

CONTENTMENT (original master notes)¹

*“But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have **learned**, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be **content**. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things **I am instructed** both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” – Phil. 4:10-12*

Paul “sets out in this mighty passage [Phil. 4:10-19] with its staggering and astounding affirmation, to show the primacy of the Lord and the all-sufficiency of the Lord, while at the same time he shows his gratitude and his indebtedness and his love towards the Philippians for this manifestation of their personal care and solicitude for him. The real essence of the matter is found in verses 11 and 12. Here we have the doctrine...

LET US... LOOK AT THE CONDITION TO WHICH THE APOSTLE HAD ATTAINED.

“He describes it by the word that is translated here as ‘content’—‘I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be ‘content’... it is important that we should get at the exact and precise meaning of this word. The word ‘content’ does not fully explain it; it really means that he is ‘self-sufficient’, independent of circumstances of conditions or surroundings, ‘having sufficiency in one’s self.’ That is the real meaning of this word which is translated ‘content.’

CONTENT:

- “*Arkeo* primarily signifies to be sufficient, to be possessed of sufficient strength, to be strong, to be enough for a thing... I Tim. 6:8, with food & raiment; Heb. 13:5... *Autarkes*, as found in the papyri writings, means sufficient in oneself (*autos*, self, *arkeo*, see above), self-sufficient, adequate, needing no assistance; hence, content, Phil. 4:11.” (Vine, vol. I, p. 234)
- “Happy enough with what one has or is; not desiring something more or different; satisfied.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1994 edition, p. 300)
- Independent of circumstances, ‘*content in whatsoever state I am*,’ [4:11] to be self-satisfied, independent of surroundings.

Acts 16 – “...There is, for instance, an interesting example of it [here]... describing the occasion of Paul’s first visit to Philippi where the recipients of this letter lived. You remember how he and Silas were arrested and beaten and thrown into prison with their feet made fast in the stocks. Their physical conditions could not very well have been worse, yet so little effect did that have upon Paul and Silas that ‘at midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God’ (Acts 16:25).

2 Cor. 12 – “That is what you find also in [this] famous passage... where Paul tells us how he learned to be independent of ‘*the thorn in the flesh*,’ i.e. self-sufficient in spite of it.

I Tim. 6:6 – “You remember also how he exhorts Timothy to take hold of this principle by saying: ‘*Godliness with contentment is great gain*.’ There is nothing like it, he says in effect, if you have that you have everything. Paul had become an old man by then and he writes to the young man Timothy and says: The first thing you have to learn is to be independent of circumstances and conditions—‘*Godliness with contentment*.’

¹ Everything contained here is taken verbatim from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes & Cure* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1965) with the exception of material referenced immediately afterward in parentheses, & all material appearing in brackets which has been added by me. –Mike Edwards, March, 2018, Madison, Ohio. Note: All bolding, colorizing, underlining & some italicizing added by me. –mwe

Mt. 6:34 – “The... New Testament, however, not only affirms that this was true of Paul, it makes it very plain and clear that **it is a condition into which we should all as Christian people enter**. ...Our Lord makes this point...‘*Take no heed for the morrow*’ [Mt. 6:34], be not over-anxious and worried about food, and clothing and things of that kind. That is the glorious, mighty independence of what is happening to us, ***that we should all know and experience***. It is self-sufficiency in the good sense. [!]

“But it is most important that we should have clear understanding in our minds as to what this means.

The word ‘*content*’ tends to provoke **CERTAIN MISUNDERSTANDINGS:**

- A) “You can so interpret this statement by Paul as more or less to justify the charge that is brought against the Christian gospel that it is nothing but ‘***THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE***’...They say that it is a doctrine which has taught people to put up with all kinds of conditions whatever they may be, and however disgraceful and unjust... **Now that is just rubbish and a total denial of what the apostle teaches here**. Yet how often has it been interpreted like that... The Bible never teaches that; it does not say that man should be content to remain in poverty, that he should never endeavor to ‘better’ himself. **There is nothing in the Bible that disputes the proposition that all men are equal in the sight of God and that all are entitled to equality of opportunity.**
- B) “Neither does it mean mere ***INDIFFERENCE TO CIRCUMSTANCES***. That is but the negative resignation of a pagan stoicism, and far removed from the Christian position.

WHAT THEN DOES IT MEAN?

“To put it positively, what the apostle says here is that he is not mastered or controlled by circumstances. By all means, if you can improve your circumstances by fair and legitimate means, do so; but if you cannot, ***and if you have to remain in a trying and difficult position, do not be mastered by it, do not let it get you down, do not let it control you, do not let it determine your misery or your joy*** [cf. I Cor. 7:21 cf. Booker T. Washington]... This is what he affirms of himself. ‘Whatever my condition or circumstance,’ he says in effect, ‘*I am in control. I am master of the situation, I am not mastered by the situation, I am free, I am at liberty, I do not depend for my happiness upon what is happening to me. My life, my happiness, my joy and my experience are independent of the things that are going on round about me, and even of the things that may be happening to me.*’

“I WOULD REMIND YOU AGAIN THAT PAUL WAS ACTUALLY IN PRISON, probably chained to a soldier on his right and another on his left when he uttered these words, **yet even while in that actual condition, he can say that he is independent of his circumstances**. ‘*My life,*’ says Paul, ‘*is not controlled and determined by what is happening to me; I am in a state and condition in which I rise right above them. These things are not the determining factors in my life and experience.*”²

“NOW THAT IS HIS CLAIM, and he was most anxious to emphasize the fact that it is **AN ALL-INCLUSIVE CLAIM**. Observe again his actual words. Having made the general statement he now amplifies it: ‘*I know both how to be abased and how to abound, everywhere and in all things I am instructed*’—again he goes back to it—‘*both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.*’ [4:12] He was anxious to make the all-inclusiveness of his claim perfectly clear.

“IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO DISCUSS THE RELATIVE DIFFICULTY OF THESE TWO THINGS. Which is the more difficult, to be **ABASED** or to **ABOUND** *without losing the contented mind?* I do not know whether we can ever answer the question. **They are both extremely difficult and one is as difficult as the other.**

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1965, 1981), pp. 277-280

MLJ: “Can I be ABASED without feeling a sense of grudge, or without being worried, or without being anxious? Can I suffer the need of food and clothing, can I be abased in my profession or office or work, can I somehow or another be put down and still remain in spirit exactly as I was before! **What a difficult thing this is**, to take a second place, to be hurt, to be insulted... to suffer physical need or pain...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 or annoyance or bitterness of spirit, to discover how not to be worried or anxious.** Paul tells us that he has learned how to do that. He had experienced every kind of trial and tribulation and yet he is unaffected by them.

“Then take the other side. ‘*I know how to ABOUND,*’ says Paul [4:12], ‘I know how to be full, I know how to enjoy plenty. **What a difficult thing this is.** How difficult it is for the wealthy person not to feel complete independence of God. **When we are rich and can arrange and manipulate everything, we tend to forget God.** Most of us remember Him 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. “*I leave it to you decide which is the more difficult.*”

“Lack is not necessarily a sign of God’s disfavor, nor plenty of His approval.”

(Ryrie, Study Bible, p. 1800)

“But... he goes still further and says: ‘**IN ALL THINGS**’ [4:12b] which means *in everything and in all things*—every single thing in detail, all things together...Then he adds...*whatever may happen to me, I am self-sufficient, I am not dependent upon them, my life and happiness and joy are not determined or controlled by them.*’

“THAT, ACCORDING TO [PAUL], IS THE WAY TO LIVE, THAT IS CHRISTIAN LIVING. It is good for us to face this mighty statement. *We are living in days and times of uncertainty*, and it may well be that the first and the greatest lesson we all may have to learn is **TO KNOW HOW TO LIVE WITHOUT ALLOWING CIRCUMSTANCES TO AFFECT OUR INNER PEACE & JOY.** And yet *perhaps there was never a time in the history of the world when it was so difficult to learn this lesson as it is today*... Even in a natural sense we are all so dependent on the things that are being done *for us and to us and around and about us*, that it has become most difficult to live our own lives... **The world is organizing life for us in every respect and we are becoming dependent upon it.**

“[An] **ILLUSTRATION** of that in the early days of [WWII] were the **Blackout Regulations** [in Great Britain] were first imposed on us. We used to hear of something which was described as the ‘*boredom of the blackout.*’ **People found it almost impossible to spend a succession of nights in their own homes doing nothing.** They had become dependent on the *cinema, the theatre and various other forms of entertainment*, and when these things were suddenly cut off they did not know what to do with themselves—‘the boredom of the blackout.’ **That is the very antithesis of what Paul is describing here.** But increasingly it is becoming the tendency in the life of man today... [cf. “*Facebook fasts*”, “*cellphone holidays*”, etc.

“This, ALAS, is not only true of the world in general, **it IS BECOMING TRUE ALSO OF CHRISTIAN PEOPLE**... Professor Whitehead uttered a great truth when he said in his definition of religion that ‘*Religion is what a man does with his own solitude.*’ **You and I, in the [final] analysis, are what we are when we are alone...**”³

Dr. Bob Jones Sr: “**Reputation is what men think you are, Character is what God knows you to be.**”

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *ibid*, pp. 280-283

HOW PAUL REACHED THIS CONDITION OF CONTENTMENT

“[Paul] makes a very interesting statement...he says: ‘I HAVE LEARNED,’ or better, ‘*I have come to learn.*’ **I thank God that Paul said that! Paul was not always like this any more than any one of us.** He had ‘*come to learn.*’ He has another interesting word also. He says: ‘*Everywhere and in all things I am INSTRUCTED both to be full and to be hungry.*’ The authorities are all agreed here in saying that what he really says is, ‘*I have been initiated,*’ ‘*let into the secret,*’ ‘*let into the mystery.*’

LEARNED [v.11]: “*Manthano* denotes (a) to learn... (b) to ascertain... (c) **to learn by use and practice, to acquire the habit of, be accustomed to**, e.g., Phil. 4:11; I Tim. 5:4, 13; Tit. 3:14; Heb. 5:8.”

INSTRUCTED [v. 12]: “*Mueo*, **to initiate into mysteries**, is translated ‘**I have learned the secret**’ (Passive Voice, perfect tense) in Phil. 4:12, R.V. (A.V., ‘I am instructed’)... (Vine, vol. II, p. 324)

“Paul says that he has come to learn how to be in this condition. **Now there are many intimations in the New Testament that this was particularly difficult for him.** Paul was sensitive, proud by nature, and in addition, he was an intensely active being. **Nothing could be more galling for such a man than to lie in prison.** He had been brought up as a Roman citizen, but here is enduring bondage, not spending his life among great intellectual people, but among slaves. How does he manage it? ‘Ah,’ 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?”

1. “In the first place it was **BY SHEER EXPERIENCE**. I need only direct your attention to 2 Cor. 12:9-10 about ‘*the thorn in the flesh.*’ Paul did not like it. 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 the lesson: ‘My grace is sufficient for thee.’** 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 great lesson and to bring us to this great position.”**
2. “But it was not to be experience alone. **Paul had come to learn this great truth BY WORKING OUT A GREAT ARGUMENT.** Let me give you some of the steps of the argument which you can work out for yourself. **I think that the apostle’s logic was something like this:**
 - a. **CONDITIONS ARE ALWAYS CHANGING, THEREFORE I MUST OBVIOUSLY NOT BE DEPENDENT UPON CONDITIONS.** – [cf. Phil. 4:12; I John 2:17 – “*The world passeth away & the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.*”]
 - b. **WHAT MATTERS SUPREME & VITALLY IS MY SOUL AND MY RELATIONSHIP TO GOD—that is the first thing!** [cf. Phil. 3:8-10; III Jn. 2 – “*I wish that thou mayest prosper & be in health as thy soul prospereth.*”]
 - c. **GOD IS CONCERNED ABOUT ME AS MY FATHER, AND NOTHING HAPPENS TO ME APART FROM GOD.** Even the very hairs of my head are all numbered. I must NEVER forget that. [cf. Mt. 6:27; 10:30 – “*The very hairs of your head are numbered*”]
 - d. **GOD’S WILL & GOD’S WAYS ARE A GREAT MYSTERY, BUT I KNOW THAT WHATEVER HE WILLS OR PERMITS IS OF NECESSITY FOR MY GOOD.** [cf. Rom. 8:28 – “*All things work together for them that love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*” Rom. 9:20 – “*Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’*” (nkjv) etc.]

- e. EVERY SITUATION IN LIFE IS THE UNFOLDING OF SOME MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S LOVE & GOODNESS. Therefore my business is to look for this peculiar manifestation of God's goodness and kindness and to be prepared for surprises & blessings because *'His ways are not my ways, neither His thoughts my thoughts.'* – Isa. 55:8-9 [cf. Rom. 11:33-36]. What, for example, is the great lesson that Paul learned in the matter of the thorn in the flesh? It is that: *'When I am weak then am I strong.'* Paul was taught through physical weakness this manifestation of God's grace.
- f. I MUST REGARD CIRCUMSTANCES & CONDITIONS, NOT IN & OF THEMSELVES therefore, but as a part of God's dealings with me in the WORK OF PERFECTING MY SOUL AND BRINGING ME TO FINAL PERFECTION. [cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10]
- g. WHATEVER MY CONDITIONS MAY BE AT THIS PRESENT MOMENT THEY ARE ONLY TEMPORARY [cf. II Cor. 4:7-5:8], they are only passing, and they can never rob me of my joy and the glory that ultimately await me with Christ. [cf. Rom. 8:31-39; etc.]

MLJ: "I suggest that Paul had reasoned and argued it out like that. He had faced conditions and circumstances in the light of the Christian truth and the Christian Gospel, and had worked out these steps and stages. And having done so he says: *'Let anything you can think of happen to me, I remain exactly where I was. Whatever may happen to me, I am left unmoved.'*

- 3. "The big principle that emerges clearly is that Paul HAD LEARNED TO FIND HIS PLEASURE & HIS SATISFACTION IN CHRIST & ALWAYS IN CHRIST. That is the positive aspect of this matter. We must learn to depend upon Him and in order to do that we must learn to know Him, we must learn to have communion with Him, we must learn to find our pleasure in Him. Let me put it plainly—the danger with some of us is to spend far too much of our time even in reading about Him. The day may come, indeed will come, when we shall not be able to read. Then comes the test. Will you still be happy? Do you know Him so well that though you become deaf or blind this fount will still be open? Do you know Him so well that you can talk to Him and listen to Him and enjoy Him always? [cf. Phil. 3:1-14]. Will all be well because you have always been so dependent upon your relationship to Him that nothing else really matters? That was the apostle's condition.
- 4. "Finally, I believe that what helped him most to learn this lesson was HIS LOOKING AT THE GREAT & PERFECT EXAMPLE OF CHRIST HIMSELF. *'Looking unto Jesus...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame'* (Heb. 12:1-4). Paul *'looked unto Him'* and saw Him and His perfect example. And he applied it to his own life. *'While we look, not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal'* (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

MLJ paraphrase: *"I have come to learn in whatsoever state I am, therein to be self-sufficient and independent of circumstances."*

"CHRISTIAN PEOPLE, CAN YOU SAY THAT, DO YOU KNOW THAT STATE?"

Let this become first with us, let this become our ambition, let us strain every nerve and do everything we can to get into this blessed state. Life may force it upon us, but even if circumstances do not, the time is bound to come, soon or late, when earth and every earthly scene will pass away, and in that final isolation of the soul we shall be alone, facing death and eternity. The greatest thing in life is to be able to say with Christ Himself at that hour:

'And yet I am not alone because the Father is with me' (John 16:32).

"May God in His *infinite grace* enable us all to learn this great and vital lesson, and to this end let us offer frequently that prayer of Augustus Toplady:

**While I draw this fleeting breath
When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar through tracts unknown
See Thee on Thy Judgment Throne,
Rock of Ages cleft for me
Let me hide myself in Thee.’⁴**

⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *ibid*, pp. 283-286