

Philippians 4:10-23

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[0 : 0 0] Jim Carrey is not perhaps what you would call a serious actor, whatever that is, but if you can glaze over the profanity, he can on occasion be good for a giggle. Now, for the unenlightened ones who don't know who this man is, and there's no shame attached to that, one of his recent offerings goes by the fun title of Mr. Popper's Penguins, which gives you a rough idea of the genre we're talking about. Well, whatever the merits or otherwise of Mr. Carrey's artistic production, he is nothing if not successful, and of course, all the trappings of wealth and fame that go with that success. Now, with that in mind, it's interesting to hear his thoughts on wealth and fame.

He has been quoted as saying, and I quote, I wish everyone could get rich and famous and everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that's not the answer. Now, the grammar is a little suspect, but let's not be too pedantic.

More importantly, I'm not sure if Mr. Carrey has any thoughts on what the answer might be, or if there is an answer. Or perhaps even before we start thinking about answers, we would need to think about what the question is. I guess the question has to do with happiness. I presume that's what he is getting at when he made the comment that I've quoted. What is it that makes somebody happy?

What makes you happy? I think we generally use the word happy to describe very identifiable moments or occasions, and as such, it is used of a fleeting or temporary experience. Now, that's not to decry a happy moment. They're very welcome. It's not to decry a happy day or a happy occasion. The more, the merrier as far as I'm concerned. But to recognize that happiness, certainly in that way of understanding it, is by its very nature something that passes. There's a happy moment, a happy day, a happy circumstance, but that passes, and the cause of our happiness also then is removed or passes.

Now, I imagine, I can't speak for the man, but I imagine that Jim Carrey's life has had and continues to have its fair share of happy moments. But maybe the issue has to do with what we might call contentment.

[2 : 5 1] Contentment is more than an experience. It is, we might call it, a state of being. It is a more permanent thing than happiness, or at least happiness as I've attempted to describe it or define it.

Happiness, as generally understood, I'm not suggesting this is an entirely accurate definition of the word, but as generally understood or as the word is generally used. Happiness is a function of, we might say, a slave of circumstances. And so, our happiness is determined by our circumstances. If our circumstances are good, then we're happy. But if they're bad, well, then we're not happy. And so, in that sense, it's a function of circumstances that so often are beyond our control.

So, I can be happy when my son scores a hat trick against Peterhead in the Scottish Shield on Thursday. That's prophetic happiness, if the weather allows for the game to go on at all. I will be very happy when that happens. But does that mean that I am content as a person? I will be happy for a moment, maybe for the rest of the day. I will enjoy the glow of that success. But does that mean that I am content? Not at all. I may be content, but it's certainly not because of the circumstance described.

I can be happy when I see my newly born wee nephew on Skype. He was born across the States a few weeks ago, and we can see him on Skype, and he looks so happy and giggling away or whatever babies do.

And I'm happy. I see that. I'm happy. But does that mean that I'm content? The moment, the occasion, is a happy one. And so it should be. I'm not decrying that. But it is a moment. It's a passing moment. The Apostle Paul speaks of contentment. He testifies that he was content. He claimed to be content, and I'm willing to take him at his word. We've read the passage in Philippians chapter 4.

[5 : 04] Notice there in verse 11, I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Notice very interestingly what Paul says there, whatever the circumstances. He's saying my contentment is not a function of my circumstances. Whatever the circumstances I have learned to be content. We're going to notice, I hope, a little bit later on in what we have to say that we ought not to understand the contentment that Paul speaks of here as independent of his circumstances. His circumstances are significant, but it really is important to understand how he views his circumstances. We'll come to that in a moment, or in a few moments. Well, Paul then is able to declare, to testify, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I wonder, is that true of you? If you were honest with yourself and were to answer that question, is that your experience? Are you able to say, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances? And if it is true, then good. If it's not true, would you like it to be true? Is that an appealing prospect to be able to testify, to be able to declare that that is true of you, of your life? I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Well, if you're interested in this possibility, if at the moment for you it is only a possibility, then listen to what we have to say about what Paul says on this matter. Now, before considering how Paul got to that place of contentment, if we can call it a place, we have to note what the word he uses means. The word that is translated there in chapter 4 as being content. What does that word mean? What does the word that he uses in the original Greek mean? Obviously, it's translated as content, and that's a perfectly good translation, but just exploring a little bit the word he actually uses, I think, can be helpful. The word that he uses, the word that is translated there in verse 11 and in verse 12 by the word content, is a Greek word whose root meaning is sufficient. The idea of sufficiency is at the heart of this word. So, the idea that is behind this is the idea of being satisfied, of being satisfied with something. In this case, it's with everything, with life. He is content. He is satisfied. He is content or satisfied with who he is, with what he has, with the circumstances that he finds himself in. This is the idea behind this word. I have learned to be content, to be satisfied with our situation and circumstances. It's important to clarify what contentment is not. It's not just positive thinking. It's not just pretending that things are better than they actually are. It's not about always looking on the bright side of life and somehow in that way, being cheery even when things are very adverse for us. That's not the kind of contentment that Paul is speaking about at all, nor is it some kind of pious fatalism where we are simply resigned to the way things are and stubbornly smile in the face of adversity. That is not what Paul is speaking about at all.

So, for example, to be content does not mean that we will do nothing to change our circumstances. To be content doesn't mean that we just accept everything as it is and we do nothing to improve our lot or to change our circumstances. By no means. We will, of course, and we ought to, if we don't have employment, seek to secure employment or perhaps secure better employment. If our health isn't all that it might be and there are means available to us to improve our health, well, of course, we will do that. If our marriage is going through a rocky patch, we don't just say, oh, well, that's just the way it is, but I'm going to be content regardless and do nothing. Of course not. We will or we ought to do what is available to us, to work on that, to improve the situation and to work through any difficulty we might have in this particular example that I give. So, to be content isn't some kind of resignation to where we are or to the circumstances that we are facing. But back to what Paul claims, to Paul's testimony, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I wonder, was Paul always content? Or in any case, once he became a Christian, was he always content? Is this part of the package that you become a Christian and then suddenly you're content all the time? Whatever the circumstances, you're content? Well, I suspect that's not the experience of many of us, perhaps most of us here. Being a Christian in and of itself doesn't in some kind of mysterious or automatic way grant to us this contentment that Paul speaks of, nor does Paul claim that that is the case. Rather, he very explicitly makes the point that he himself had learned to be content. The implication is clear. That had not always been his experience, but he had learned to be content. Clearly, he had known times in his life when he was far from content.

It's significant, and I think this particular testimony of Paul is best understood, and the significance of it is best understood when we appreciate that he is writing this letter towards the end of the end of his life. And I imagine that this learning curve that he was on that allowed him, at this point, as an aged man, to say, I have learned to be content, is one that took a fair amount of time for him to reach this point. There are different references even in this letter that make it clear that he is anticipating death in the near future. So, this is something that he had learned. There had been time that had been taken. It was a process that he had gone through that had allowed him to arrive at this point, where he is able to say, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

And he notices, well, in verse 11, he talks about learning, and then in verse 12 also, in the second half of the verse, I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.

And then he gives some examples, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. So, if Paul had to learn to be content, then that would be true of us also. And I want us to spend a little bit of time really answering two questions, and that is, what is it that he learned? What did he learn that allowed him to be content? What did he learn? And then also to pose the question, how did he learn? By what means did he learn what he learned? But first of all, what did he learn? What did he learn that allowed him to discover this secret, as he calls it? I have learned the secret of being content. Well, I think what he learned all has to do with Jesus and the place of Jesus in his own life.

[13:14] I think the first thing we can say is that Paul learned that Jesus was with him. He learned that Jesus was with him. It's interesting in verse 13. He follows up his testimony concerning being content in any and every situation with this affirmation that we read in verse 13. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Now, that testimony only makes sense if Jesus is with him. Jesus can do this for Paul because he is there.

Jesus can grant to Paul the strength that he needs to do everything that is placed before him because he is with Paul. Jesus is with Paul, and so as he is with Paul, so he enables Paul, he strengthens Paul, he grants him the strength that he needs to do everything that he is called to do.

Paul, and so as he is with Paul, he is with Paul. This is what he had learned, and this discovery through life and through experience allows him to reach a point where he can say, I am content with my circumstances, whatever the circumstances. Paul has discovered this, and he knows this to be true, that the Lord is with him. And that is necessary for us also. If we are to be able to experience what Paul clearly experienced and testifies to, of being able to be content in any and every situation, this is something we must learn, that Jesus is with us.

But another thing that is related to that is that Paul learned that Jesus was everything to him. If we just notice a couple of things that Paul says in this same letter to the Philippians, first of all in the previous chapter 3 and in verse 8, we read there, what is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him. And along similar lines in the first chapter of the letter, in chapter 1 and in verse 21, we read perhaps words that are most familiar, for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Now, the language that Paul uses there on those two occasions is language that really describes how he had come to the point, he had learned that Jesus was everything to him. And so, his contentment is independent of his circumstances. It's not a function of wealth, it's not a function of how much he earns or the status of the job that he's managed to secure. It's not a function of his health, how healthy he is or how well he feels. It's not a function of how beautiful he looks in his own eyes or in the eyes of others, or we could multiply the examples. No, nothing could shift him from his focus on Christ. Christ was everything to him. If he had Christ, then his life was complete.

[16 : 51] And so, whatever the circumstances might be, he could be, as he testifies, content. So, Jesus was with him. Jesus was everything to him. But we can also notice, as we maybe take a step back and see other things that Paul says on other occasions, that Jesus was in him. In his letter to the church in Galatia, in chapter 2 and in verse 20, Paul says, I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

Jesus had, as it were, so taken up residence in Paul by his Holy Spirit that Paul's own identity is almost subsumed. I wouldn't say entirely subsumed. It's not as if he loses his identity as Paul. But there is a sense in which Christ takes up residence in such a way that he is able to use the language that he uses. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. Now, what did that mean in practical terms? Well, it means that he had the mind of Christ, a term that Paul is very fond of and uses on different occasions to have the mind of Christ. And this is something that Paul, as he grew in his faith, increasingly had the mind of Christ. He would see things from Christ's perspective.

He could see the big picture. He could see what God was achieving by his circumstances, however adverse, as we'll notice in a moment. And so, instead of being consumed by adverse circumstances and maybe feeling sorry for himself, he could take a step back and see the big picture and see, no, God knows what he's doing. He is working out his purposes through these things, however unpleasant they are and indeed are for me. And that point perhaps balances somewhat the statement made a moment ago and that I made reference to at the beginning, that he was content independent of his circumstances. That maybe doesn't really capture the reality. It's maybe a little misleading to say that he was content independent of his circumstances. Really, it's more remarkable than that. It is that Paul could see his circumstances, even very adverse circumstances. He could see that they were so arranged for his own good and for the good of the cause of Christ, which of course, for somebody with the mind of Christ, really is one and the same thing. The good of the cause of Christ is identified with his own good, for that is what he wants above all else. And Paul could see that. And so, his contentment, perhaps not independent of his circumstances, but whatever the circumstances, he could see that they were being ordered by God for the fulfilling of God's purposes, which Paul had entirely identified with and bought into it, if we can maybe use that language. So, what did he learn? What did he learn that allows him to not only testify to this, but most importantly, to experience this contentment that he speaks of?

Well, he'd learned that Jesus was with him, that Jesus was everything to him, and that Jesus was in him. But also just to briefly notice how he learned these things. How is it that he learned these things?

The verbs that Paul uses here in the chapter we're looking at are revealing. He actually uses two verbs that are translated, certainly in our versions, both of them translated by the word learned.

[20 : 32] If we begin with the second occasion in verse 12, we read there in the second half of verse 12, I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.

The verb translated, learned the secret, it's just one verb in the original, but in order to capture the idea, in English it's translated by this phrase, learned the secret, is a verb used of initiation, into a spiritual mystery. It implies that many don't get it. Many people just wouldn't get it.

They'd say, well, Paul, you're crazy. How can you speak in these terms? It makes no sense. Here you are, a prisoner. Here you are, being opposed by many. Your life is in danger. You're facing the executioner in all probability, and you're talking about being content. Well, that just doesn't make any sense.

You know, you've lost the place. And the language here of, I have learned the secret, does suggest that it's something that lots of people just won't understand. They just won't get it.

Maybe some of us here are in that situation. The verb could also suggest that this knowledge or this attitude is not attainable for ordinary folks, perhaps like you and me. But the interesting thing is that Paul doesn't just use this word that is translated there, learned the secret, in verse 12. He uses another verb, also translated learn. That's what we have in verse 11. I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. And this is a much more common word. It's just the regular, ordinary verb for learning. And it has what we might call overlapping meanings as regards the manner of learning. It can be used to speak of learning by instruction. You can think of it in a formal setting in a classroom. You learn by instruction. But it can also have the idea of learning by inquiry, where perhaps in a more independent way, by inquiry, investigation, you discover and you learn things. And it can also be used in the sense of learning by discovery or experience. You know that we learn lots of things by experience, by the life that we live and the things that we do. And in the passing, we learn, even though we're not in a classroom setting. And this, of course, is a learning that is within the reach of all. And as Paul learned in that way, by instruction, by inquiry, by experience, he learned to be content. So, that is something that we too can learn. There's no reason why we also cannot learn as Paul learned. Well, how did he learn? Well, I think we can say that he was taught by Jesus in two ways. He was taught with words, and he was taught also by experience, as in the experiences that God placed him in, that enabled him to learn. But if we think at first of the words by which he was instructed and taught by Jesus, there's a lovely connection between the language of the words that Paul records for us. And in 2 Corinthians 12 and in verse 9, 2 Corinthians 12 and in 2 Corinthians 12 and in verse 9, the context of these words are Paul's thorn in the flesh, some significant affliction that he endured, and the manner in which the Lord responded to him when he asked that he be spared or relieved of this affliction. And what was the answer that the

[24 : 45] Lord gave him? Well, there in verse 9 of 2 Corinthians 12, we have these words, my grace is sufficient for you. Now, the interesting and lovely connection between these words of Jesus addressed to Paul and the words that Paul uses here in Philippians is that the word translated there in Corinthians, sufficient, sufficient, my grace is sufficient for you, or to put it another way, I am sufficient for you, is the same word as we have here in Philippians, the same idea of sufficiency, of contentment. Jesus is saying to Paul, if you have me, you have everything. You have enough.

You are complete. You don't need anything else. You may have a thorn in the flesh. You may have lots of adverse circumstances, lots of pain to experience and to endure, but my grace is sufficient for you.

And so, with these words, Jesus instructs Paul. These and other words, no doubt, but with words, Jesus instructs Paul in this matter of contentment, of being satisfied with God's ordering of his life, of God's ordering of his circumstances, whatever they might be, even if they're very different to what he would have anticipated or desired for himself. What Jesus is saying to Paul, and he says to us also, if you have me, you have enough. Nothing else is required to complete you or satisfy you or make you happy. We too, of course, are instructed with words. We have them in the Bible. The words that the Lord addresses to Paul, we can take to ourselves, my grace is sufficient for you. We read of God's promise, I will never leave you nor forsake you. We read of, in Paul's letter to the Romans, that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord. And we could multiply the examples of words that instruct us in this matter of being content. And as we listen to the words, and as we make them our own, so we are instructed, we learn to be content. But Paul didn't learn only by words that were directed to him, important though they were. He also learned by experience, by varied experiences. And notice there in verse 12 of chapter 4 of Philippians, I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. Clearly, Paul is making reference to life experiences. And in those experiences of life, he had learned, he had discovered what it was and how it was possible to be content. Well, what kind of experiences did he experience, or did he, were part of his lot that allowed him to learn in this way? Well, physical pain was one of them. We've noticed just a moment ago the words of Jesus addressed to Paul in circumstances of affliction and pain, this thorn in the flesh that he speaks of, that three times he asked of the Lord that he be spared, that he be relieved of this affliction.

And the Lord's answer was, my grace is sufficient for you. And so, in the midst of this pain, of this affliction, Paul experienced that Jesus was with him. He was able to appreciate that Jesus was everything to him, and he was enabled to see the big picture. He was able to understand why it was that the Lord allowed him to suffer in this particular way. And this is a difficult area, perhaps, for us to understand or to come to terms with, that the Lord can and does use pain in many ways. We do look forward, of course, to a day when pain will be removed entirely, and that is something we can and ought to look forward to. But in this life, we do experience pain, and the Lord does use pain.

In different ways, he can use it to humble us, to cultivate dependence on him. He can use it to equip us for future service, and perhaps very especially, he can use it to enable us to be sensitive to the needs of others and better able to help others as they experience, perhaps, that which we have experienced in the past. So, physical pain was one of the means, or pain not only physical, of different kinds, is one of the means that God used in Paul's experience and can use in ours.

[29 : 41] In the letter that we've read, we read of circumstances of personal animosity, of those who were opposed to Paul. In chapter 1 of this letter, and from verse 15, we read, it is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill, the latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true Christ is preached, I rejoice. Paul could handle petty jealousies and personal animosity.

It's not that he enjoyed it. He would have much preferred, of course, if people hadn't been doing the things that he declares they were doing. He didn't enjoy being opposed. He didn't enjoy people seeking to do him harm. But he could handle it because he could say, well, as he puts it himself, what does it matter? What does it matter? What does it matter if people oppose me in that way? Indeed, I can see that the important thing is that Christ is preached. If their motives are suspect or indeed beyond suspect, so be it. But I will not be disheartened by that. I will not be taken down by that.

I will remain content with my circumstances even when I am the victim of personal animosity and opposition. Well, there's one circumstance that he describes for us in this very letter. And of course, another circumstance that very much applies as he writes this letter to the Philippians is his being a victim of injustice and imprisonment. He was a prisoner as he wrote this letter, and there was no reason for him to be suffering in that way. He had committed no crime that he would be deprived of his liberty. And even worse, that he would be facing the prospect of execution. And yet, Paul is able to see that these circumstances, though very adverse, very severely adverse circumstances, he was able to see the big picture. God enabled him to see the big picture. He speaks in chapter 1 of how his own imprisonment had resulted in the brothers being emboldened. So, the other believers said, well, look at Paul. He's in prison. He's about to be executed, so it would seem. Well, if he's able to do that, then surely we can speak of Jesus to our neighbors and acquaintances. Surely we won't remain silent when we see how he is facing the circumstances he is facing. And so, God used these adverse circumstances for good. He also makes reference in this letter to how he is pleased that he is what he is because God has placed him in a place of strategic importance. Yes, as a prisoner, but in a strategic place to fulfill his mission of making known the good news of the gospel. Notice there in chapter 1 and in verse 13, he says, as a result, that is, as a result of his chains, as a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. So, he says, it's a good thing that I'm in chains. By that means I've been able to testify here at the very heart of the empire. And similar language at the very end of the letter or the implication certainly at the very end in his final greetings, all the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. Now, how is it that there were saints in Caesar's household? Well, there were saints in Caesar's household because Paul was imprisoned there and able to testify to them and share with them the gospel. And so, this adverse, this very painful and difficult experience, Paul could see was used and ordered by God for good. So, Paul learned. He learned to be content, whatever the circumstances, and no doubt that was a tough and a painful learning curve that he had to claim. But he did so. And of course, the challenge is for us, that we too. The prize is a very wonderful one, to be able to testify, to be able to live life in this way. I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances. But in order to reach that point, we do need to learn, to be instructed, and to listen to the words of Jesus, but also to understand our circumstances and analyze them in the light of what God's purposes are and what the big picture is. But perhaps this morning you're not a Christian. And what I would say to you, just very briefly as we draw things to a close, is that

I would encourage you not to be content with your circumstances, particularly that circumstance of not yet being a follower of Jesus Christ, one who has put their trust in Him. Why ought you not to be content with your circumstance? Well, if you are not a believer, if you're not trusting in Jesus, then He is not with you, certainly not in the manner that He is with His own. He doesn't mean everything to you, clearly, and He's not in you to help you, as He is for those who are trusting in Him. But of course, that can change. You can put your trust in Him even today. If we go back to what we mentioned, is reported to have been said by the actor Jim Carrey, I wish everyone could get rich and famous and everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that's not the answer. Well, I wish everyone could know Jesus and experience being complete in Him so they could see and experience that He is the answer.

[35 : 57] So let us pray. let us pray. Well, so