

One of my midlife delights is my grandchildren. What a joy it was to hold my two-hour-old granddaughter for an hour or so in the birthing center while my wife and son attended to my daughter-in-law in her delivery room. I simply stared at her nonstop, whispering my love for her and thanking God for the precious gift that she was. The ensuing months brought similar happy times. To look at this little treasure as she smiled and cooed was to glimpse a splendid picture of contentment!

Or so I thought. She's content . . . until she gets hungry or needs a diaper change or doesn't get what she wants. Then her so-called contentment evaporates instantly.

Thankfully, the kind of contentment that God promises does not disappear when circumstances sour. His contentment lasts even through hardship. It's not "contentment until" things go wrong but "contentment despite" things that are wrong. A far more accurate picture of contentment than a baby is an old, weather-beaten, hungry apostle who is languishing in a Roman dungeon—and yet singing praise to Christ his Redeemer. Listen to

the apostle Paul's powerful, real-life testimony in Philippians 4:11–13.

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 all this through him who gives me strength.

We discover from this passage three takeaway principles about contentment.

1. You can learn true contentment.
2. You can enjoy true contentment despite hard circumstances.
3. You can find true contentment in God and nowhere else.

In the pages that follow, we will take a closer look at each of these principles before laying out a plan of daily steps we can take on the road to contentment. As you begin, note that we must not take these steps alone or in isolation from other believers. God has designed his church to contain pastors, elders, and other mature brothers and sisters who can teach you, encourage you, model for you, pray for you, and challenge you to grow in this fruit

of Christian contentment. Consider strategic ways to involve these other people on your journey so that they can help you.

Three Principles of True Contentment

What is true contentment? The contentment that God gives is inner satisfaction in God alone, whatever the circumstances. A contented person experiences God's peace even in difficult times and consciously enjoys the fact that God is good no matter what. Contentment is the opposite of grumbling, complaining, and ingratitude. And it's more than passive acceptance, stoic resignation, or an attempt to grin and bear it or white-knuckle it through adversity. In the words of Puritan minister Jeremiah Burroughs, contentment is "that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every situation."¹

To be content, you must positively pursue and actively experience the deeper, lasting joy that Jesus Christ brings. Let's begin with the first principle we found in Philippians 4.

Principle 1: You Can Learn True Contentment

Here is God's good news for you: amid all your problems and pressures, you can indeed learn to become content. God guarantees it.

How do we find contentment? Does it float down from heaven so that we wake up one morning with it? Does it come from a trip down a church aisle to some altar? Do we exorcise demons of discontent in order to get it? Must we “pray through” it properly, perform some one-time act of “fully yielding” to the Lord, or receive a mystical spiritual gift?

The answer is no. You don’t receive or discover contentment; you *learn* it! Paul explains, “I have learned to be content. . . . I have learned the secret of being content” (Phil. 4:11–12). Contentment is not a mystery to uncover but a mindset to cultivate. It arises from a process of Christian growth.

In his description of this process, Paul uses two different Greek terms for “learn.” The first term carries the sense of learning something experientially—grasping the truth personally and living it out practically. It’s the same verb that Hebrews 5:8 uses to recall that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered.” This doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t know intellectually that he should obey his Father or that there existed in him some prior state of disobedience. It means that he needed to learn *experientially*—at each moment—to obey God in the crucible of suffering. Similarly, when Titus 3:14 calls God’s people to “learn to devote themselves to doing what is good,” we don’t doubt that they intellectually knew that they

should do good works. But they needed to put into practice the priorities and habits of doing good to others. In the same way, Paul had to learn experientially how to find contentment moment-by-moment in the Lord even when he faced a host of hardships.

The second term that Paul uses for “learn” is a rarer verb that was used in his surrounding culture to signal initiation into some secret society or mystery religion. In this context, Paul Christianizes the term in order to remind us that entrance into the sphere of Christian contentment requires intentional, dedicated commitment.

Horatio Spafford’s famous hymn mightily underscores this.

When peace, like a river, attendeth my
way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me
to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Spafford wrote this hymn following the sudden, tragic death of his four daughters. As he saw in his own life, whether our lot brings flowing tranquility or billowing sorrows, God teaches us (“Thou hast *taught* me”) contentment. The second stanza deepens the point.

Though Satan should buffet, though
 trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless
 estate,
And hath shed his own blood for my
 soul.²

We can withstand Satan and trials, but only if gospel truths—Christ’s death for us while we were in the helpless condition of sin—*control* our minds. That’s part of the progressive, inner-person transformation of Christian maturity.

Principle 2: You Can Enjoy True Contentment Despite Hard Circumstances

It’s one thing for God to assure us that we can learn contentment. But is that possible when our hardships oppose our happiness?

God’s good news continues with our second principle. Not only is contentment learnable and something you can experience, but it is something you can experience even when hardships hit. Your spiritual happiness does not depend on your life happenings. Notice the comprehensiveness of Paul’s words: “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*” (Phil. 4:11–12). No possible experience is excluded from this.

Such expansive and inclusive language might sound too good to be true—hyper-spiritualized God-talk. But Paul was no mere theorist or ivory-tower philosopher. He wrote these words from prison, amid severe adversity. This man lived out the lessons that he taught. Paul was a real person facing real problems, and he practiced what he preached. He learned contentment—that “sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit” that Burroughs describes.

As we seek to grasp the breadth of the contentment that Paul had learned, “whatever the circumstances” and “in any and every situation,” let’s consider seven hardships that he faced and the similar trials we sometimes encounter.

Financial pressures. Perhaps you find it hard to make ends meet each month, leaving you with little hope of a positive cash flow or future savings. In Philippians 4:11–12, Paul recalls times of hunger and poverty that were far worse than what most of us have faced. In 2 Corinthians 6, he describes the paradox of being “known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (vv. 9–10; see also