

The Secret of Contentment



By Tim Howington

Hey, want to know a secret? Promise not to tell anyone? As I write this article, I'm broke. I am so broke I can't pay attention. I am staring at a pile of bills that I can't pay and to be honest I am a little stressed. How I got here doesn't matter. I could tell you about the big tax bill I didn't anticipate or the AC/Heater Unit that went out. Or the fact that in the nonprofit sector if you don't continue to raise support for your cause, you run out of money. I won't bore you with the details of the trip I took or the mistakes I have made or the decisions I have made. If I tell you the path to my **BROKENESS**, you might lose interest in my journey. But if you are living in this world

of **BROKENESS** or you can see it from where you are currently standing, you might continue to read. I am going to tell you about the secret of contentment.

Some religious leaders say that there are many paths to heaven (as a Christian, I take issue with that position as Jesus says He is only way), but even though there are not many ways to heaven, there are many paths to financial difficulty. Lots of ways to get to the magical world of **BROKENESS**.

I grew up in a poor home, so this is not a strange place to me. But I hate it. There is something about not having enough that saps the strength of even the strongest among us. Even the apostle Paul, who was one of the key figures in the early Church had to work through this and he is the object of our study today. Listen to his plight in Phil 4:10-13 (NASB).

10 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. 11 Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 12 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. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

In this passage, Paul is writing to the church at Philippi who had sent him a gift for his ministry. The road of the itinerant preacher is a tough sled. No congregation to minister to and draw a salary from like our church leaders these days. Jesus had said that the one who preaches the gospel should get his living from the gospel and later the local church would spring up and get organized and make it easier for preachers to make a living. But Paul was on the point of the spear and God had called him to plant the Church in places where it did not exist at that time. Places like Rome and Ephesus and Philippi and Colossae and Corinth and Galatia. And that proposition was a difficult one financially.

Let's make some observations about the passage.

Paul learned to be content in whatever circumstance he was in. Did you catch that. Paul learned to be content. Contentment is not something that comes naturally (especially if you are materially challenged). It is a learning experience. In 1 Timothy 6:6-8, Paul expands his definition of contentment to

his protegee Timothy. He writes, "But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content." We will not debate whether covering included housing or just clothes but suffice to say that Paul's list is pretty spartan (food and covering). If you restate the sentiment you might say, "if we have food and clothing we can be content- everything else is a blessing". The only way we learn something is to experience it. I remember an old John Wayne movie (Hondo), where he was talking to this little kid who couldn't swim. John is shocked that this kid of 9 or 10 can't swim so he just throws him in. I think God does that with us sometimes. We need to learn to be content so He just throws us into the deep end of the pool where we must literally sink or swim as it relates to contentment. Or said another way we must learn to trust Him.

Paul knew how to get along with humble means and prosperity. A few years ago, our ministry was asked to be involved in a resource mapping exercise with the United Way. We were trying to discern what kind of nonprofit resources our community had to offer to the poor. I have to say I was impressed with the number of organizations and individuals who genuinely had an interest in helping the poor. One of the resources I was exposed to was *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* by Terie Dreussi Smith, Ruby K. Payne, and Philip E. DeVol. The book had so many great ideas but one of my big takeaways was that there is a financial ecosystem among the poor, the middle class and the wealthy. There are mindsets and practices that define how each group thinks about finances and behaviors that they have. It's almost as if they speak different languages as to how to navigate the world of personal finance. The authors point of view was to say that for the poor to move "up" into a new world of the middle class or even the wealthy they would have to learn a new financial language to navigate the landscape. One of the interesting observations that each of the distinct worldviews (the poor, the middle class and the wealthy) would find it extremely difficult to live in the other persons world. But Paul had learned how to get along with humble means or prosperity.

Paul described this as a secret. He says it this way, "I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need." I was studying this passage a few years ago and was talking about this with my brother who is a pastor in Arkansas. He asked me if I knew that they phrase going hungry meant. I was curious what his perspective was, so I asked what he thought it meant. His response was classic, "that meant that when Paul got ready to sit down to eat, dinner time came, and dinner time went and there was no food or at least not enough food." I don't know about you but that doesn't happen much at my house but when it does it makes me a little hangry. And I am not just talking about the feeling that needs to be addressed with a Snickers bar but the frustration that I don't have enough or the difficulties I am facing are just too much. For Paul it was not just having stuff that he needed but he had challenges everywhere he turned that required a certain level of contentment. Listen to his description of his journey in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11,

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through

your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through *the prayers of many.*”

So, what is the Secret? Whether we are talking about the need for contentment around the area of financial lack or the need for perspective in other difficulties of life, the secret of contentment I believe is found in Philippians 4:13. Paul writes, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” We use this verse for inspiration in so many things but the context is critical in that it was the strength of Christ that gave Paul the ability to hold up under financial stresses. Not to say that He doesn’t give us strength for the other challenges of life. But this passage is talking about the strength of Christ that helps us deal with going hungry or suffering need. When we are tempted to quit, remember that Jesus offers hope, perspective and strength to persevere through the trial. To be sure we need to continue to work on managing our finances well and figuring out how to uncover the necessary resource to get out of the hole we find ourselves in. But we also need to draw comfort from the fact that our God gives us strength to navigate the difficulties with grace and composure.

I mentioned earlier that I grew up in a poor home. How my single mom raised the three of us with the salary that she was making I still don’t know. But I don’t really remember her complaining about our plight. I am sure that she spent many a sleepless night trying to figure out how to make it. But her faith and resolve caused her to keep plowing ahead. I wonder if she had learned the secret. I don’t know a lot, but I do know that the secret of contentment can be learned. No—it must be learned if we are to survive this world filled with many challenges. And that is exactly what I am learning right now. Despite my current set of circumstances, I need to lean on the Lord and His perspective. I truly can do all things through Christ who give me strength.



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Resources

***Financial Difficulty-** If you are reading this article and are going through a difficult financial time let me recommend a little book I wrote called *How to Manage Yourself when there is No Money to Manage*. You can buy on Amazon or download for free on the Freedom 5:one website www.freedom5one.com (on the financial hotline tab).

****Life Difficulty-** If you are reading this article and are going through a difficult time not related to finances let me recommend a little book I wrote call *Trouble: Managing Your Heart in Difficult Times*, it is also found on Amazon and the Freedom 5:one website www.freedom5one.com (on the financial hotline tab).