

I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Philippians, Chapter 4 verses 8-14. This can be found on page _____ in your pew Bibles. We continue in "The Joy of Unity" series. Scripture reveals the prescriptions for Joy.

Our Fathers Word

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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.

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

The Word of God for the People of God

There was once a stone cutter who was discontent with himself and with his position in life. One day he passed a wealthy merchant's house. Through the open gateway, he saw many fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must be!" thought the stone cutter. He became very discontent and wished that he could be like the merchant.

To his great surprise, suddenly, he became the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever imagined, but envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. Soon a high official passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low before the procession. "How powerful that official is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a high official!"

Suddenly, he became the high official, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by the people all around. It was a hot summer day, so the official felt very uncomfortable in the sticky sedan chair. He looked up at the sun. It shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. "How powerful the sun is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the sun!"

Suddenly, he became the sun, shining fiercely down on everyone, scorching the fields, cursed by the farmers and laborers. But a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth, so that his light could no longer shine on everything below. "How powerful that storm cloud is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a cloud!" Suddenly he became the cloud, flooding the fields and villages, shouted at by everyone. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by some great force, and realized that it was the wind. "How powerful it is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the wind!"

Suddenly, he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting trees, feared and hated by all below him. But after a while, he ran up against something that would not move, no matter how forcefully he blew against it – a huge, towering rock. “How powerful that rock is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be a rock!”

Suddenly, he became the rock, more powerful than anything else on earth. But as he stood there, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into the hard surface, and felt himself being changed. “What could be more powerful than I, the rock?” he thought. He looked down and saw far below him the figure of a stone cutter.

If the stone cutter in our story were to visit his physician, what would his diagnosis be? What could the physician possibly prescribe to help with his discontentment? Well the Great Physician is Jesus! He has prescriptions for joy!

Paul reveals them, here, in today’s scripture text. Paul wants us to know in this world, Jesus’s prescriptions will give us permanent joy. A joy that no one can take from you! How does he know this? He knows it because he has experienced it. Not just once, not many times, but continually. He has found the prescriptions for joy in Jesus that lasts forever and ever.

What our stone cutter needs — and in fact, what most people need — Prescriptions for Joy — leads to *our being content*. Contentment is *key* to joyful living. There is only one source where we will find contentment, and that is in our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we join Paul this morning, he is experiencing contentment in a Roman prison cell. What a place to be celebrating joy. He is writing a letter to the Church at Philippi thanking them for their concern and past support. They could always be counted on, including financial support. Right now, all they could do for Paul was to pray for him. Prayer is so very important.

Paul wraps up his letter expressing his joy through his deep gratitude and contentment. As the founding pastor, Paul had a special relationship with the Philippians. The church had supported his ministry in the past and they'd recently sent another gift. The passage we're looking at today is Paul's thank-you note. But as we look beneath the surface, at what he writes, we discover a man who is utterly content.

Contentment is a wonderful virtue. It comes from being rightly related to God and trusting in his sovereign love over our lives.

Yet many of us, including me, have tried to find contentment in all the wrong places. We've tried to find it in money, possessions, power, prestige, relationships or jobs. But all those things left us empty, didn't they? I love the definition of contentment offered 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 of every condition.”

In other words, contentment is being at peace with what God has assigned us; it is to be at rest.

The Bible has a great deal to say about contentment. In the gospel of Luke, (3:14) John the Baptist told some soldiers to be content with their wages. Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6-7), “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it.” This is repeated by the author of the book of Hebrews. “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...” (Hebrews 13:5) But even though we’re frequently told to be content in Scripture, very few Christ followers actually experience contentment.

What is the *key* ingredient, contained in the *prescriptions for joy* Paul has learned that will lead to being content? It is this; “that he can do everything with the help of Christ who gives him the strength he needs.”

When we make Jesus our Savior, we have a relationship with Him. When we make Him our Lord, we have fellowship with Him. When we have fellowship with Jesus we can do everything, at anytime, anywhere, and always be content.

You see, our fellowship with Jesus leads to strength, His strength, and His strength leads to contentment. Php 4:13 *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

Looking through the lens of Paul’s life let’s consider these prescriptions for joy, putting us at rest, with peace, fully content.

The first prescription for joy is that we should learn to *relax in God’s sovereignty*. Look again at verse 10. Ten years had passed since Paul’s ministry in Philippi. Right after he left the church the Philippians had sent Paul financial support. But even though they continued to be concerned they apparently weren’t able to help for a lengthy period of time.

We're not told why they weren't able to help. Perhaps they didn't know where Paul was. But recently Epaphroditus arrived in Rome bringing a generous gift. Because of this Paul says in verse 10 that he rejoiced in the Lord greatly.

Notice Paul's gracious attitude regarding the time when he didn't receive anything from the Philippians. Notice he doesn't scold them for not sending anything. In fact, Paul isn't agitated at all by what may have been a ten-year lapse in their financial support. He didn't get worked up. He didn't fret. There was no panic even though he had experienced some times of real scarcity. How could Paul remain content in the face of those things? He was content because he knew the *times*, the *seasons* and the *opportunities* of life are controlled by God's sovereignty.

We saw this earlier in chapter 1. Even though Paul was chained to a Roman guard, he still rejoiced because God used his negative circumstances to advance the cause of Christ. Because of his chains the entire palace guard heard the Gospel and the brethren were encouraged to be bold for Christ. We called this the Romans 8:28 mindset. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." This mindset allows us to look beyond our immediate situation and relax...knowing that God is always at work.

Relaxing in God's sovereignty is foundational to contentment. Just think how much stomach acid you would avoid if you stopped trying to control people or manipulate circumstances. Some of us know what it's like to wake up at night worrying about how we can convince someone, to get our way, or how we can twist things so they turn out like we want.

But instead of doing those things, if we sit back, relax, and trust God's sovereignty, surely, we'd live much more contented lives.

Last week I mentioned that worry was one of our greatest joy thieves. Instead of allowing worry to consume us Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Philippians 4:6) In other words, don't worry about anything but pray about everything. Let God be God. Relax in his sovereignty. Don't carry on your shoulders the weight God carries on his! Jesus said, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27) Worry doesn't help anything!

The second prescription for Joy is to rest in what God provides. Look again at verse 11. (Php 4:11) I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Doesn't that blow you away? Remember, Paul was under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier, and living on a sparse diet. But none of those circumstances affected his contentment. He had learned to be content "whatever the circumstances." You might underline that phrase.

This is almost impossible for us to grasp, isn't it? Nothing in our society encourages us to be content with what we have. Just the opposite! Sometimes I feel like we're being carried along by a raging river that screams at us to buy, buy now, buy more, get more and do more.

It's *insanity* to live beyond your means, buying things you *don't really need*, to impress people who *don't really care*, with *money you don't really have*. But the only way to do that—the only way to stop living beyond our means—is to rest in what God provides.

Paul was not content because he was sitting on a Caribbean beach sipping a Pina Colada. He was content chained to a Roman soldier eating stale bread and gruel. Why? Because he rested in what God had provided. He had Christ in his life and *that* was enough. Have *you* done that? When was the last time you rested in what God had provided? Scripture says, (1 Timothy 6:8) “But if we have food and clothing we will be content with that.” Every one of us has food and clothing, but are we content?

I love the way Psalm 16:6 expresses this principle, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.” God assigns each of us different boundary lines. We all have different gifts, skills, backgrounds and experiences. God will apportion to some of us more challenges and some of us will have more opportunities. The key to contentment is not looking to see what others may or may not have, but looking to God and trusting that he knows what’s best for each of us.

The third prescription for joy is to refuse to let circumstances dictate your joy. Look again at verse 12. Here Paul expands on what he says in the previous verse. Two times he repeats the phrase “I know.” “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.” He repeats this to emphasize that by experience he has learned to live above his circumstances. Paul had learned to get off the roller coaster of feeling content only when things were going well and then feeling lousy when things were not going well. I’m sure you know what that roller coaster is like. I think we’ve all been there.

Notice he learned to be content “in any and every situation.” Think about that as it relates to your life. If Paul has food, he’s content. If he’s hungry, he’s still content. He learned to live with contentment in any and every situation.

One reason I started fasting years ago was to train my body not to control my emotions. I don’t know about you, but when I used to get hungry it changed how I treated people; I got grumpy; joy thief; I lost my joy. But as I’ve fasted over the years, I’ve trained my body that hunger does not have to affect how much joy I experience. At least with respect to hunger, I’ve learned not to let circumstances dictate my joy.

You might consider trying this with some area where you struggle. For example, if you have a problem getting irritable when you can’t buy something you want, why don’t you intentionally deprive yourself from buying those things, even if you can afford them, to learn to train yourself to be content regardless of your circumstances. Or, if you tend to complain when you don’t get your way, why don’t you fast from getting your way for two weeks? Give up your right to get your way for two full weeks—in order to train yourself to be content even when you don’t get your way.

Paul says he learned to be content in any and every situation. You and I can learn to be content too. But the problem is we don’t even try. We may train ourselves in the gym. We may train ourselves to lose weight by going on diets and fasting. We may train ourselves to think by reading. But we never consider teaching ourselves to be content.

A huge part of this is re-training our mind to think positive, God-honoring thoughts even when our circumstances may be negative.

One reason Paul was able to experience joy and contentment that transcended his negative circumstances is that he had trained his mind to think in a healthy, God-honoring manner.

I want you to memorize Philippians 4:8. Let's read it together. "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Thinking these thoughts goes a long way toward not allowing circumstances to dictate the joy we experience.

Paul's fourth prescription for joy in today's passage, we should rely on God's strength. Look again at verse 13. This refers to having God's strength to endure all the trials Paul has just spoken about: being in need, being hungry and living in want. Today we live in a world of unimaginable comfort. So our challenges might not be things like hunger or scarcity. But the principle of relying on God's strength is just as important for contentment today, as it was for Paul.

Paul got through his difficulties with contentment because he relied on God's strength. By his own testimony, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." What does it mean to rely on God's strength? I've learned from the *school of hard knocks* that if I'm doing things in *my own strength*; I become agitated, worried, anxious, distressed, troubled. You know. Have you been there with me? At wits end? But if I do things in God's strength, things flow more naturally. For example, when I'm preparing a sermon I can feel the difference if I'm doing it in my strength or in God's strength. When I do it in my strength I labor over every word. It takes hours to write one paragraph. But when I get out of the way & open myself to God's strength, the words seem to flow onto the page like a gently flowing river.

Now this is not to suggest that doing things in God's strength will *always be easy*. It *won't*. Asking forgiveness, *won't be easy*. Overcoming a bad habit, *won't be easy*. Learning to think good and godly thoughts, won't be easy.

Paul captures this when he writes about *his* thorn in the flesh. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

Thus, sometimes we experience God's strength in ways that make things flow more smoothly—like when I prepare a sermon. Other times we experience God's strength in ways that make us more resilient—like when Paul wrestled with the thorn in his flesh. Either way, relying on God's strength will add greatly to our level of contentment.

As we wrap up, I'd like you to underline a phrase in verse 12: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation..." Friends, once we learn to be content we'll begin to experience rushing rivers of God-inspired joy. But I think Paul uses the word secret because contentment is not something everyone learns. It's available to every Christ follower, but, sadly, not everyone finds it. So what's the secret of contentment? Relax in God's sovereignty. Rest in what God provides. Refuse to let circumstances dictate your joy. Rely on God's strength

Let us Pray

Heavenly Father,

Loving Lord we know that in Your presence is the fullness of joy,

and for *this* we bless, and thank You.

Thank You for Jesus and the joy and peace that floods the hearts

of all who have found in Him the rock of their Salvation.

At your right hand are joys for ever more – thank You for the joy we have in You, through the blood of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Thank You Father for the peace and love and hope that I receive from You so freely as Your eternal gift of grace to all Who trust Jesus as Savior – how it rejoices our hearts and guards our minds, with each passing day.

Lord we pray that we may draw from Your living wells of salvation day by day,

and that our joy may be full to overflowing in Jesus,

just as You have promised to all that Your children.

Thank You for the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

Help us always to rejoice, and to remain in Your love,

so that Your joy may well up in our hearts and overflow to others,

to the glory of Your name.

AMEN