

Preston Baptist Church

Zoom Service 6pm 06/09/20

Readings: Psalm 23, Phillippians 4:4-13

Reflection

We live in a world of discontent. Throughout the world we see in the news huge groups of people dissatisfied with their situation, through famine, oppression, discrimination and so many other issues facing us today. Often this involves people taking to the streets, often ending in bloodshed.

Even in our relatively comfortable Western society we see the signs of discontent - people wanting more than they have, people wanting what other people have, often getting themselves into debt to attain something which so often is just beyond their reach.

In 1986 the Chicago Tribune newspaper coined a new phrase. Looking at the thousands of people on the High Streets spending increasing amounts of money on non-essential goods, they invented the phrase Retail Therapy. It was a serious attempt to explain something that we often joke about, but how many of us have bought something in the past that we really didn't need just to cheer ourselves up? I have!

Sadly, Christians are not immune to this and often we find ourselves following the trends in the rest of society in wanting things just because others have them, and we don't want to be left out.

We may long for contentment, but our human nature tells us that we so often need just one more thing to make us everlastingly happy!

In Psalm 23 David writes of his total dependency on God. With the Lord as my Shepherd, he says - I lack nothing - I need nothing more. He guides, restores, provides and sustains me though everything in my life.

This is a picture of contentment - a life that we may all long for, neither needing, and more importantly, wanting anything other than what we have. And yet David also experienced the flipside of this when his discontent and dissatisfaction led him to want another man's wife with disastrous results for all concerned.

In Phillippians 4 we have a letter from Paul to the church in Phillippi - a letter of Joy and Encouragement. This is a man apparently at ease with his life - I am content, he says - I have learned the secret of total satisfaction with my life.

When I am in need , or when I have plenty, when I'm well-fed, or when I'm hungry - whatever the situation, I am content.

We can perhaps imagine Paul, laying back at his ease in a comfortable chair as he says this, well satisfied with his life and situation. But this letter was written when Paul was in Rome, incarcerated in a Roman prison awaiting trial. Now, the Romans didn't really do prison, they held people until they were pardoned, exiled, or put to death - and Paul knew that he was unlikely to leave Rome alive.

So how could Paul, in this dire situation that would destroy the spirit of most people, say that he was content? How can we know this sort of contentment?

Well we are none of us born content - it's not our natural state. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to improve our lives, we get discontented when we can't get what we want, or we can't change an unsatisfactory situation.

Being content is not being lazy or complacent - it's not swinging in a hammock not caring what happens around us, but it is being satisfied with what we have.

Think about this statement:

Contentment is not that I have what I want, but that I want what I have.

So what do we learn from Paul here?

1. First - contentment is learned.

It's not without effort. Paul calls it a 'secret' because contentment is not something that just happens to us, it doesn't happen naturally.

Paul learns the secret, bit by bit, test by test, circumstance by circumstance, he accepts what God is teaching him through each episode in his life. And we can do the same, but it takes effort and application.

Paul learned, as we need to learn, to live in the moment that God provided for him - sometimes good, sometimes difficult, sometimes clear, sometimes confusing. Paul could never have done it without God's help, and neither can we.

2. Contentment doesn't depend on our circumstances.

Paul's situation was dire, and led eventually to his death - and yet in himself he knows contentment.

He was in prison because he was doing the work that God had given him of proclaiming Jesus Christ, at that time a very dangerous thing to do in the Roman world. He was often hungry, or in danger, in pain or fearful and yet he finds the secret of contentment in Jesus Christ.

We never know what life will bring us day by day, one day we may be on the crest of a wave, the next day just keeping our head above water, but whatever our situation we can know contentment with God's sustaining power.

And the last point?

3. Contentment comes from a close relationship with God.

I can do all things through Him that gives me strength, say Paul in verse 13.

Paul's experience was that in his own strength he would fail, but being totally dependent on God's strength, he would always be victorious. One commentator says that the Greek word here is *Dynamis* - literally filled with dynamite!! I'd bet you never expected that! But God promises strength to do things we would never have dreamed of.

Who do we depend on? Our own resources? They will fail you eventually.

On other people? With the best will in the world, they will let you down sometimes.

Luck? That's a really shaky philosophy.

I We need to trust God in every circumstance, not depending on our own resources to see us through, but learning contentment in God's strength - then we can face whatever life brings our way, even when it shakes us, as we know it does.

The secret of contentment? Living our lives, day by day, hour by hour, in God's hands. This is not easy, but God promises the victory.

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