!

Notice how Paul also recommends some mental discipline. We cannot prevent thoughts coming to our minds but we can control what we choose to dwell on. We can choose what we read or watch with this extra time – what will we feed our minds on during lockdown?

Self control also applies to relationships. See how with respect and genuine affection Pastor Paul appeals to a couple of particular church members to try and 'agree in the Lord'. We'll not see eye to eye about everything but let's not forget the faith that unites us. With a little self control curbing our tongues and actions we'll hopefully avoid spoiling things with unnecessary fall outs!

This confidence in the Lord and willingness to live a careful, controlled life results in a remarkable sense of **contentment**. Paul has lost home and material comforts, not to mention a promising career and social standing and now he's unfairly imprisoned but still he is filled with joy. He regards himself as a citizen of heaven. He knows the greatest inheritance is still to come. He will give thanks for whatever he's given in the meantime, be it little or much.

Here is the testimony of a mature Christian and it should be the aspiration of every one of us who seeks to follow Jesus:

'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 everything through Him Who gives me strength.'

May we know the grace and help and strength of the Lord today and throughout our lives and, like Paul, may it cause us to constantly rejoice!

Amen