

## Philippians 4:10-20

Pentecost 7, July 24, 2022

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*I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup> I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup> Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. <sup>15</sup> And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

“Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” I would venture to guess that some of you have heard those famous words before. They were spoken by the great, Yankees first baseman Lou Gehrig during his retirement ceremony. With a lifetime batting average of .340, compiling nearly 500 homeruns and over 2700 hits, and playing 2,130 straight games all in the Yankee pinstripes, he was truly a fan favorite. And yet, he was forced into retirement shortly into the 1939 MLB season due to his diagnosis of ALS, also now commonly referred to as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.” He would die only two years later, and everyone knew that day was coming soon, yet he still said, “Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” It’s rather shocking to hear those words coming from his mouth when you know what he was going through.

I’m not sure how he summoned the strength to say those words. Maybe he was just saying them. I do know, however, of another man who gave a very similar testimony after suffering other many terrible things. That was the Apostle Paul. Paul wrote this letter from which our sermon text comes to the Church at Philippi, a letter which has been called “The Letter of Joy.” The recurring theme throughout the book is also found in our text for this morning: “Rejoice in the Lord!” And, perhaps it’s a bit surprising then to learn that Paul wrote this letter, overflowing with joy as it is, from a prison cell in Rome. He’d been imprisoned there for about two years by the time of writing, which ought to leave us asking, “How?” How did he summon the strength to write these words? Was *he* just saying them? Did he really *mean* them? I know the answer, and you do too. Paul was able to rejoice, even in chains, because he knew, in the words of our theme:

### **The Secret to Contentedness**

Now, imprisonment is one thing, we can all imagine how miserable that would be; Roman imprisonment was something else entirely. According to some history books, a prisoner in Rome began his imprisonment by being stripped naked and flogged. The bleeding wounds would not be treated before his tattered clothing was placed back on him, and the prisoner was then placed in uncomfortable leg and wrist chains. They would remain for years in a cold, dark cell in their tattered, blood-stained clothing which was never replaced even during the cold winter months. With brutal cold, a lack of water, and insufficient places to relieve oneself, it’s reported that most prisoners spent their time begging to be put to death. Others refused to beg, they simply killed themselves.

So, as Paul writes our sermon text, he's in that most deplorable sort of place, a Roman prison. And unlike the other prisoners there, he'd done nothing wrong! He was imprisoned simply for proclaiming the love that God has for sinners in Christ Jesus. And as he's surrounded by those cries for a quick death, *Paul's* words are, ***"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."***

How can he say that? How can someone be so content when their world seems to be crumbling around them? You know, I think there are a few different strategies that a person might use in the pursuit of such contentedness. For one thing, a person might try for the stoic approach to life. You might know someone like that, the type of person who never seems to let anything get to them. The reason they can do that is because they shut themselves off from things outside of themselves. And this approach can be effective at not letting the negative things bother you, achieving a *sort* of contentedness anyways. The problem is that you can't just shut yourself off from the negatives, you end up ignoring the positives as well. In an attempt to remain stoic, a person robs themselves of some of the true beauty and joy of life. It's like people that publish videos or articles for public consumption on the internet. They always say, "Never read the comment section." They do that so they can avoid any negative criticism, but in so doing, they also miss the positive thank-yous and compliments. So no, that's not the answer, because ignoring everything doesn't lead to actual contentedness.

Another tactic that people use is trying to find somebody who's worse off than they are. I think every parent has utilized that approach when dealing with a child who doesn't want to eat their food. "There are children starving around the world who would love to eat your dinner." You *could* try that approach. Anytime you're feeling down about something, instead focus on someone who's got it worse so you can feel a *bit* better about yourself. The problem is that's a rather depressing way through life, always searching for someone to pity, seeing tragedy as the only way to feel content.

No, the real **Secret to Contentedness** is what Paul found, even in His chains. True contentedness is centered on the cross of Jesus Christ. It's the cross that Paul is pointing to when He says, ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."*** You know, that's probably one of the most popular verses in all of Scripture that I can think of. You see it frequently printed on Christian cards and decorations. It's a very popular verse with Christian athletes as well, in fact, NBA Champion Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors famously writes that verse on his shoes with a black sharpie before he takes the court for basketball games. He sees it as a theme verse for his life as a professional athlete. And many ordinary Christians also find comfort in those words: ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."*** It's used as a reminder of the great things we can accomplish in Christ.

But I wonder how many people know the context surrounding that verse. Paul wrote this verse not in the context of athletics or feats of strength or endurance or anything like that. He wrote this verse in the context of finding true contentment, *regardless* of the situation.

Now, we all know what it is to be discontented or dissatisfied. We know that feeling well. It's harder to describe what actual *contentedness* is though. One of the best definitions for contentment that I've

heard is: *“It’s not having everything that you want; it’s wanting what you’ve already got.”* Would you say that describes you? Are you content? Regardless of what’s going on in your life—plenty or hunger, abundance or need—are you content? Personally, I have to say, *“No.”* When things are rough, when the work is piling up, when the bank account is running low, when sickness is running through the house, or when physical pain strikes, I’m not feeling very content at all. Even when the opposite true and things are going my way, I still find that I’m always looking towards the next thing. You too?

Paul, however, had found **The Secret to Contentedness**. It was all focused on Jesus. Even in his receiving gifts from the Philippian congregation, he’s rejoicing, not because he finally has some supplies, but that this group of Christians was moved by their Savior’s love to support Paul’s ministry. Listen to what he says: ***“And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”***

And did you notice how he describes the gift they’d sent? He said, ***“I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied.”*** Which, again, is just so shocking when you consider where he’s writing from. *“Paul! Well supplied? Full payment? You’re in prison! You don’t have anything!”* And yet Paul rejoices, because he knows what Christ has done for him. It’s just like Noah, when Noah finally stepped off the ark onto a world that had been forever changed, destruction being seen everywhere he looked. And yet, what is the first thing he did? He made a sacrifice to the Lord and sang praises to God. Even in those circumstances, he could not deny that the Lord had shown him steadfast love.

We ought to remember the same in our day. You know, it’s so discouraging, oftentimes, to keep up with the news. When we see terrorism, school shootings, war, economic collapse—it’s depressing and discouraging to see that this is what’s going on in our world. And, it can leave us hopeless rather than content. But when we see these things, we can also say, *“I read the last chapter of the book already, and the ending is that God won!”* And that victory is ours too in Christ Jesus our Savior. This is where true joy is found. Joy comes from knowing that no matter the circumstance—sickness, crippling disease, poverty, hunger, broken families, you name it—yet we know who stands *with* us.

Think of all of the times God promises to be with us. For instance, Jesus said, ***“Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them.”*** (Matthew 18:20) Meaning, He’s right here with us now this morning. Jesus also promises, ***“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*** (Matthew 28:20) He promises the Holy Spirit is with us as well, through our baptisms: ***“According to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”*** (Titus 3:5-6) And when we receive the Lord’s Supper, Jesus also promises He is there as He says, ***“Take, eat; this is my body. . . Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*** (Matthew 26:26-28) So no matter your personal circumstances, as devastating as they may seem, you have the joy of knowing that the God who knows end of the story, He is with you. And He’s working *for* you.

And that's why Paul concludes our text with the reminder: **"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."** Now, there are those who take those words and use it to preach what we call "the prosperity gospel." It's this idea that if you give everything you have away, particularly to the preacher as is often the message, then God is going to *richly* supply you with everything you want. We know that's not what Paul's saying here when we consider that he is not rich at all. He's not very well-supplied in terms of earthly needs. He's in prison, it's as if God has taken everything he wants away.

But what we have to remember in this promise that **"God will supply every need of yours,"** is that our opinion of what we need and God's *knowledge* of what we need aren't always the same. It's like that Rolling Stones song, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, well, you might find you get what you need." The one who is with you, who is working for you, who died to forgive you, the one who knows the ending—He always knows what you need.

And so, we ought to receive everything as a gift from God. And I really mean *everything*. That's often a difficult mindset to have when you're in the midst of one of those *difficult* gifts from God. When a loved one is struck with cancer, when something horrible happens in the family, how can you receive those things as gifts? How can you be content when dealing with that sort of thing? We can do so when we look at those things which seem like true evils and remember that we know that **"for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."** (Romans 8:28) God can use those difficult gifts, He can take even those things that people use as evil against you, take them in His hands, and He says, "I can work with that. I can do something with this."

And how many of us can look back over the course of our lives now and see those times when pure evil looked like it had entered into our world, and yet the Lord was able to work good. He brought us through and brought us closer to Himself. Even though it may be something that you'd never wish to go through again or never wish on anyone else, yet you can recognize that "God's plan for me was good." Eternal good. Some evil may be so devastating that it's difficult to see any good at all or understand what the point is, but God is able not only to see the good and understand His plan, He's also able to act. He alone can bring evil to good.

And we see that no where so clearly as at the foot of the cross. There, as the innocent Son of God hung on that cruel execution device, we see the greatest evil the world has ever participated in. And of course, we also see there the greatest good. There the Son of God pays for your sins and mine, He forgives us; there He guarantees that we have peace with God and that we have life with God after we depart this world of sorrow. *That* is God's plan for you. And He's accomplished it.

So really, we see then, that it doesn't matter what's going on. We've seen the end of the story. We know where we end up. Through it all, we have Jesus alongside of us working for us, supplying our every need. So that we *could* say, "Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." Except, that it isn't luck at all. No, it's the love of God for a sinner like yourself, a love which He will never take away from you. Holding onto these facts, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it's *easy* to be content. May God keep our focus on the cross, **The Secret to Contentedness**. In Jesus' name. Amen.