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Strength for Contentment Philippians 4:10-14

Intro: It's been said that there are 2 kinds of people in this world: thermometers and thermostats. What is a thermometer? It's a device used measure temperature. A thermostat is a device used to turn on the a/c or heater, depending on the season. How do these things relate to character? Well, a thermometer isn't capable of changing anything around it – it just registers the temperature. It's always going up and down depending on its surroundings. Now a thermostat will also register the temperature of its surroundings but it has the additional capacity to change the surroundings when they need to be changed. Some people lack the power to change things – instead, they allow things to change them.

The Apostle Paul was a thermostat. Instead of having spiritual highs and lows in the face of changing situations, instead of allowing circumstances to determine his outlook on life (harsh his mellow), he just went right on doing what God had called him to do. He continued to serve the Lord as the Lord gave him opportunity. We can see in his personal references at the conclusion of his letter that he didn't see himself as the victim of circumstances but as the victor over them. In **v11** – I can accept all things; **v13** - I can do all things; **v18** – I have all things. Paul didn't need to be pampered to be content. His contentment was found in the spiritual resources abundantly provided to him by Jesus Christ.

II Peter 1:2-4 offers some deeper insight into these spiritual resources. Peter tells us that we have been given, in addition to grace and peace – all things that pertain to life and godliness. We have been given these things by the divine power of God the Father and Jesus Christ and they come to us through our knowledge of Him who called us. This knowledge is not a mere intellectual understanding or intuition. It's the knowledge that comes from experience – the experience God's people have of God Himself. Furthermore, those exceedingly great and precious promises are underwritten by the glory and virtue of the very God who gave them to us. Meaning, the promises of God are based on His glory and virtue; thus, they are perfectly reliable because God could never compromise His glory and virtue.

These are the spiritual resources that allowed Paul to find contentment in any circumstance. Contentment should not be confused with complacency, nor is it a false peace that's based on ignorance (ignorance is bliss). The complacent Christian is unconcerned about others but the contented Christian desires to share their blessings. Contentment isn't a mental escape from the battle but an abiding peace and confidence in the middle of the battle. This is how Paul could say, as he does in [v11](#), that he had learned to be content in any situation. The 2 most important words of this statement are learned and content.

The verb learned means to learn by experience. Paul's spiritual contentment was not something he had immediately after he accepted Christ. He had to go through and endure many difficult experiences in order to learn how to be content. It was something that he had to learn because contentment isn't natural to mankind. Content really means contained and it describes someone whose resources are within them and they don't need to rely on any external substitutes. The Greek word means self-sufficient but Christians are never sufficient in themselves – we're sufficient only in Christ. Because Jesus Christ lives within us, we're adequate for all the challenges and demands of this life.

In this passage, Paul points to 3 amazing spiritual resources that make us adequate and bring us contentment.

10 – Throughout Church history, individual churches have been remembered for different things, some good and some bad. In [Rom 1](#) we see a picture of a church that was known for its faith and is remembered today because of it ([v8](#)). The church in Ephesus was known for its hard work, and it's remembered for that ([Rev 2:2-3](#)). Corinth is remembered for its division and moral laxity, the Laodicea church for its apostasy, the Thessalonian church for its doctrinal dispute over Christ's 2nd coming. In Philippi we have a church that's remembered because it remembered. It remembered the apostle Paul in his moments of great financial necessity.

When Paul first came to Philippi, there were no Christians there. He was the first missionary. As Paul began to preach and teach the OT, a small group of believers gathered around him. These Christians were attached to Paul, because through him they found salvation and blessing in Jesus Christ.

Thus, they loved Paul and wanted to help him, and they continued to do so even after he moved on to other cities. After he left Philippi, Paul worked a short time in Thessalonica. Since it was close, the Philippians sent messengers to find out how he was doing. When they heard that he was in financial need, they took up a collection and sent it to him. Later when they heard that the need continued they did the same thing again. Paul refers to this in **v16**.

Soon, a riot drove Paul out of Thessalonica, and he went south to Berea and then moved on to Athens. During this time the church at Philippi lost track of him. When they eventually heard of his condition, that he was again in need, they sent money to him once again. This happened at least once after Paul had left Thessalonica, for the letter says that the Philippians had cared for him in the beginning of the gospel after he had left Macedonia. **II Corinthians** says that when he was in Corinth “the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed” (**2 Cor 11:9**). These were presumably Philippian Christians. Eventually the Philippians lost touch with Paul entirely, for he was constantly on the move and communications were uncertain and slow. Paul left Greece, returned to Judea, went on a 3rd missionary journey where they saw him again, then he moved on. Finally, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned in Caesarea for 2 years then sent to Rome in chains.

Many years had now passed since Paul had first visited Philippi and had started the church there, but the love of the Philippians for Paul was still strong and the church had not forgotten his service among them. Eventually, news of Paul came to them from Rome, and they learned that he was now in prison there and lacked everything. Many co-laborers had left him and he couldn't work. Immediately, they began to collect funds, and when they had them they sent the gift to Rome as soon as possible by way of Epaphroditus.

I've gone over all of this to illuminate the 1st resource believers possess that makes us adequate and content – it's the providence of God. We don't hear much about God's providence in this age of scientific advancement and it's easy to assume that the world simply spins on it's axis like a top without any interruption from God. But, the Bible clearly teaches the providential workings of God in nature and in the lives of His people. Providence comes from 2 Latin words “pro” – before and “video” – to see. Providence means God sees to it beforehand. It doesn't just mean that God knows

beforehand (He does) but it's more than that. It's God working in advance to arrange circumstances and situations for the fulfillment of His purposes.

The best illustration of this truth is the OT story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was the favorite son and his other brothers envied and even hated him for it. They finally got rid of him by selling him into slavery. If that were the end of it, it would be a terrible story. But God was simply getting all the pieces of a great deliverance into place. Joseph's life was put through the wringer but eventually, God put him in a position to not only save his family from starving but everyone in Egypt and the surrounding regions too, while making his boss (Pharaoh) a rich man. This is nothing but the providence of God in the lives of His people; His hand ruling and overruling in the affairs of life.

Paul experienced this same divine providence in his life and ministry and he was able to write [Rom 8:28](#) because of it. God in His providence had caused the church in Philippi to be concerned for Paul's needs and it came at a time when Paul needed their love and support the most! They had always been concerned for his well being but, clearly, they didn't always have the opportunity to help. But, when the opportunity arose, their care for Paul flourished again.

Life is not a series of accidents – it's a series of divine appointments. God's providence isn't reactive – it's proactive: God has already acted to lay out the necessary circumstances of your life to see His purposes accomplished in you. He goes before us to prepare the way. That's God's providence; it should be a great source of contentment for us!

11-13 – Now, Paul is quick to inform his friends in Philippi that he is not complaining! His happiness didn't depend on circumstances or things; his joy sprang from something deeper, something other than poverty or prosperity. Most of us have thoroughly learned to be abased because when difficult times come our way, we immediately run to the Lord. But, few believers have learned how to abound properly. Prosperity has done way more damage to believers and the church than adversity ever has. This was exactly the attitude of the church of Laodicea that was rebuked by the risen Christ in [Rev 3:17](#), "I am rich, have become wealthy and have need of nothing..." Adversity often forces us to rely heavily on Jesus while prosperity exposes how little we actually do rely on Him.

The word learned in v12 isn't the same word we see in v11. It's actually "instructed" which refers to being initiated into the secret. This word was used by pagan cults to refer to their "inner secrets." Paul uses the word here to show that through trial and testing, he was initiated into the wonderful secret of contentment in Christ in spite of poverty or prosperity. V13 reveals that it's the power of Christ within him that gave him spiritual contentment.

I feel compelled to stop at this point and clarify a few things about this particular verse. This is undoubtedly one of the most loved, most used, most referred to passage in all of scripture. It also happens to be one of the most misinterpreted! If a Christian athlete is working to win a gold medal in the Olympics, they will inevitably quote this verse; it may even be the prompt that gets them up every morning for workouts. They will quote it if they get into the Super Bowl or any similar great struggle. They'll quote it like a mantra in the face of any herculean task or strenuous activity. That's not what the verse says, not at all. The context doesn't support or reinforce any type of triumphalist or super-Christian mentality. It's not meant to be a guarantee of victory in the area of human endeavour.

It's the same problem with the generally accepted interpretation of Jn 14:14. A large section of Christians see this as carte blanche to pray for anything their little black hearts desire and God is then obligated to produce because "that's what the Bible says." Of course, we know that's not what the Bible says at all. The problem with this interpretation is that it willfully ignores the obvious truth. To pray in Jesus' name means more than just tagging His name to the end of your pray like some kind of magic words. It means to pray with the authority of His name and in order to properly do that, you must first be properly submitted to His authority; you must be aligned with His will, to desire what He desires. When you are in that position of complete, willful submission, then you will pray for what He desires and your prayers will be answered because they will glorify God.

What are the all things Paul refers to in v11? The immediate context is found in v11-12, his ability to be content no matter what circumstance he finds himself in. I would say that is a greater accomplishment than winning a gold medal. If you want to expand the context, then you can start back in ch1 and see all the things he desires for the Philippian believers – that their love would abound (9); that they would approve excellent things and be sincere and without offense (10); their conduct would be worthy of the gospel and

they would stand fast in unity (27). He exhorts then in ch2 to esteem others better than themselves (3); to have the submissive mind of Christ (5) and do all things without complaining and disputing (14). In ch3 he challenged them to have a spiritually mature mind (15) and in ch4 he showed them how to have a secure mind (4-7). None of these are accomplished through human determination.

Paul's initiation into the secret of contentment should not seem strange to us since nearly all of nature depends on hidden resources. The mighty, muddy, meandering rivers of the world have their sources in far off snow-capped mountain ranges. The great trees send their roots down into the earth to draw up needed water and minerals. The most important part of the tree is the part you can't see – the root system. The most important part of the Christian's life is the part that only God can see. Unless we learn to draw on the deep resources of God by faith, we will fail in the face of life's pressures. Paul depended on the power of Christ at work in his life. Believers possess all the power of Christ within to meet the demands of life.

Paul's precious statement of faith in v13 must always be placed along side the Lord's statement in Jn 15:5. Jesus is teaching the same thing. He is the vine, we're the branches. Branches are only good for bearing fruit or as burning fuel. The branch doesn't produce fruit by its own self-effort; but by drawing on the life of the Vine. "Without Me you can do nothing." Paul didn't say, "I can do all things..." but "I can – through Christ..." as the believer maintains their communion with Jesus Christ, the power of God is there to see them through and to be content

11-13 – in talking at length about his ability to be content in any and every situation, Paul didn't want to give the impression that the Philippians had somehow done anything wrong in sending him support. Contentment isn't resignation or fatalism. The same God that provides the power to meet the demands of life also provides the means to relieve those demands. He may allow the trials to come but He also provides a way of escape and more often than not, it's through the generous kindness of other believers.

There is a real sense in this verse that the giving of the Philippians was really better for them than it was for Paul; even in spite of his great difficulty! Paul's referring to a great biblical truth here, one that seems counter-intuitive to a lot of believers – that fact that godly giving is actually better for

the giver than it is for the one who receives. This truth will be addressed in the next few verses so we don't want to steal all their thunder today. Paul is about to share a great secret with the Philippian believers on giving so you don't want to miss out on hearing that too.

What was the secret of Paul's contentment in the face of all circumstances? First, he trusted in the overruling providence of God to go before him and arrange the circumstances of his life to facilitate his divine calling and fulfill his God-given purpose. Paul also constantly relied on the unfailing power of God to give him the strength to meet any and all situations in his life. There is a 3rd resource that allowed Paul to be content and it concerns the unchanging promises of God.

Are you tossed about by circumstances? Does your attitude rise and fall depending on the circumstances of your surroundings? Are you a thermometer or are you a thermostat? Do you change the environment around you by your calm confidence in Jesus or are you constantly being changed by the difficulties of life? If so, you need to familiarize yourself with all the spiritual resources that are at your disposal through the presence of Jesus Christ in your life. The truth will not only set you free, it will make you a blessing to those around you who will be affected by your faith. 😊