

THE BYPRODUCTS OF PEACE

The Book of Philippians #36

We have spent the last several weeks looking at the peace that Paul says he had experienced from a life lived in obedience and trust. Paul passed on how he was able to accomplish this by revealing the steps we should take to experience that same peace: Forget what lies behind, press on toward the upward call of God in Christ, rejoice in all things, be anxious for nothing, let your requests be made known to God through prayer and supplication; and finally, think on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent and worthy of praise. He then concluded by saying this, *“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.”*

Paul is saying it is not enough to know what to do, it is not even enough to do it periodically. If peace is to come to the Christian's life and remain with him through the hardships and trials of life, he must make a practice of doing the things which Paul has said to do. Once Paul had settled these things in his heart and mind he determined that the only place where he would allow his mind to dwell was the place where:

The past had no influence on the present
The grace of God was constantly being applied to his weakness
The thoughts of his heart revolved around the future God had planned for him

Having established these facts through his personal testimony while at the same time encouraging us to follow in his footsteps, Paul goes on to express his appreciation for the Philippian believers and their care for him. It is through his gratitude that he reveals two spiritual fruits that have come out of the peace he has found in Christ – contentment and strength – which I believe are the byproducts of the peace he has found in Christ. We are going to look at these today as we pick up in Philippians chapter 4 and verses 10 through 14

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-14

“But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 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. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.”

In Roman times a prisoner was not feed from the coffers of Rome. They were expected to provide their own meals. According to Simon Apablaza and his website Scribd.com,

“Prison, in the days of Paul, were not pleasant or healthy. In the mind of the people, prison was equal to death, despair, sickness of mind and body, and humiliation.... Neglect and abuse (occurred frequently) in the matter of diet and hygiene. Securing adequate nourishment fell on the shoulders of the prisoners (family and friends); poor prisoners often were neglected and suffered great misery. To depend on the ration of the prison was actually to put their life at risk, because its lack of variety, quantity and quality. In fact the food of prisoners was about half the amount of food given to slaves. The food barely sustained life, and they could be turned easily into a weapon of punishment, torture or even execution when withheld by guards. The only

generosity in official provision for many was the last meal before execution.”

When we hear of these conditions we cannot help but compare them with prisons in America today. American taxpayers pay for the food, clothing, health care, legal and entertainment needs of its prisoners. This is a far cry from what Paul experienced where the food portion was meager; and if your family or friends could not or would not provide for your needs, then declining health and eventual death was what you could expect as a prolonged prisoner of Rome.

So it is no wonder that Paul says he rejoices greatly that the Philippians had an opportunity to share with him in his affliction. He mentions that he had no doubt of their concern, only that they had previously had no opportunity to express that concern in tangible ways until now.

When Wendy and I were first married we had little work and what we did do was either sporadic or paid very little. Consequently popcorn and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches became our most frequent meals. There were days that we had very little in the house to eat and were concerned that we would not be able to pay the rent or utilities.

At the time we attended a young marrieds group in our church and we asked for prayer for more work without going into the specifics of our situation. But some people were paying more attention to what was not being said than what we actually shared.

A few days later a good friend of ours knocked on our door and gave us a big bag of apples which he had picked from his tree. I was embarrassed to be in a position of poverty so my first reaction was to refuse the gift, saying we did not need it. But I knew that without those apples we might not eat that week. So I humbled myself and took those apples, and thanked him for his gift.

That was not the only time our friends showed concern. We had two instances where we left home and when we returned we had an anonymous gift of \$100 sitting on our front porch in a sealed envelope. To this day we have no idea who gave us that money or how they knew we needed it. But that money enabled us to pay our rent and sustain us through another month of monetary struggle.

I believe our friends were always generous people and never wavered in their concern for us. But they never had an opportunity to show that concern until they found out about our need. Once they found out they took the resources they had and offered them to us.

Sometimes we wonder why our friends seem so callous to our needs. But what I have found is that in many cases the need is never revealed. Either embarrassment, or pride or self-sufficiency gets in the way of letting others know of our need. And when the need goes unexpressed, it also goes unnoticed. Some have trained their eyes and ears to see and hear these unexpressed needs but most have not. This does not make them less caring, just less aware of the opportunity to care.

The gift of the apples and the money taught us to open our eyes and ears to see and hear what people are expressing underneath their polished exterior. Because we were the grateful recipients of someone else's concern we have since paid attention to the opportunities to be the one to give the gift of our concern. And we have friends who do the same.

Just last week I heard about someone I'll name Peter who was helping his friend John prepare for a seminar. John was expressing his frustration at not having a nice shirt to wear. Normally Peter would

have regarded this as just another passing comment. But Peter knew his friend John was not just attending the seminar, he was the teacher for the seminar. John was frustrated because he wanted to wear something that not only looked nice and but would also not make him feel self-conscious about what he was wearing.

Since Peter frequently shops for men's clothing he thought this was right up his alley and a good opportunity to provide his friend with something he needed. He knew he couldn't solve John's immediate problem but he could prevent it from happening again. So he causally asked John's wife what size shirt John wore. And when he got home he went shopping and found two shirts on clearance that he thought John would like. He then texted pictures of both to John and asked if he liked any of them. John was surprised that Peter had done this for him but was grateful for his concern. John actually liked one of them (another testament to Peter's attentiveness). So Peter promised that he would bring the shirt John liked with him when he saw John again at the end of the month.

Now John is not in prison. Neither is he in poverty. However because he relies on donations to his ministry he recently experienced a lack of giving which caused him to fall several months behind in salary at the end of last year. Peter knew this so he understood why John could not afford to buy a new shirt for this event. Because Peter had paid attention to John's situation and understood the unspoken need behind his frustration, Peter was able to recognize an opportunity to show his concern for John through the simple gift of a shirt.

What we have learned through the years is that you don't have to have money to show your concern. Like the friend who gave us a bag of apples when we had no money to give we gave out of what limited resources we had. And sometimes all we had was ourselves. So we helped others by cleaning or moving furniture, doing computer work, doing their shopping or laundry, or helping them organize their finances. To some we have given used clothing, to others unwanted cars. Whatever we have that someone could use we try to freely give. And I have seen this concern expressed among the members of this congregation toward those who were in need as well. As Paul says, we give out of what we have, not out of what we don't have (1 Corinthians 8:12-13).

Though we are not told what the physical expression of their concern was, the Philippian church did know of Paul's need for food and clothing so most likely it was in these two areas that their expression was manifested. But the point is not what was being given but rather that the opportunity to express their concern was not missed. Paul appreciated their gift because it was a tangible sign of their concern for him. And when you and I give I believe we will find our gift of concern greatly appreciated as well by those who receive it; just as Paul did while he was in prison.

But in the midst of expressing his gratitude Paul says that his gratitude is not coming from a position of want because he has learned to be content in whatever circumstances he finds himself in. In other words, despite his subsisting on one half a slave's portion of food, Paul says he had no need, because he had learned to be content in the circumstance in which he found himself. So the first byproduct of peace that Paul reveals is one of contentment.

When I think of being content I think of relaxing after a good meal, sitting in my comfy chair at home with Wendy by my side watching a great Christian movie about how God has been faithful to His people in the difficulties of life. My stomach is full and that makes me feel content. My chair is comfortable and that makes me feel content. My wife is beside me and that makes me feel content. The movie is causing faith to rise up within me and that is making me feel content. And I am resting in the safety of my own

home. Nothing more needs to be added to make me feel content.

To be content is to be comfortable, relaxed, and happy. To be content is to be satisfied, desiring nothing more than what you have. Though Wendy and I from time to time have talked about moving into a larger home to better accommodate the kids and grandkids when they come home for a visit, we truly find ourselves satisfied with our little home, as cramped as it may get a few weeks a year. We don't really desire anything bigger or fancier. We're quite content to stay right where we are. Death or the physical limitations of old age may force us to sell our home someday, but for now we are content to be where we are. We find we have no need for something more.

Certainly being in this home with my wife, good food and a movie feels comfortable and relaxing. It is a satisfying experience that causes me to want nothing more out of life. If this was all my life had to offer I would feel content. It's like putting on a good pair of house slippers after being on your feet all day. You get that "ah" feeling when it happens. But is the contentment Paul is expressing a feeling or is it a state of mind? To help us answer that question let's look at some other scriptures where Paul speaks of being content.

Besides here in Philippians, Paul uses the word content when speaking of the weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties he has experienced for Christ's sake (2 Corinthians 12:10). He also speaks of being content with just having food and covering (1 Timothy 6:8); and he tells all of us to be content with what we have as well (Hebrews 13:5). The Greek word used in these instances means to take pleasure in it, and to choose or willingly determine to be content (*Eudokeo*). But this is not the same Greek word Paul uses in Philippians 4:11.

The definition of the Greek word translated as "content" in Philippians 4:11 is this: "*sufficient for one's self, strong enough or processing enough to need no aid or support; independent of external circumstances; contented with one's lot and one's means, though it is the slenderest portion.*" It is the only place in the New Testament where this particular Greek word is used (*Aurtakes*). This Greek word has no concept of pleasure or will in it. The translation of this word is the contentment that comes from experience. It is a contentment that has been learned through hardship.

So there is a contentment that comes as the result of the choices we make and there is a contentment that comes in the midst of things that are forced upon us. In the former we experience pleasure because of our freedom to choose our circumstances. This is a feeling of contentment. In the latter we learn to be content because there is nothing we can do to change the circumstance. We learn how to adjust our expectations to the reality of the now as opposed to the reality we once knew. This is a mindset of contentment.

Though Paul was in prison, subsisting on the meekest ration of food, he says he learned to be content with what was given to him. For him this was not a new concept recently acquired. It was something he says he learned and it applied to whatever circumstances he was in both good and bad, in plenty and in want. In verses 12 and 13 he says, "*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. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*"

Paul said he had learned the secret of being content. And what was that secret? He could do all things

through Him who strengthened him. He learned through his suffering that he can persevere under any and every circumstance when he relies on the One who gives him the strength, power, and ability to endure. It did not matter how much he had or what he did not have. What mattered is that the God who said He would never leave or forsake him was there in his midst. It was not the circumstance that made him content, it was the God who was there in the midst of it that made him content. He learned that whatever he lacked in earthly provisions was more than made up for by the One who stayed by his side, the One who was more than the sum of all that he was lacking.

Certainly living in prison would have caused Paul to lower his expectation of what he could expect out of life. Used to roaming the world in search of new converts to the faith, Paul was now restricted to dark and damp cells, frequently chained to the wall and sleeping on dirt or rock floors. These cells were frequently so far down that no light reached them. Paul mentions that he has a bodily affliction that effected his eyes (Galatians 4:13-14). We are not told, but perhaps prolonged exposure to darkness had an effect on the sensitivity of his eyes to sunlight. But whether it was imprisonment, the beatings he incurred, or the suffering he endured, it all took a toll on his body.

In prison Paul could not expect to have a healthy meal three times a day and a snack at bed time. He could not expect to have a change of clothes when his wore out. He could not even expect a weekly bath. Living in these dire circumstances day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year has to teach you something.

Did he feel hunger pains? Did he get cold because his clothing wore out? Of course he did. But he was not looking to those things for his contentment. He was looking to the One who satisfied his deepest longings. This is the difference between a contented feeling and a contented state of mind. Being in want is not a good feeling. But trusting in God brings contentment in any and all circumstances because it causes us to look outside our circumstances to the One who is there with us in the midst of them.

As my son-in-law's father lay in a hospital bed at home waiting to die from his cancer we went to visit him and he spoke to us of being at peace; that he had found contentment in the midst of his disease because Jesus was so very close to him in his suffering. God was strengthening him in the midst of the battle that was raging in his body.

Like the cancer that was devouring his body, Satan sought to devour his spirit. But what was evident in his face and in his testimony was that through faith Jesus had already enveloped him in His love and grace. It was only a few days after our visit that he was ushered into eternity. And the faith that had sustained him for over 50 years became sight for him. Oh that we too would learn to be content in the midst of our circumstances.

Scripture says that Jesus learned obedience from the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). Evidently this method of learning obedience was not the sole property of Jesus. Paul also learned obedience through the things which he suffered and we are told that suffering has the ability to produce the same thing today in all believers. I Peter 5:5-10 Peter tells us,

1 PETER 5:8-10

"Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and

establish you.”

Paul says he learned to be content in whatever circumstances he was in implying that we too could find this same contentment. This may seem like an impossible task for some of us here today, but think of what Paul had to endure compared to what most of us have had to endure. Paul experienced whippings, beatings and stoning. He spent time in the ocean after several shipwrecks; He was constantly in danger from his journeys, from rivers, robbers, and his own countrymen as well as the Gentiles and false brethren; In Damascus he was let down in a basket through a window in the wall in order to avoid capture. The cities, the wilderness and the sea all held danger for him; He experienced labor and hardship, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, lack of food, cold and exposure; All of this plus the daily pressure of his concern for all the churches.

Through all these things - weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, dangers, and difficulties – Paul said he was well content, for he learned that in his weakness God’s power was perfected in him. And through that consistent Presence and indwelling power his weakness became his strength. (2 Corinthians 11:24-12:10). And so Paul reveals the second byproduct of peace – the secret, he says, of being content in the midst of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need- and that secret is God’s strength to endure in any and all circumstances.

The secret that Paul learned through his suffering was that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him if he remained obedient to God’s commands. Is this something we too can learn? Yes. We can also learn obedience through the things we suffer, but only if we understand the purpose of suffering. We must let Christ have His way in and through us during our times of suffering, understanding that Christ’s power is perfected in our weakness.

Instead of trying to cover over our weakness and muster up some false bravado, we should acknowledge our weakness and inability to God and allow Him to work through them. As Paul says, *“When I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:10b). When we look for the strength to endure we must not look to ourselves but rather to the One whose strength empowers us to endure. For His strength is perfect when our strength is depleted.

We must also remember that it was the power of Christ that saved us from our inherent weakness – the inability to be righteous and acceptable in His sight. We should continue on the same path which God set before us, one of acknowledging that God’s power is sufficient - to cover over a multitude of sins, to overcome death and separation, to overcome the evil one, and to overcome this world’s tribulation.

James says that when we encounter various trials and rely, as Paul did, on the One who strengthens us to endure, these trials will produce endurance, and endurance will have its perfect result – making us perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4). Paul’s contentment may have come from experiencing the fruit of his trials. He was being made perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. It stands to reason and seems to naturally follow that if you are lacking in nothing you will be content with what you have.

Fruit was being produced out of his labor to endure. And when that fruit was manifested Paul learned the purpose of suffering. And when that purpose was revealed he started to participate in the journey, learning to be content in whatever circumstance he found himself in.

Our participation in this journey of learning to be content is crucial to us as well. God sent many, many

trials to the Israelites in the wilderness but they did not learn contentment. Instead they kept up their practice of mistrust and complaint. They hardened their hearts and did not believe God (Hebrews 3:12-19). It would be very easy for us to do the same. To say, "Where is God?" when we go through our trials, especially those which appear to have no end, or those which are full of constant physical or emotional suffering.

But what happens to us does not change who God is. Our faith rests in His faithfulness, not on our emotional or physical state or our lack of understanding of His ways. His word reveals His character and His promises. It is on these and on His eternal character that we place our trust. Relying on the strength which He Himself supplies we, like Paul, can learn to be content in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in; because we know that God is at work perfecting and completing us so that we will lack for nothing.

We will always have a choice on how we respond to trials and difficulties. None of us enjoys going through these things. All of us seek to be free of the difficulties of life no matter how small they are. But in our life with the Savior Paul teaches us that it is the end result we are after, not the immediate gratification of release from turmoil. Like Paul, sometimes we have no control over our circumstances. In these cases the only choice we have is how we respond and whether or not we will allow the Lord to work in us as we work our way through it.

When we put into practice the things which we have learned and received and heard and seen in Paul, we can be assured that the God of peace will be with us. And when the God of peace is with us we, like Paul, will experience the byproducts of that peace. We will learn to be content in whatever circumstance we are in because we understand that we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.

Let me close by quoting the words to a song written and sung by Steven Curtis Chapman called, "His Strength Is Perfect".

HIS STRENGTH IS PERFECT

I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength
But sometimes I wonder what He can do through me.
No great success to show, no glory of my own,
Yet in my weakness He is there to let me know....

*His strength is perfect when our strength is gone
He'll carry us when we can't carry on
Raised in His power the weak become strong
His strength is perfect. His strength is perfect*

We can only know the power that He holds
When we truly see how deep our weakness goes
His strength in us begins when ours comes to an end
He hears our humble cry and proves again....

*His strength is perfect when our strength is gone
He'll carry us when we can't carry on*

*Raised in His power the weak become strong
His strength is perfect. His strength is perfect*

"His Strength Is Perfect" Words and Music by Steven Curtis Chapman and Jerry Salley
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From the CD "Real Life Conversations" by Steven Curtis Chapman, CCLI#829565

You may understand that God's power and strength reside within you. But like me you may wonder how God could ever use your weakness for His glory. Here is my response. You'll never know if you don't surrender. You'll never know until you come to the end of your own strength then cry out to God for His. If your circumstance seems overwhelming, if you've come to the end of your endurance, let go. For it is in the release that you will find His strength. And it is in trust that you will find Him faithful.

If it's possible to be content in all circumstances, and Paul says that it is possible through the strength that God supplies, then we will find it by putting into practice that things which Paul has taught us. To dwell in a place where:

The past has no influence on the present
The grace of God is constantly being applied to our weakness
The thoughts of our heart revolve around the future God has planned for us

When we put these things into practice Paul says the God of peace will be with us. And when the God of peace is with us the peace of God descends upon us. And when God's peace is present the byproducts of His peace, contentment and strength, will be ours as well. We may have to learn them through our suffering, but they are not illusive feelings. They are the dwelling place of a mind staid on Jesus.

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