

## Facing Times Of Stress: Contentment

Independent of Circumstances

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We live in trying times—times of stress—characterized by moral and spiritual decline. The sins of society constantly affect our lives and influence even the most diligent resisters. There is a constant bombardment of negativism, which often results in discontentment. I can tell you when I watch the news in the week, that I become very discontent with what I see. It is very hard to fight that, and so I thought that this would be a good subject to take a look at today.

People are not happy with their leader; they are not happy with their spouse; they are not happy with their friendships; they are not happy with their job; and if religious, neither are they happy with their church.

Much of the time we feel frustrated and fatigued from our unsuccessful efforts in resisting the world, Satan, and our own human nature. Discontentment affects us in much the same way. It is absolutely exhausting! But, at the same time it requires a conscious effort to become content. Contentment does not just happen; it is learned as the result of hard work and right focus.

Contentment is freedom from irritation, anxiety, and worry. The biblical idea of contentment comes from a Greek word that means, "independence," or, "self-sufficiency." But the apostle Paul used the word in a Christian sense to show that real satisfaction or sufficiency comes from God through Christ, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

The apostle Paul could be content, whether in poverty or in abundance. And, he continually gave God thanks in every circumstance. This is something that he learned to do over a period of time.

**Philippians 4:10-13** But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did

care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

With the end of the ninth verse of chapter four, the apostle Paul reached the end of the specific exhortations that he was anxious to address to the members of the church at Philippi. He finished with doctrine, but he still could not close the letter, as he had more to say of a different light.

There was one more thing he had to do, and that was to express his profound gratitude to the members of the church at Philippi for their personal gift to him while in his prison cell in Rome, a gift that they had sent by the hand of their friend and spiritual brother, Epaphroditus.

In a sense, this is a major part of the reason why Paul was writing this letter to them. The Philippian church had sent him some gift. We are not told what it was, but it was something that he needed while in prison.

Epaphroditus went back to them, and Paul sent the letter with him; and having finished with his formal teaching, he wanted to thank them for this expression of their love and concern for him in his suffering and his imprisonment.

That is what he continues to do in these ten verses running from verse 10 to 20. Notice the way Paul writes the details of this epistle, and the way he offers his thanks to the members of the church. It is full of instruction. It is very clear that his thanking the members of the church for their gift and for their kindness presented Paul with a problem.

What possible problem could Paul foresee in thanking people who have been kind and generous? But to Paul, it is obviously a problem that takes him ten verses to address. Usually Paul deals with doctrines in a verse or two, but when it comes to just thanking the members of the church for their goodness and kindness, it takes him ten verses.

Notice that he goes on repeating himself. "Not that I speak in respect of want," and later on, "Not because I desire a gift." He seems to find it difficult to find the right tactful words.

Paul's trouble was something like this: He was very anxious to thank the church at Philippi for their kindness. But at the same time he was equally anxious to show them that he had not been waiting impatiently for, or expecting, this expression of their kindness, and still more that he was not in any sense dependent on their goodness and generosity.

In that way, he finds himself confronted with a problem. He has to do these two things at one and the same time; he has to express his thanks to the members of the church, and he has to do it in a way that will not in any sense detract or deviate from the reality of his experience as a Christian, being dependent upon God. That was the problem that he was facing, how to thank them for their generosity, but still emphasize to them that his dependence was on God.

That is why it takes him ten verses to do this. It was the dilemma of a Christian, sensitive to the feelings of others while trying to reconcile these two things. He was both a man of steel and a man of velvet. God's righteous standards had to be upheld, and there must be loving concern for the feelings of others.

He was anxious to express his profound gratitude and to let them know that their kindness really did move him deeply, and yet he was concerned on the other hand to make it abundantly clear to them that he had not been spending his time wondering why the churches had not thought of his needs and suffering earlier.

What we have in these ten verses is the apostle's method of resolving that specific problem. The thing we have to understand about God's truth is that it is something that governs the whole of our life. It dominates and controls our thinking; it controls our action. And now, in these ten verses, we see how a Christian, even in such a matter as returning thanks for a kindness, does so in a way that is different from the way and manner of a person that is not a

Christian. The Christian cannot do anything, not even in a matter like this, except in a truly Christian manner. So here, Paul, at one and the same time, shows his indebtedness to his friends, but still greater indebtedness to God.

Paul was always zealous for the sovereignty and reputation of God, and he was afraid that in thanking the Philippians for their gift he might somehow give the impression that God was not sufficient for him apart from them.

He had to keep that first. He loved the Philippians very dearly and he was profoundly grateful to them. But he loved God even more, and he was afraid that in thanking them he might somehow give the wrong impression that God was not sufficient for him, or that he had been depending on the Philippians in an ultimate sense. He was afraid he would seem discontent with the will of God.

Paul starts out to show the primacy of God and the all-sufficiency of God, while at one and the same time, he shows his gratitude and his indebtedness and his love towards the Philippians for this manifestation of their personal care and concern for him.

The real essence of the matter is found in verses 11 and 12. Here we have the teaching:

**Philippians 4:11** Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.

That is, "Satisfied to the point where I am not disturbed or worried."

**Philippians 4:12** I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

There are two main principles here. The first is the condition at which Paul had arrived. The second is the way that he had arrived at that condition. That condition is the condition of contentment.

First look at the condition Paul had attained. He describes it by the word translated here as content—"I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content." But it is important that we arrive at the exact meaning of this word.

The word "content" does not fully explain it; it really means that he is, "self-sufficient, independent of circumstances or conditions or surroundings, "having sufficiency in oneself." This is self-sufficiency in the good sense. We know that self-sufficiency can be bad when we ignore God. That is the real meaning of the original Greek word translated content—self-sufficient, independent of circumstances.

Vivian Greene, in her work, *Words of Women: Quotations for Success*, rightly stated, "It is not our circumstances that create our discontent or contentment. It is us."

Again, "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content"—self-sufficient, independent of circumstances, independent of conditions. The affirmation made by Paul is that he had arrived at a state in which he could honestly and truthfully say that he was independent of his position, his circumstances, his surroundings, and of everything that was happening to him. This is very important to us today, because we are entering a time of uncertainty, and of changing circumstances.

Paul was not making some rhetorical statement; the records of his life in different parts of the New Testament prove this. For example, look at the description of Paul's first visit to Philippi, where the recipients of this letter lived. You will remember how he and Silas were arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison, with their feet tightly secured in the stocks. Their physical conditions could hardly have been worse, but that had very little effect on Paul and Silas.

**Acts 16:25** But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

They were independent of circumstances—*content in whatever state I am*. They were self-satisfied, independent of surroundings. Also, that is what we find when Paul tells us how he learned to be independent of *the thorn in the flesh*, self-sufficient in spite of it.

**II Corinthians 12:7-10** And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In its basic Greek meaning, to be content simply means to be pleased, satisfied; having a feeling of sufficiency. Of course, we are not talking about contentment with evil, wickedness, or sin.

The person whose circumstances suit his outlook may be happy; but the person who can suit his outlook to any circumstances is outstanding. That is an attitude in controlling his anxiety, of ridding himself of worry, and of being content. Paul makes it clear in I Timothy 6 that contentment should be combined with righteousness.

**I Timothy 6:6-9** Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.

Paul had become an elderly man by the time he wrote to the young pastor, Timothy, and said, "The first thing that you have to learn is to be independent of circumstances and conditions, to have godliness with

contentment, to be righteous while being satisfied in Christ, and with God's will."

New Testament teaching not only affirms that this was true of Paul; it makes it very clear that it is a condition that all of us as Christians should achieve. You remember how Jesus Christ makes this point regarding worrisome situations.

**Matthew 6:25-34** "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Do not be over-anxious and worried about your needs. That is the wonderful, powerful independence of what is happening to us, that we should all know and experience. This is self-sufficiency in the good sense.

But it is very important that we have a clear understanding of what this means. The word content tends to stimulate certain misunderstandings of what Paul is teaching. Paul's statement, "in whatever state I am, to be content," sometimes has been viewed as nothing more than hindrance to the

forward evolution of mankind, that it has been a damper on progress. It has been viewed as a doctrine that has taught people to put up with all kinds of conditions whatever they may be, and however disgraceful and unjust.

The Bible never teaches that people should be content to remain in poverty, that they should never endeavor to 'better' themselves. Neither does it mean mere indifference to circumstances. That is just the negative resignation of a pagan 'Stoic,' and far removed from the way a Christian should think.

Stoicism was a philosophy that Paul had to refute in his day because there were some very slight similarities with true Christianity. I will not get into the similarities, but seeing some of the differences may help explain good versus evil individual independence.

The difference between pagan Stoicism and true Christianity is this: the morality of Stoicism is essentially based on pride, whereas the morality of Christianity is based on humility.

Contentment does not begin from a person's outward condition, but from his inward disposition, and is the genuine result of humility. Stoicism encourages individual independence away from divine interference, but Christianity encourages individual independence with faith in divine intervention; and finally, Stoicism looks for consolation in the belief that life is beyond anyone's control, but Christianity finds consolation in divine intervention in a person's life.

What Paul says about himself in Philippians 4, is that he is not mastered or controlled by circumstances, as the Stoics believed they were. He taught that, by all means, if you can improve your circumstances by fair and legitimate means, then do it; but if you cannot, and if you have to remain in a trying and difficult situation, do not let it determine your misery or your joy.

In other words, Paul says that you have to arrive at the state where, whatever your conditions, you are not controlled by them. That is what he acknowledges about himself. "Whatever my condition or circumstance," he says in effect, "I'm in control. I'm the master of the situation. I'm not mastered by the situation. I'm free. I'm at liberty. I don't depend on what is happening to me for my happiness."



Your life, your happiness, your joy, and your experience should be independent of the things that may be happening to you. Remember, Paul was in prison, probably chained when he expressed what he wrote to the Philippians, but even while in that condition, he could say that he was independent of his circumstances.

Paul said that his life was not controlled and determined by what was happening to him; he was in a state and condition that he rose above. These things were not the determining factors for his feeling of sufficiency and independence in his life.

So that was his claim, and he was very anxious to emphasize the fact that it is an all-inclusive claim. Look closely at his actual words. Once he had made the general statement, he then amplified it:

**Philippians 4:12-13** I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned [and again he goes back to it] both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

The Amplified version adds to verse 13, "I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him Who infuses inner strength into me; I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency."

Paul was anxious to make the all-inclusiveness of his claim perfectly clear. Let me put the opposites in series. He knew how to be abased, he knew how to be hungry and to suffer need; on the other hand, he knew how to abound, how to be full, and to have plenty.

It is interesting to notice the relative difficulty of these two things. Which is the more difficult, to be abased or to abound without losing the contented mind? To have wealth or poverty?

Both situations are extremely difficult and one is as difficult as the other. Can we be abased without feeling a sense of grudge, or without being worried, or without being anxious? Can we suffer the need of food and

clothing, can we be belittled in our work, can we somehow or another be put down and remain content?

It is very difficult to take second place, or to be hurt, or to be insulted, or to see others suffering in the same way, or to suffer physical need, or pain—to know how to be abased, how to be hungry, how to suffer need in some respect.

One of the greatest tasks in life is to discover how to suffer any or all of those things without feeling a sense of grudge, without complaint, annoyance, or bitterness, and to discover how not to be worried or anxious. Paul tells us that he learned how to do that. He had experienced every kind of trial and tribulation, and yet he was able to learn to be unaffected by them.

Then take the other side. Paul said, "I know how to abound, I know how to be full, I know how to enjoy plenty." This is really a tough thing to do.

It is extremely difficult for the wealthy person not to feel complete independence from God. When a person is rich, and he can arrange and manipulate everything, he tends to forget God.

Most of us remember God when we are down. When we are in need we begin to pray, but when we have everything we need, how easy it is to forget God.

He says that he is not dependent on either, that he is self-sufficient in this sense, that his life is not controlled by these things, and that he is what he is apart from them. Whether he is to abound, or to suffer need, it does not matter.

But Paul is not content with that, he goes still further and says, "In all things, everywhere," which means in everything and in all things—every single thing in detail, all things together.

Paul divides it up like this deliberately. He wants to say that there is no limit to what he can do in this respect. In a sense, he is saying, "In every single particular thing I'm like that." Then he adds, "Now I'll put them together in all things. Whatever may happen to me, I'm self-sufficient, I'm not dependent

on circumstances, my life and happiness and joy are not determined or controlled by them."

That, according to Paul, is the right way to live; that is an important part of Christian living, especially in times of stress. What about the tribulation, if we have to go through that, as we know that there are going to be some who are going to be martyred?

We are living in times of uncertainty, which makes it all the more important that we learn the lesson of knowing how to live without allowing circumstances to affect our inner peace and joy. Remember Paul and Silas sang hymns and praised God in their circumstance of imprisonment.

There is no doubt that we are in times of stress. Perhaps there was never a time in the history of the world when it was so difficult to learn this lesson as today. The whole of life is so controlling and organized at the present time as to make it almost impossible to live this self-sufficient Christian life.

Even in a natural and physical sense, we are all so dependent on the things that are being done for us, and to us, and around us, that it has become very difficult to live our own lives. We switch on the radio, or the television, and gradually become dependent on them, and it is the same with the Internet, with eBay, PayPal, MySpace, FaceBook, and Twitter.

The world is organizing life for us in every respect and we are becoming dependent upon it. Many of you have experienced power blackouts from bad weather, local area construction, or faulty power equipment. You know how disruptive that can be to our externally controlled and organized lives. People find it almost impossible to spend successive nights in their own homes, without light and electricity, seemingly doing nothing. That is the exact opposite of what Paul is describing in Philippians 4.

But increasingly, we are becoming dependent upon what others are doing for us. It is a type of personal-socialism; it is the exact opposite of what Paul is teaching the Christians there at Philippi and for us.

Have we really cultivated this self-sufficiency so that we can stand on our own (with God's help, of course) when it comes to making righteous and wise decisions?

The mark of the last century is that the world became far less self-sufficient, not only in its physical survival with regard to water and food, but in its mental outlook with regard to every need—especially in its thinking.

You and I, in the final analysis, are what we are when we are alone. It is easier for most people to enjoy the worship of God in the company of other Christians than when alone—and fellowship is a good thing.

**Psalm 133:1** Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

So, I am not talking about independence from that kind of thing.

Paul wants us to enjoy what he himself was enjoying. He had a love for God the Father and Jesus Christ that made him independent of all that was happening, or that might happen, to him. In everything, in all things, wherever he might be, whatever was happening, he was content. Abased or abounding, in need or in plenty, it did not matter; he had this life, this personal life with God and Christ. We see there the key to becoming content, and that is with our personal relationship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

Let us consider briefly the second matter found in Philippians 4, namely, how Paul reached this condition of contentment. Paul makes a very interesting statement.

**Philippians 4:11-12** Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

Notice in verse 11 he said, "I have learned," or better, "I have come to learn." Paul was not always like this any more than any one of us. He had come to learn contentment.

He used another interesting word, in verse 12. He said, "Everywhere and in all things I have learned [which literally in the Greek means, 'I am instructed'] both to be full and to be hungry."

So Paul used two specific terms with slightly different meanings. In verse 11 he said, "I have come to learn," and then in verse 12, he said, "I am instructed."

The authorities agree here that Paul really said, "I have been initiated, let into the secret, let into the mystery."

Paul says that he has come to learn how to be in this content, self-sufficient condition. There are several intimations in the New Testament that this was especially difficult for him. Paul was sensitive, proud by nature, and, in addition, he was an intensely active person.

Nothing could be more frustrating for such a man than to lie in prison. He had been brought up as a Roman citizen, but here he is enduring bondage, not spending his life among great intellectual people, but among slaves and criminals.

So, how does he manage it? He says, "I have come to learn, I have been let into the secret, I have been let into the mystery." How did he come to learn?

In the first place it was by sheer experience. You remember Paul's thorn in the flesh, mentioned in II Corinthians 12:9-10? Paul did not like it, did he? He struggled against it; three times he prayed that it might be removed. But it was not removed. He could not reconcile himself to it. He was impatient, he was anxious to go on preaching, and this thorn in the flesh was keeping him down.

But then he was taught a lesson: The Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you." He came to a place of understanding as the result of sheer

experience of the dealing of God with him. He had to learn—and experience teaches us all.

Some of us are very slow to learn, but God in His kindness may send us an illness, sometimes He even strikes us down—anything to teach us this lesson, and to bring us to this converted position.

But it was not to be experienced alone. Paul had come to learn this truth by working out in his own mind certain challenges. Let me give you some of the steps Paul used to face times of stress; these are things that we can apply in our own lives to meet challenges in our own life. These are things that we can use to combat discontentment and anxiety when facing times of stress.

Paul's logic was something like this:

**"Firstly, what matters above all else is my relationship with God. That is the first thing."**

**Exodus 20:3** "You shall have no other gods before Me."

A person who breaks this commandment cannot be content because his treasure and security is elsewhere. Personal security depends on who we rely on for protection. The Ten Commandments protect relationships with God. First and foremost, God alone is to be recognized as God, and He is to be worshiped with reverence as the great benevolent Sovereign that He is.

This first Commandment is broken when we do not give glory and honor to God only. Pride and discontentment make a god of self, covetousness makes a god of money, sensuality makes a god of the belly; whatever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted in or depended on, more than God—no matter what it is—in effect, we make a god.

Someone once said, "With the civilized man contentment is a myth. From the cradle to the grave he is forever longing and striving after something better, an indefinable some new object yet unattained." They mean that the

carnal man will never be content because he is always pursuing something. You could choose the wealthiest person in the world, someone who has everything they want, and they would not be content.

**"Secondly, God is concerned about me as my Father, therefore nothing happens to me apart from God. Even my hairs are counted. I must never forget that!"**

**Luke 12:7** But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

This shows God's providential care over the smallest details of life. If God even cares about sparrows, how much greater is His care for every one of His own children, whose value is so much greater. By the way, a sparrow at the time of Paul was worth two of the smallest coins that there were.

**"Thirdly, God's will and God's ways are a great mystery, but I know that whatever He wills or permits, is of necessity for my good, and for the good of others."**

**I Peter 3:16-17** Having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Peter points out that it may be God's will for us to suffer for doing good. This is commendable before God, and so is better than deserved suffering for doing evil.

**"Fourthly, every situation in life is the unfolding of some manifestation of God's love and goodness. Therefore my responsibility is to look for this manifestation of God's goodness and kindness and to be prepared for surprises and blessings."**

**Isaiah 55:8-9** "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

One of the principles that I get out of this is that when we are suffering a long-term illness, we must be content with the circumstance because God has decided what is best for us. It does not mean that we just roll over and live with it, we should research it and find out what we can do to possibly improve the situation.

What, for example, is the great lesson learned in the matter of Paul's thorn in the flesh?

**II Corinthians 12:10** Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul was taught this manifestation of God's grace by his suffering in physical weakness.

**"Fifthly, conditions are always changing; therefore I must obviously not be dependent upon conditions."**

**Proverbs 24:21-22** My son, fear the Lord and the king; do not associate with those given to change; for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin those two can bring?

This is referring to those who set aside the worship of the true God, or the authority of the true king, who represents Him. Those who do not fear and reverence God and those who do not fear and reverence the king will meet sudden tragedy.

Politicians today are given to change. In fact, the promise of change has given those without vision a false hope of a better future; but increased



abortion, euthanasia, and other methods of planned depopulation as the result of their demonic policies of change will bring sudden calamity on humanity.

We cannot depend on conditions because dramatic detrimental changes are being introduced on a daily basis. If we worry about every change that is coming down the pipeline, we will worry ourselves sick.

**"Sixthly, I must regard circumstances and conditions, not in and of themselves, but as a part of God's dealings with me. This is His work of perfecting my heart and mind, and bringing me to final perfection."**

In Scripture, perfection generally refers to something being without flaw or error; a state of completion or fulfillment. God's perfection means that He is complete in Himself. He lacks nothing; He has no flaws. He is perfect in all the characteristics of His nature. He is the basis for and the standard by which all other perfection is to be measured.

Man's perfection is relative and dependent on God for its existence. Regarding a person's moral state in this life, perfection may refer either to a relatively blameless lifestyle or to a person's maturity as a believer.

**Philippians 3:12-15** Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things, which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

The promises that we have from our God and Father, and His Son Jesus Christ are tremendous in their power, their guidance, and their encouragement.

The more spiritually mature a man is, the more humble, self-renouncing, self-abhorring, and the more sensitive to every sin he becomes, and the more

closely he draws to Christ. The moral imperfections that cling to him feel like sins; and he grieves over them and strives to overcome.

The faithful find that their life is a constant warfare, and they need to watch while they pray. They are always subject to the constant discipline of their Father's loving hand, designed to correct their imperfections and to confirm their refinement.

And it is understood and evident that the most righteous are the least prone to claim to have attained perfection for themselves.

**"Seventh, whatever my conditions may be at this present moment, they are only temporary, they are only passing, and they can never rob me of the joy and the glory that ultimately await me with Christ, unless I give up God's way of life, or rebel against Him."**

**I John 2:15-17** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

The apostle Paul probably reasoned it out similar to the way the apostle John did here. He had faced conditions and circumstances in the light of God's truth and had worked out these steps and stages. And having done this he said, 'Let anything you can think of happen to me, I remain steadfast, unwavering, committed. Whatever may happen to me, I am unmovable.' This is the attitude that each and every one of us has to have when we are facing these times of stress and anxiety.

The main principle that emerges clearly, is that Paul had learned to find his pleasure and his satisfaction in God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, and always in Them. That is the positive aspect of this matter.

We must learn to depend on God, and in order to do that, we must learn to know Him, we must learn to have fellowship with Him, and we must learn to

find our pleasure in Him. If the day comes when we are restricted from freely worshipping God, or even reading about Him, when persecution is pressing against us, will we be able to be joyful? Will we be able to have peace of mind?

Let us connect all this with a practical application. Let us use a real life situation.

Some members of the church are being tested with this right now in various ways. Those whose spouses are non-members—unconverted—are dealing with this type of thing on a daily basis. How hard is it for them to be self-sufficient and independent of circumstances?

I am sure that many times it is tough to be content in that situation. But what is God's goal there for the converted member?

God is more concerned about our character than our comfort. His purpose is to mold us, like clay models, into Christ's image.

**Jeremiah 18:5-6** Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the Lord. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!"

We could insert the church of God in there, because He is doing the same with us today.

The awkward, sometimes frustrating and exasperating experiences of living with a spouse who is not in the church could be a great blessing in disguise.

Every close human relationship, including marriage, has its stresses and anxiety. We know that two cannot walk together unless they agree. But, then, roses have thorns. When a husband or wife is not in the church, a member has an even more urgent prod to develop wisdom.

The apostle James tells us

**James 1:5** "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Living with potential hostility, or periodic alienation, forces a Christian to examine himself regularly.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthian members, and us, that we are to examine ourselves to determine if we are truly converted. We are to test ourselves to see—to know—that Jesus Christ is in us. In this way, the human clay that God is transforming becomes a little more pliable.

We all fall short of the ideal from time to time. The good news is that God is more willing to give us wisdom than we are to ask Him for it.

The tragedy is that many people stumble carelessly through life. Some are discourteous, tactless, and un-teachable. It is no wonder they grieve over their terrible lack of success in human relationships.

Wisdom, on the other hand, is the art of saying the right thing at the right time in just enough words to make the point.

**Proverbs 25:11** A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

The sometimes-thorny relationships between Christians and their non-member spouse provide incentive in the lifelong pursuit of wisdom. Members with antagonistic spouses should cultivate all the attributes of tact, diplomacy, strategy, and timing; these qualities lead to increased success in life. James worded it beautifully in his epistle.

**James 3:17-18** But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

The responsibility is clearly upon us as members to weed out destructive anger and to make peace wherever possible.

The worldly, almost irresistible pleasure of striking back—retaliating by word or action—is not worth the price paid in severed relationships. It is so hard to resist preaching to or lecturing our spouses. But it is better to develop a gentle and quiet spirit that the Bible esteems so highly.

**I Peter 3:3-4** Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.

We should be careful to disengage ourselves from situations in which we feel resentment and bitterness boiling to the surface. God warns that a brother who is offended is harder to be won than a fortified city.

We should allow people to save face whenever possible, treating our spouse as we would like to be treated in a similar circumstance. Remember the admonition called the golden rule.

**Luke 6:31** And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

These are basic Christian principles, simpler to read over than to actually put into practice. But they do work, and the results are well worth the effort. Remember Paul's counsel in Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men"—with everyone!

Nothing justifies cruelty by antagonistic spouses. God does not expect women, for example, to suffer under despicable examples of manhood by men who beat them, threaten their lives, or attempt to suffocate them spiritually. Paul tells us, in I Corinthians 7:15, "God has called us to peace."

It is true that Christian women are required to honor their husbands and to submit to them, but God also says in Colossians 3:18, "Wives, submit

yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord." That is, to your own husbands.

Danger to life and limb, or slow spiritual strangulation by husbands who make it impossible for their wives to obey God's clear commands is unfitting. Wives are to submit, yes, but "as it is fit in the Lord." A Christian woman owes allegiance to an authority even higher than her husband—to the One who instituted the husband's authority in the first place, the almighty, eternal, loving God.

Acts 5:29, plainly teaches that, "We should obey God rather than men." No scripture justifies the cruel, iron-fisted rule of a man who forces a converted woman to infringe on God's spiritual law. The wife is told to "submit herself," not to get pressed into slavery.

At the same time, converted women should not seize on any picky areas to excuse dumping husbands they would selfishly like to get rid of. A content person will not criticize and will not condemn. And wisdom dictates that tact and resourcefulness can often work wonders.

Contentment results from developing an independence of circumstances, and a dependence upon our relationship to God. Without contentment, we find it nearly as impossible to please others as ourselves. Without contentment we cannot please God.

Paul's intimacy with God, through Christ, was so great in its depth that he had become independent of everything else.

A primary synonym for contentment is 'sufficiency.' Is what we have sufficient? Contentment is a disposition of mind in which our desires are confined to what we enjoy without complaining about our lot in life, or impatiently wishing for more.

It contrasts envy; greed and covetousness; pride and ambition; anxiety of mind; complaining and dissatisfaction. Contentment does not imply unconcern about our welfare, or that we should not have a sense of anything uneasy or distressing; nor does it tolerate idleness, or prevent diligent efforts to improve our circumstances.

It implies, however, that we have controlled and moderate desires for material things; that we are not careless; but that we accept and make the best of our condition and circumstance, whatever it may be.

Finally, what helped Paul most to learn this condition of contentment—this independence of circumstances—was his looking at the great and perfect example of Christ Himself.

**Hebrews 12:1-4** Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

Knowing the, "joy that was set before Him," and that trials are a temporary part of physical life, Paul looked to Christ and saw Him and His perfect example. And he applied it to his own life.

**II Corinthians 4:17-18** For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things, which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

This is why Paul could say, "I have come to learn in whatever state I am therein to be self-sufficient and independent of circumstances."

On His last evening with them, Jesus continued to teach and encourage His disciples. His emphasis was on the Father, because His chief resource was the Father, whose purpose He came to fulfill and by whose power He was able to execute it.

The greatest thing in life is to be able to say with assurance, with Christ Himself, at that time of trial, that "the Father is with Me."

**John 16:32-33** Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

Jesus imparted to His disciples knowledge concerning His death, and His provision for them, that they might be calm and confident in facing this time of stress and anxiety, disillusionment and apparent disaster.

His statement, "that in Me you may have peace," reiterates His statement of John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." Even in the hour of His greatest suffering, He had an unshakeable confidence in the victorious purpose of God.

May God in His infinite wisdom and grace, enable us all to learn this great and vital lesson of independence of circumstances and contentment with godliness.