

162 I have learned to be content

The letter to the church at Philippi is one of the warmest of all the New Testament letters, and is well-worth a read-through in one sitting when you can manage it. As always, Paul encourages, urges and instructs his fellow Christians, assuring them of his loving concern and constant prayers for them (eg., 1.1-11) - all the more remarkable as he is writing from captivity in Rome, where a dose of self-pity might be in order! Not a bit of it: the Concordance lists nine occurrences of the word "Rejoice" in this short letter.

Then, in 4.10 and following, we read that the Philippians have been able to get a gift through to Paul after some delay. This was probably financial, to support his itinerant ministry, and was something of a habit for them when they could (vv.15-16). Paul is obviously grateful ("your care of me hath flourished again" as the AV puts it, v.10), and is cheered by this evidence of their support. We tend to assume that Paul was Mr Superman who never got downcast or weary, lonely or fed up - but he did, he really is just like the rest of us!

See how he then continues along the lines of - "Yes, a big thank you - but I'm not actually in want or need" (v.11). He explains to them - "I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content" (V.11), and in these few words the Holy Spirit gives us a huge spiritual lesson!

We notice Paul had had to learn about contentment - how to enter it, how to remain within it whatever was going on, and above all, on what grounds such contentment was always justified. There must have been occasions in the earlier years of his extraordinary ministry when poor Paul was far from content: the false teachers, the opposition from Jew and pagan, the shipwrecks, the violence, the threats, the constant concern for all these scattered little Christian communities. Yet slowly, wonderfully, through all these ups-and-downs, Paul was brought through to understand, in practice, that the Lord really is the Lord; all is under His control; nothing happens without His allowance - nothing; and the Lord knows what He is doing, and will bring all things to pass until His full and final victory is evident to all.

Submariners speak of how calm is their boat when she is submerged. Above them there may be raging the most terrible of storms and the wildest of seas, but down below, all is peaceful, calm, untouched, unruffled. That's not a bad picture to illustrate this state of spiritual contentment which Paul learned, and which we are learning too. Come what may - and of course much does come and may

come - the great spiritual facts in which we are privileged to live as Christ-redeemed children remain rock-solid. Therein lies the secret of this precious, abiding, contentment. No wonder elsewhere, in Romans 8, the Holy Spirit tells us through this same Paul - "All things work together for goodWho shall separate us from the love of Christ? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Nothing) shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!" (from vv 28, 35, 32, 37,39).

Paul found in the crucible of experience over many years that such statements are not in the realm of "whistling-in-the-dark, fingers-crossed, let's-hope-there's-something-in-this" aspirations! He found that they are true - even when at the time everything seemed to be laughing in his face that they were nonsense.

Let us also note in closing that this precious contentment is not an instruction for Christian people to sit back and watch the Lord do His work! There was not a day in Paul's life when he would not have had concerns on his mind and tasks to be done, but in all of these, by God's grace, he had learned to be content.

We finish with these glorious words that sum up what we have been thinking about this time - "But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now unto God and our Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Philippians 4.19-20).

We praise God, for these things are true.

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