

Learning Contentment In All Circumstances¹

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St Paul learned to live a life of inner calm in the midst of external distractions. On several occasions in his writings he records the tumultuous situations he faces (E.g., 2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:23-30; 12:7-10). Yet, in spite of the continuous and immeasurable diversions that befell him, he informs the Philippians that:

I have learned, in whatever circumstances I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have been instructed in the mystery of satiation and hunger, abundance and scarcity. I can do all things in Christ who empowers me. (Phil 4:11-13)

Notice first that it is not simply hardships which ruin our interior quietude but seemingly beneficial things as well. Having an abundance of the things of this world can be every bit as disruptive to a contented life as scarcity, plentiful sustenance as malnourishment, and recognition as humiliation. Afflictions of the soul come not only from adversaries assaulting our aspirations and well-being but also from the wolves in the sheep's clothing of worldly prosperity and comfort. St. Paul's contentment is not found in the transitory characteristics of this world, whether they be harmful or helpful to his physical well-being, but in Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. How, practically speaking, did he come to experience this contentment?

St. Paul says he has *learned* to be content, and that he has been *instructed* in the mystery of satiation and hunger, abundance and scarcity. The peace of God did not descend with the wave of a wand that magically and instantaneously transformed his life. Like us, St. Paul had to learn how to live the Christian life, to live with and rely on Christ in the relentless adversities and blessings of life. What can we learn from him to protect us from the global fragility, national instability, parish and

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family tensions and personal anxieties that are relentlessly assaulting our sense of stability and robbing us of any hope for tranquility? What can we learn from him to protect us from the abundance, comfort, leisure, wealth, convenience, and materialism that insulate us from the divine peace that the world cannot provide? How did he *learn* contentment in *all* circumstances? He tells us how in the preceding verses, and invites us to follow the path he has trodden.

Rejoice in the Lord always

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your forbearance be known to all men. The Lord is near. (Phil 4:4-5)

We may react defensively, even harshly, to the exhortation to rejoice in the midst of trials. How can I rejoice when I've lost my job? When I'm arguing with my spouse? When I'm worried about my children? When I'm at odds with my priest? When I'm isolated from my friends and family? Isn't it some kind of a cruel and insensitive joke to expect me to rejoice? And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we might reflect on whether we *rejoice in the Lord* when bountiful gifts befall us and life seems dependably rosy. Let us begin, then, by being candid with ourselves about the extent to which our emotions depend on our external circumstances. This is foundational to St. Paul's exhortation.

Consider carefully his words. He does not ask us to *rejoice in our current circumstances*, neither in the tribulations that are befalling us nor in the welfare bestowed on us, but *in the Lord*. Our feelings are indeed powerfully influenced by the tangible reality that encompasses us. We readily succumb to the emotional rollercoaster, raising us high into the heavens with hopes and anticipations only to send us plummeting into the depths with unmet expectations and disappointments. St. Paul, however, is teaching us that the reality of this transitory world need not manipulate our emotional state if we only focus our attention on the reality of Christ who is constantly present with us, who embraces us through life's ups and downs.

Like an injured child who runs to the embrace of his mother, so too, we are comforted by Christ's healing embrace that is more powerful than any of our injuries--even more powerful than death itself. And like an exuberant child who runs to his mother to share the delight of a new discovery, so too we are strengthened by the joy of the Lord that the world cannot take away. Without ignoring the transitory reality of our circumstances, let us embrace the immeasurably greater reality invisibly present and fulfilling all things. St. Paul assures us, "The Lord is near." Let us run to him!

Pray with thanksgiving

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)

Anxiety is a common companion in life. Our Lord emphasizes that anxiety arises when we're focused on the future, preoccupied with what *might* happen, instead of being absorbed in the present, experiencing what *is* happening. He contrasts our worldly cares which arise from us attempting to take care of ourselves with a calm life in the kingdom where our heavenly Father provides for us (Mt 6:31-34). This obsession with the future might be gloomy with dread or radiant with anticipation, yet in either case we will notice an inner restlessness that displaces a tranquil comfort in the present. In this way, awareness of our own anxiety, our inner turbulence, becomes an invitation to leave our imaginings about the future, where God is absent, and return to the present, where God is patiently and lovingly waiting for us.

St. Paul offers us practical guidance on how to make that transition from the future to the present, from the world to the kingdom, from anxiety to divine inner peace: "by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God." Prayer is simply talking to God. We are encouraged to talk to God about everything, but St. Paul highlights two aspects of prayer that are essential if we are to overcome anxiety: supplication and thanksgiving.

Supplication is making our requests known to God. It is asking God for what we want, especially in the context of those matters that are troubling us. Maybe this sounds selfish or impious. After all, God knows what we need so we should just receive what he gives us without complaint. We fear the things we want are trivial, unspiritual, or selfish, not befitting our Creator and Redeemer. But this way of thinking entices us to a delusional piety that ignores and denies our inner turbulence, pretending to be someone we're not instead of bringing Christ into the reality that we are. For the point of supplications to God is not primarily to receive what we ask for, but to *offer* all of our desires and wants, all our worries and fears, ourselves, one-another, and our whole life to Christ our God. This offering of our inner life to Christ by honest prayers brings him, the Prince of Peace, into our inner storms to calm them. St Paul emphasizes in this very passage not that we will receive what we ask for, but that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." In offering our entire inner universe of concerns to God, we make room in our hearts for the indwelling peace that neither words nor concepts can contain, where thieves cannot enter nor moths destroy.

Making our requests known to God without thanksgiving, however, short-circuits our supplications. Thanksgiving is precisely what turns our requests into offerings. Thankfulness acknowledges that what we are receiving comes as a gift from God, realizing that every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights. It is a profound expression of trust that God knows what's best for us. We ask him for whatever we want, and we thank him for whatever he gives. Thanksgiving is what opens our eyes to see God's invisible presence in the visible world. Over time, intertwining thanksgiving to God with our requests has a subtle transformative influence on our desires, reshaping what we think we need or want, thereby undermining the sources of our anxieties and letting peace enter in their place.

Maybe this sounds simplistic. It is indeed simple, but not simplistic. For its effectiveness lies precisely in a simplicity that finds a home in the humility to

surrender our cares to God in childlike requests and assured gratitude. We know from daily experience how very difficult it is to let go of the thoughts tormenting us--our fallen mind relentlessly manipulating a God-forsaken imaginary future, whether utopian or dystopian, with self-assured confidence. It is only unpretentious conversation with God, gratefully acknowledging his presence and care for us, that dissipates the mental illusions that fuel our anxieties.

Think Uplifting Things

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things*. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—*practice these things*, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:8-9; emphasis added)

In this third piece of advice, St. Paul again promises peace, this time not as a result of prayer, but of the two-fold instruction *to think* and *to act* in intentional ways: to think good thoughts and to follow good examples.

The resolute conviction of St. Paul, and all of our Holy Tradition, is that we have control over what we think. We can, as St. Paul writes to the Romans, set our mind on the things of the flesh or we can set our mind on the things of the spirit (Rom 8:5-7). It is up to us. Just because a certain thought enters our head doesn't mean we have to believe it, own it, make it ours. We can replace critical or disquieting thoughts with reflections on what is commendable or excellent or praiseworthy. This is not to deny the reality of the negative things we face, but to decide not to focus on them, not to have our minds controlled by them. We choose to gaze at the positive while only glancing at the negative. We don't do this once for all time, but at all times to achieve oneness with Christ.

Similarly, when we choose to focus our attention on good role models, the people that God has placed in our lives who are worth emulating, including the saints, we will gradually become like them, who are in turn like Christ. "Be imitators of me," St Paul teaches, "as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). We begin to value what they

value, to yearn for what they yearn, to pray the way they pray, to endure the way they endure, to rejoice the way they rejoice. The world knows the power of imitation. It constantly bombards us with images and advertisements to entice us to be like a famous athlete, a well-known movie star, a fabricated 'ideal' human--if only we buy their products. Such emulation brings torturous restlessness instead of peaceful contentment. Let us choose wisely whom we imitate.

Like St. Peter, if we focus our attention on the wind and the waves, on negative thoughts and worldly mentors, we will find ourselves sinking under the sea of fruitless and disturbing anxieties; but if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the source and destination of our faith, and on his great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, we will walk on divinely peaceful waters in the midst of worldly raging storms.

Contentment comes neither easily nor quickly; we need to learn it in the context of life's hardships and bounties. They are the schoolroom in which God teaches us in the most practical ways possible. The guidance provided here by St. Paul characterizes eager and receptive students of divinely transformative training. Let us learn, then, contentment in all circumstances by rejoicing in the Lord always, by talking to God about everything with thanksgiving, and by following in the footsteps of his saints with God-pleasing thoughts.