

# Philippians 4.10-23

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## *The Secret: Revealed*

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Finding Joy in the Journey (8)

### **The secret shoebox**

A man and a woman had been married for more than 60 years. They had shared everything. They had kept no secrets from each other except that the woman had a shoe box under the bed that she had told her husband never to open or ask her about. Such was their love and trust for each other that he never tried to open it for all those years.

But one day the woman got very sick and the doctor said she would not recover. When the end drew near, she asked her husband to reach under the bed and pull out the shoebox. 'It's time to reveal the secret,' she said, 'and tell you what's inside the box.'

So, with a trembling hand, he took off the lid and found inside two crocheted dolls, and £50,000 in cash.

He was a little confused, and not just because he was old.

‘When we were to be married,’ his wife said, ‘my grandmother told me the secret of a happy marriage was never to argue, and that if I ever got angry with you, I should keep quiet and crochet a doll.’

The old man was so moved, he had to fight back tears; there were only two precious little dolls in the box. In all those years of living and loving, she had only been angry with him twice. He almost burst, he was so happy.

‘That explains the dolls,’ he said, ‘but what about all that cash?’

‘Oh, that?’ she said. ‘That’s the money I made from selling the dolls.’

Our passage this morning is all about a secret – Paul says, **I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation** (12).

Sound good?

Well, I can now reveal, after a summer of preaching, that the secret is... not a secret at all, but what Paul has been telling us all along! The **secret of being content** is actually also the secret of finding joy in the journey, because learning to be content brings the deep joy and the deep peace of God, in all circumstances.

# Generosity

Look in v14 with me: the Philippians shared in Paul's **troubles**. Though he was a long way away, they still cared deeply for him, they showed him the **genuine concern** that Paul commended Timothy for (2.20).

But more than that: they helped support him financially (16). In fact, for a while they were the only church in the whole region that supported him in that way (15).

Paul had a principle with all his churches, that actually the Church of England follows today: those with plenty support those in need. That's how you are able to have a full-time vicar despite only paying half. Believe it or not, Paul was the man who invented the Parish Share... or Common Fund as it's called in Birmingham!

Paul says **I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty** (12). He's been on both sides, and is **content whatever the circumstances** (11). So he didn't seek their gifts: **not that I desire your gifts**, he says (17).

He isn't being rude; Paul knows their generosity was a *gift*, not a payment for services rendered. Paul is in fact commending the Philippians for working out their faith in this very practical way.

Look in v18: Paul describes their gifts as **a fragrant offering** (18). This echoes Noah, who offered God a sacrifice of thanks when the waters receded after the flood (see Genesis 8.21). The sacrifice was a sign both of Noah's obedience to God, and his gratitude for saving him and his family.

It's the biblical way of saying, 'they put their money where their mouth was.' Instead of a burnt sacrifice on an altar, they gave what they had out of obedience and gratitude to God, and so were able to help meet Paul's very real material needs.

Remember – in chapter 2 he told them:

in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.

*Philippians 2.3-4 (NIV)*

And he also says: **stand firm in the one Spirit** (1.27), **be of one mind** (2.2, 4.2). Paul says we are one, we are united with Christ – and so supporting one another is one way in which we can let that truth bubble up to the surface, so we can *be* what we *are*.

That's the teaching behind Paul's principle that churches with plenty should help churches in need.

# Discipline

So, Paul says that one we can be content in all circumstances is if we all support each other practically, so those with plenty support those in need.

But there is also a right attitude that we need to have. Did you notice those three little words in v11 and v12? Look down with me: **I have learned to be content** (11) and **I have learned the secret of being content** (12), Paul says: **I have learned.**

This isn't something that happens by osmosis. I used to wish that I could learn French simply by leaving my French textbook on my desk. I still wish that I could absorb the knowledge from all the books on the shelves in my study, without having to read them. There was a fad a few years ago for hypnosis tapes to play by your bed while you're asleep, to help you learn or quit smoking. We are always looking for a shortcut, to avoid the hard work and effort.

But unfortunately, really learning something takes effort. And if it doesn't, it probably isn't worth learning in the first place.

Others can help to meet our needs, but if we never learn the discipline of obedience, we will never learn **the secret of being content** (11, 12); we will simply end up as needy whiners.

Paul says:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

*Philippians 1.27 (NIV)*

And:

Therefore, my friends, as you have always obeyed... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling...

*Philippians 2.12 (NIV)*

And:

One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

*Philippians 3.13-14 (NIV)*

And:

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.

*Philippians 4.9 (NIV)*

Time and again Paul says: work hard, work out your salvation, put your faith into practice, press on, strive and strain to **take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of** you (3.12).

Friends, there are times when all we can do is lean on the support of others. That is one of the joys of being part of a church family. But we mustn't get lazy, and think that following Jesus is easy. If you think it's easy, if it doesn't take much effort, then you need to think deeply about how serious you are about your faith.

Salvation is a free gift – you don't have to do *anything* to earn it. But God's grace is not cheap, it came at a huge cost: Jesus gave his life so you could live yours. So following him, responding to him in gratitude for all he's done, must also be costly.

**I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation** (12). Are you willing to learn to be content with what you have, rather than coveting what you don't have? Are you willing to look for God in the valley of the shadow of death – where he is still with you, no matter what happens?

You see Paul's contentment was learned through good times, and through some harsh lessons. There is no shortcut – but the journey is worth it, because as we learn, so we learn where true joy is found.

# Jesus

And that's the third thing about the deep contentment, joy and peace of God. Where is it found? In Jesus.

One of the things I have learned about Philippians this summer is the unflinching way Paul directs our gaze to Jesus. In four chapters I have counted almost 60 references to Jesus. I've listed them all on a sheet which I'll hand out in a moment.

Right at the beginning of this series, I said that finding joy in the journey is all about learning where to look: Jesus. **To live is Christ, to die is gain (1.21). I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things (3.8).**

Jesus is worth so much, if we lost *everything else* and still had him, we should still be content.

It's all about Jesus. He is the main thing. If we keep our eyes fixed on him, whom will we imitate? Jesus.

When we struggle with temptation, who can spur us on with his perfect example? Jesus.

Who binds us together with love and an unbreakable unity? Jesus.

Who is enough? Who is with us, no matter what? Who is the one whose suffering and resurrection, whose power to save, whose peace is stronger than anything this world can do? Jesus.

It is my prayer that in all we do here while I'm vicar – and long after I've left – our focus would be on Jesus. Yes we need to fill more chairs. Yes we need to pay more money to the diocese. Yes we need to reach out more effectively – but in all that, please let our focus first and foremost be fully on Jesus.

Paul says **rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!** If we want to find joy in the journey, we need to learn where to look: we need to look at Jesus.

*Pause*

On the handout is a list of all the times Paul mentions Jesus in Philippians (I think!). Please spend some time looking through the list, and if a verse jumps out at you, look it up, read the verses around and pray through them.

On the other side of the handout are some notes on last week's passage, and some questions for you to reflect on at home, with a friend or family member, or in your home groups.

*Pause*

I hope you've *enjoyed* reading through Philippians as much as I have. But Finding Joy in the Journey doesn't end here: this is only the beginning as we learn to be faithful and fruitful, following Jesus together.