

## The Art of Contentment

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Are you content in your life? What is it to be truly content anyway? Look to Job and Paul in the bible as examples of content people. From these two men we can learn how we ourselves can become content also. We to can practice true contentment.

The book of Job begins by introducing Job as a man who is blameless. You cannot not find fault in this man. He is also upright or honest. He is a man that shuns evil, a godly man who wants to please God. His only worries concern his children who do not live lives pleasing to God. We quickly learn that Job is a wealthy man. But God allows the devil to test Job by taking away his wealth along with his entire family, except his wife. Job went into mourning after his great loss according to the customs of his day. (Job 1:10) Later Job gets sores all over his body so bad that his friends do not recognize him. Job sums up his life's philosophy and illustrates his contentment when he says his famous verses below.

<sup>21</sup> ... "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."

<sup>22</sup> Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

Job 1:21–22 (NASB95)

Another equally content man of God is the Apostle Paul, who says he has learned to be content. He has a contentment that does not depend on outside circumstances. Paul is content in either good times or tough times. He remains content even when his human needs are lacking, and he is hungry.

<sup>11</sup> Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:11–13 (NASB95)

Here in Philippians, Paul is thinking of his physical needs. A person, it seems, could always use more than they have. But Paul has learned to be content with whatever he had, how be it much or little. This contentment is not just the ability to do without. A lot of whether a person is content depends and a person's purpose in life. A person committed to living with extraordinarily little could be terribly upset and discontented if they inherited great wealth. In verse 13, Paul lets us in on his secret of how he is able to be content, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"<sup>1</sup>

This informs us that Paul trusts in God and depends on Him to strengthen him to meet every situation. He is not saying he receives superhuman strength. The word "Strengthen"

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 4:13

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(ἐνδυναμώ) carries with it the idea of “enabling”, “to cause one to be able to function or do something”<sup>2</sup> Paul knows he is able to accomplish his task because he can trust God to help him when he needs help. Certainly, God’s help to him can be superhuman, miraculous, or ordinary as God chooses. Paul’s knowing God’s help is nearby allows him to be content.

Paul mentored a younger man, Timothy. He tells Timothy of the “great gain” godliness brings when one is content. It is good and desirable to be godly, but the benefits are greater when one is also content. He paraphrases the first part of the quote from Job in verse 7 below.

<sup>6</sup> But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. <sup>7</sup> For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. <sup>8</sup> If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

1 Timothy 6:6–8 (NASB95)

It has already been said that contentment is a learned trait. It is something Paul has “learned” and he is helping Timothy to learn contentment also and in doing so he also teaches us how to be content. A person can learn to be content with only the very basic necessities, such as food and covering. Covering here is most likely referring to clothing. The word “Covering” (σκέπασμα) means “that which serves as a cover and hence as a protection”<sup>3</sup> and mostly refers to clothing but can also refer to shelter, such as a house. This shows us how little Paul needed to be content even though he also aware of what it was like to have plenty.

Job’s contentment endures his moment of great distress and mourning. He experienced the greatest test any person, other than what Christ endured on the cross. Job’s friends arrived with good intentions though not helpful at all. Job remains steadfast as his “helpful” friends continued to gnaw at him as they try to convince him he must have sinned. Job has good reason to believe he is innocent of sinning against God even as he faced the possibility of dying.

We witness the degree of Paul’s contentment by his situation at the time he wrote Philippians. He was in Rome to see the Emperor. He was there as a prisoner and the Emperor was his judge. The outcome was uncertain. It could turn out either good or badly for him. Yet Paul had the clarity of mind to write 4 letters<sup>4</sup> to churches while waiting in prison. These letters now serve as a valuable part of our bibles today.

Neither Job nor Paul feel like their lives are out of control because they have entrusted themselves and their lives to God. This is the first step in true contentment. Recall Philippians 4:13 where Paul says, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” This trust in the

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<sup>2</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 333). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 927). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon.

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Lord is key to being content. If we cannot truly trust God for those things most important to us, the high priority things such as our lives, we cannot be truly content.

In Job's argument to his friends he says, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless, I will argue my ways before Him." (Job 13:15) This same word for "hope" is also used in Psalm 71:14, "But as for me, I will hope continually, And will praise You yet more and more." In Hebrew thinking, hope is frequently associated with waiting. Several Hebrew words<sup>5</sup> include both the ideas of waiting and hope. Job's hope is in the Lord and this is also key to helping him to be content.

**Just as a teaching moment.** Consider if Job 4:6 would be a good verse to use to support a source of strength for contentment. Then look at the verses Job 4:5-7. See how the context makes a significant difference. Eliphaz is rebuking Job for not accepting the words of his friends as they try to convince him he must have sinned. Eliphaz thinks Job has sinned and is presenting this human wisdom as he talks to Job. Check out my lesson.

**How to Study the Bible: The Context.**

Paul also has hope. It is the hope of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:8) For him "to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) He is not sure if he should be moving on toward heaven or if he should stay a little longer. He says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7) Whatever God wants for him, Paul is ready. The lives of both Paul and Job were at risk. They were each agreeable with the possibility of dying if it was what God wanted for them. The higher God is on our priorities, the less we worry, about our lives or anything else. Therefore, the higher priority we give God in our lives the more content we can become.

Paul mentions hope, faith, and love. All three appear together in only 3 verses. Faith and love appear together in the 18 other verses and faith is paired with either peace, patience, or wisdom 10 times. Faith is an important virtue in the Christian life. The word faith occurs more times than even "love" even though love is clearly the greatest of the virtues. Faith (πίστις) is having a firm commitment even without seeing the proof. For the Christian it is a firm commitment to God. A faith that wavers leads to an undependable hope, whereas a hope full of faith is steady and dependable. This is the kind of faith and hope that lead to contentment.

Paul teaches us the "peace of God" which is vital to our contentment.

<sup>6</sup> Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,

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<sup>5</sup> Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament (electronic ed., שְׁבַרְתִּי, P. 1304, שָׁכָה, p. 1326, תּוֹחֵלֶת, p. 1697, תִּקְוָה, p. 1783). Leiden: E.J. Brill.

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whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. <sup>9</sup> The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:6–9 (NASB95)

“Be anxious for nothing.” The word anxious (μεριμνάω) can mean either concerned or unduly concerned.<sup>6</sup> One must consider the context of the use of the word to decide the appropriate meaning applied that should be in each case.

There is a healthy concern we can have for each other or ourselves that can lead us to action such as comforting or praying for a friend. Then there is a concern we call worry where we focus on things we have little control over which causes tremendous anxiety and disrupts our lives. The latter applies to the word anxious here. We are not to worry about things we have no control over. We cannot be content when we worry.

Paul’s command to us is to turn everything over to God rather than be anxious about anything. He directs us to prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. We will look at each of these 3 terms shortly. But first notice this statement is qualified by “in everything” (ἐν παντί) which means bring all our concerns to God. It is like bringing our detailed itemized list to God. God wants it all.

Prayer (προσευχή) is the general word for prayer to God. In prayer we bring our detailed itemized list of concerns to God. Pastors often remind us that when we take our needs to God, we are to leave them there with Him rather than pack them back up and take them with us again. Leave the worries with God and then do our part without the anxiety, that is, if there is anything else for us to do.

NASB95 translates supplication (δέησις) as prayer, petition, or entreaties. By itself supplication means prayer with either an urgency or a specific request for a given need. But when it is used in the phrase “prayer and supplication,” the phrase refers to praying for a specific need or purpose.<sup>7</sup> This phrase is also present in Acts 1:14, Ephesians 6:18, 1 Timothy 2:1, and 1 Timothy 5:5. Looking up these verses helps one to understand the phrase better.

Thanksgiving is our expression of gratitude to God which accompanies our prayer and supplication. Thanksgiving is not an additional thing we do when we pray but it is the way we pray. We cannot just tack on some thanksgivings to our prayers. Thankfulness begins as a way of life (see Colossians 3:16-17) and plays an important role in our prayer life. The theme of thanksgiving appears in many of Paul’s writings. We are thankful that we can even come before God and address Him in prayer. We are thankful that He is interested and hears and prayers.

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<sup>6</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 632). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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We are thankful for the trust we can have in Him. Let gratitude fill our hearts as we approach the throne of God.

If we live as Paul tells us to live and we bring our detailed list of requests to the Lord, the “peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”. In verse 9 he will turn it around and say, “the God of peace.” It is good for us to see that the “peace of God’ comes from “the God of peace.” One has true contentment when they have the peace of God. And that comes largely from prayer with thanksgiving (gratitude).

Paul describes the peace of God as something beyond what we can perceive. No doubt he says this out of experience. It is more than we can comprehend or understand yet we can experience the peace of God if we let go of our troubles and leave them in the hands of God as Paul instructs us to, “... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6) This peace of God is “the inward peace of the soul which comes from God and is grounded in God’s presence and promise.”<sup>8</sup>

The peace of God will guard or protect our hearts and our minds. The heart represents our center of emotions. Our emotions can become overwhelmed with life’s sorrows and disappointments. Some people experience anxiety because of mental illness, and I do not intend to be insensitive of people in such difficult situations. Others, who over time, have let the world get to them. Worry has overwhelmed them, and depression can take hold of them. This is a very real problem that disrupts people’s lives. People find themselves trying to find their way out of the emotional and worrisome overload.

The peace of God protects our minds from the onslaught of worrying thoughts. There are unhealthy thoughts that plague many minds. The mind can batter us with unanswerable questions during times of personal trouble. The question, “Why?” is a big culprit that distresses many people. The peace of God guards one against becoming bitter when tragedy strikes and helps us to maintain wholesome thoughts and allows us to focus on the Lord.

A person begins a journey called sanctification when they become a Christian. It is the process of becoming more Christ like. We allow God to mold us into a person having many of the character attributes of Christ. My study **Virtues for Our New Selves: A study of Colossians 3:12-17** describes some of the earlier steps. This study covers what one might consider more of a crown jewel of sanctification. This builds on the previous work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I believe sanctification continues throughout our lives but reaching a place of contentment and dwelling in the peace of God is like the advanced course in godliness. One does well to desire it and to pray for it. It may be beneficial to print this out and highlight things that will help you to be content.

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent, M. R. (1897). A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon (p. 135). New York: C. Scribner’s Sons.