

CHRISTIAN CONTENTMENT

Derek Thomas

Philippians 4:6–7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Contentment is one of those graces better felt than written about. It is, to pick up on a book title by the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, a 'rare jewel'. Just as I write these lines, a colleague in the ministry recounts an incident which seems relevant. Having preached on contentment he recalls being told by an elder, a godly, consecrated man in his eighties, that the passage had tormented him all week for, he confessed, he had learnt little of contentment in his life. Two weeks later he died. Contentment was something he struggled with to the end. And so it seems to be with many of us. Few of us can say with Paul's assurance: 'I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation' (Phil. 4:12). Perhaps it is also true that too few of us know what Paul meant by a peace which 'transcends all understanding'. This is, however, what Paul wants us to experience: a freedom from undue anxiety, that keeps our spirits calm and unruffled even when a gale is brewing all around us; a peace which is incomprehensible 'precisely because believers experience it when it is unexpected, in circumstances that make it appear impossible'.¹

Paul has set forth some great truths in this letter: that our 'citizenship' is ultimately a heavenly one (3:20a); that Jesus Christ is coming again (3:20b); that in heaven, our bodies are going to be changed so as to reflect the glory of Christ's body (3:21). Such truths as these are meant to send us on our way rejoicing, and this is precisely the theme of Philippians: *joy!*

Nor is Paul ever content with making theological pronouncements without spelling out the consequences. They trip off his tongue (or quill!) with consummate ease: Stand firm, be united, rejoice, be gentle, do not be anxious about anything. . . . Theology always had such elementary practical aims in mind—witness Paul's use of the most elevated theology in chapter 2 to cultivate servant-like habits in the Philippians (2:5–11).

Every now and then we come across in the Bible what appears to be a test of our relationship with Jesus Christ. How can we know if it is the real thing? It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that Paul provides us with one just here: what does it mean to be a Christian? It is to be free from undue anxiety

about anything. It is to know a peace which passes all understanding. It is one thing to know the essential doctrines of the faith, to subscribe to them in our heads. It is quite another to have these same doctrines instil a peace in our hearts when all of hell is declaring war against us. When the psalmist said: 'I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me' (Psa. 3:5), he was giving expression to the fact that he too knew what Paul knew. He could sleep even when surrounded by his enemies: 'O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!' (Psa. 3:1). This is the kind of Christianity which Paul knew and which we need. Do we need to underline its relevance? Surely not, for ours is an age of anxiety.

But how could the apostle urge contentment? Four features stand out: three from what the apostle has already written, and one within the text itself. Together, these features form a foundation for this counsel.

1. Losses and Crosses

We should not miss the fact that Paul's concern for peace comes within a section in which he mentions other concerns too: the need for joy and a forbearing spirit in particular (4:4–5). All three (joy, gentleness, peace) are qualities the Philippians sorely need if they are going to stand firm (4:1) in the midst of the storms that surround them. And what storms? Two come to the surface in this letter: opposition (1:28; 3:2, 18), and the fact that Paul is in prison (1:18, 9; 4:10).

In accepting the Christian calling we take up an instrument of death and identify with it. Recognizing the place—the inevitability—of trials is a mark of Christian maturity. In what has been an epistle of joy, Paul does not shirk from telling his readers to prepare themselves for death: to self, to sin, to slavish obedience to Satan's suggestions. When Paul bids his readers not to be anxious about anything, it is against this background of trouble. The Philippians had every reason to be anxious: Paul was in prison, the church's greatest and most effective leader was close to execution (he was, of course, spared, but neither the Philippians nor Paul knew it at this time), and 'dogs' were busily perverting the truth even as they read this letter (3:2). Do not be anxious, Paul says. How could he make such a request?

One answer is by accepting that the Christian life involves pain. Suffering, 'losses and crosses' to give it

a Puritan expression, is part of what we must expect in the Christian life: witness Paul's lesson learnt after the first missionary journey, 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). We need only recall Paul's circumstances as he wrote this letter to confirm its truthfulness. He writes from prison (1:13-14), probably the Roman house-arrest recorded by Luke (Acts 28:14-31). Though this was not as dire as the Mamertine prison from which he wrote 2 Timothy—house-arrest provided a degree of liberty: Paul was free to impart the gospel to whosoever visited him—nevertheless, it was constraining and the Philippians, if not Paul, were greatly distressed by it.

Paul's Christian realism demanded that hardships were among those things he urged us to expect—so much so that he infused it into his theological understanding of the Christian life. For Paul, the central truth of the Christian life was that grace had brought him into union with Christ. It is the theme of Romans 6: that union with Christ is the framework of sanctification. And Romans 6 is a summary of Pauline emphasis elsewhere: the phrase 'in Christ', 'in the Lord' or 'in him' occurs 164 times in the New Testament—all of them in Paul's letters—thus testifying to its importance (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2, etc.).

It is this very truth that is captured in what Paul writes earlier in this letter to the Philippians: 'I also count all things loss. . . that I may gain Christ and be found in him' (Phil. 3:8-9). To be *in* Christ was his consuming passion. 'Union with Christ is. . . the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. . . It is not simply a phrase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption. . .'² Thus wrote John Murray and others have concurred with his point of view that the doctrine of union with Christ lies at the very heart of the Christian life.

But this union with Christ has on-going implications for the whole of our Christian lives. If grace has brought us into union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:5), grace also ensures that an ongoing communion with Christ in his death and resurrection dominates the whole of the Christian life. It is, again, what Paul has been alluding to in the previous chapter: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead' (Phil. 3:10-11).

One of the implications of being a Christian, of being in union with Christ, is that we share in his sufferings. We become like him in his death. It was a truth which Paul expounded in 2 Corinthians 4:10-12: 'We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.' Paul sees a pattern by which he may interpret the whole of our Christian lives: it is a kind of repetition of Christ's life and death in our own lives. There is some kind of reduplication of Christ's life in our own. This is what Calvin saw too: 'From the beginning the church has

been so constituted that the cross has been the way to victory and death the way of life.'³ Thus trouble goes hand in hand with a Christian testimony and it accounts for why Paul alludes to something the Psalmist had said in Romans 8:36: 'As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."'

This surely cuts across the grain of contemporary thinking on the nature of the Christian life. We live at a time when the Christian faith is more or less flabby, preoccupied with its pleasures and intrinsically ego-centric. Words like 'consecration', 'holiness' and 'mortification' sound old-fashioned. The call for self-negation, involving an identification with Jesus in his death—'taking up a cross' to use New Testament language—is drowned out by the clamour for self-expression and achievement of maximum pleasure. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise godfearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.⁴

Eight years later the Nazis hanged him.

When we affirm that the shadow of Christ's cross falls over every part of our Christian lives, we will not be caught off-guard when trouble comes: 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you' (1 Pet. 4:12). So, what should our reaction be? 'But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ. . .' (1 Pet. 4:13).

Knowing that whatever the pain, we are sharing in Christ's on-going ministry will aid in keeping our spirits sweet. It is to this that Paul alludes in Colossians in a breathtaking statement of the place of suffering in the Christian life: 'Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church' (Col. 1:24). Paul is not thinking of Christ's propitiatory work. That cannot be added to in any way. What Paul has in mind is the church-building work of the Saviour, an on-going work whereby he takes mortal sinners into his confidence and uses them—a process which involves pain and persecution. Just as Paul learnt at Stephen's death that he was, in fact, troubling Christ just as much as he troubled Stephen, so too he was to make this a hallmark of his understanding of the Christian mission. The Devil's attempts to destroy everything that is Christ's will inevitably show itself in sustained attacks on Christ's people. In this way, 'Death is at work in us' (2 Cor. 4:12). Christian contentment begins by a recognition that we are called upon to share in this union in Christ's death.

It was such a recognition that inspired Amy Carmichael to write:

Lord Crucified, O Mark thy holy Cross
 On motive, preference, all fond desires
 On that which self, in any form, inspires,
 Set thou this sign of loss.
 And when the touch of death is here and there
 displayed
 On things most precious in our eyes.
 Let us not wonder; let us see the answer to this
 prayer.

2. Hidden Recompense?

But it is a mistake to make out that 'losses and crosses' is all there is to the Christian life. What sustained the apostle as he recounted his sufferings to his beloved Philippians was his assurance that the pain eventually yields to a resurrection: 'But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body' (Phil. 3:20-21). We are called upon to fellowship in Christ's death; we are also, happily, called upon to fellowship in Christ's resurrection too (Rom. 6:5).

The New Testament thinks in terms of two resurrections. There is the future, bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 4:14). It is what Paul alludes to in chapter 3: 20-21. But this future transformation is possible only because we have, in one crucial aspect, already been resurrected in Christ through faith. It is the sustained theme of such passages as Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1; Romans 6:3-5; and Galatians 2:19-20. The implication of this for Christian contentment is crucial. Since we are already raised with Christ there is something about us as Christians which is indestructible. The 'outer man', to use Paul's language, may well be 'wasting away'; but the 'inner man . . . is being renewed day by day' (2 Cor. 4:16). Don't be anxious, Paul seems to be saying, because your future is already assured since the decisive transformation has already taken place. It is what Paul means when he alludes to the Corinthians (of all people!) as those who are 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 1:2; c.f. 6:11). This definitive, positional aspect forms the basis for a sustained polemic on Paul's part for a progressive and outward conformity to the image of Christ. We are to live in the knowledge of who (or what) we are in the assurance that what is true of us inwardly will eventually manifest itself outwardly! Pain and suffering will, one day, yield to peace and prosperity. Such knowledge induces peace of soul.

It was keeping an eye on the heaven that is to come and recalling that we are only pilgrims in this world that kept other Biblical writers sweet (David in 1 Chron. 29:15; Peter in 1 Pet. 2:11). We are to live with heaven on our mind. McCheyne kept this principle by painting a setting sun on the dial of his watch.

To summarize, Paul urges his friends at Philippi not to be afraid on two counts: first, trouble should not unsettle us because trouble is what we must expect if we follow Jesus Christ; and second, present

discomfort is a temporary phenomenon that will eventually yield to glory and fulfilment.

3. 'See no one but Christ'

A third feature appears from what Paul has written earlier in this epistle which throws light on why Paul could urge his readers not to be anxious. It comes from Paul's one great ambition to which he gives expression in the previous chapter: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead' (Phil. 3:10-11). We have already alluded to this verse and its bearing upon Paul's acceptance of suffering as an inevitable feature of the Christian life. We have also seen how the prospect of a future resurrection shone a light into the darkness. But there is another feature of this verse that we must look at.

If asked as to what New Testament statement best summed up the apostle Paul it could well be this one: 'All I care for is to know Christ' (3: 10 NEB). He was a man dominated by Christ in every way. It was something that Paul was particularly conscious of, and in such a way that his own ambition was not something in which everyone else shared. He knew that in this matter he stood out from many others, including many of his readers in Philippi. Such was Paul's utter dedication in this matter that people took note of it: 'it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ' (Phil. 1:13). Paul calls this ambition his 'one thing' (3:13). It is something which is 'surpassingly great' (3:8). It was something which he regarded as superior to everything else imaginable. Paul knew what he lived for; and he knew that he wanted it! We must not miss the three-fold emphasis Paul places on Christ:

- in v.7 he speaks about what he does for the sake of Christ
- in v.8 he speaks about what he does for the knowledge of Christ
- in v.8b he speaks about what he does in order to gain Christ

The words are slightly different, but the ambition is one: *Christ, Christ, Christ!* Whatever had been profit in his estimation, he was prepared to write *if off for Christ's sake*. But it is the violence of Paul's language which puts it into perspective: '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.' (Phil. 3:8). Paul's word for 'rubbish' is *skubala*, a word rightly translated 'dung' in the Authorised Version. Paul is not content merely to point out that Christ is better than anything else. In comparison with knowing Christ, everything else is dung!

But what appears of relevance to our present study is that Paul goes on to remark that sharing this great ambition of knowing Christ is a mark of Christian maturity: 'All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think

differently, that too God will make clear to you' (Phil. 3:15). The mark of my personal growth in grace is witnessed just here: how much do I know of Christ? And it is in this very area that contentment is learned. The more I know of Christ: his love for me, his power to keep me, his determination to bring me to his side, the more I will be able to stay calm when everything is shaking all around me. What these Philippians need to aid them in tranquillity is to know Christ. As one of my members is inclined to say to me in moments of gloom: 'See no one in the picture but Christ'.

Knowing Christ is a relationship calculated to thrill our hearts. It is to this end that we were made. God has appointed us as covenant partners: taking us, as it were, onto his personal staff and making us his fellow-workers (so Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:9) and personal friends (so Jesus assures in John 15:14). It is a relationship beautifully portrayed in Christian marriage (Eph. 5:22ff.). And which of us, who know the privilege of marriage have not known the benefits of being able to turn to our partners in times of trouble in the assurance that they know us and we know them. At such times words are often unnecessary; a mere glance, an embrace conveys the sentiment that we know each other in a relationship of love and trust. It is such a relationship with Jesus Christ that lifts us in times of trouble. It had been Paul's source of stability in prison; it is, he insists, something which the Philippians can learn from—as should we.

4. 'The Divine Asylum'

Paul was never content with a prohibition: 'Do not be anxious . . .' (4:6a). He goes on to issue a positive command: to bring every trouble to God in prayer (4:6b). It is precisely here that we see the difference between a Christian method of handling trouble and the modern, psychological approach. Paul does not attempt to suggest that the Philippian Christians 'stop worrying and pull themselves together'. He knew only too well that such a remark would be utterly pointless. A person who has become a victim to his heart's inclinations to worry is not able to stop simply because he is commanded to. We constantly lack the strength to overcome sin in our lives. When Paul, for example, wants to reinforce the necessity for mortification as a mark of the Christian's interest in holiness of life, he insists that choking sin of its life power can be done only through the agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit in our hearts (c.f. Rom. 8:13). It is the same here: strength to 'be what we are' comes from the fellowship and integral support of God that flows through living contact and communion with him in prayer: 'in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God' (Phil. 4:6).

Paul uses four different words for prayer: the NIV has attempted to translate each word differently: prayer, petition, thanksgiving and request, though it

is doubtful if Paul intends to see four quite different elements of prayer. Such attempts are often alluded to: thus emphasizing a certain comprehensiveness in prayer. *Proseuché*, 'prayer', is thought to be a general word used for offering up our desires and wishes to God; *deésis*, 'petition', being a more specific request; *aitéma*, 'request', also has a more detailed, definite, solicitation; and *eucharistia*, 'thanksgiving', seems to have an emphatic position in the sentence structure. In the midst of the trial Paul seems to be saying: 'Don't forget to say "Thank you, Lord!"' The way to Christian contentment is to pray without feeling a grudge against God. We are not to doubt the goodness of God. I may be in trouble at the moment, but thank God he has sent his Son to die for me on the cross and purchase for me my salvation and assurance of glory. It was this very thought that sustained Job, though he lived two millennia before Christ's coming. Pained by his experiences, and sometimes angry with God and especially his inept counsellors, Job finds moments of transcendent confidence: 'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!' (Job 19:25-27).

The real significance of this stylistic richness on Paul's part lies in the importance he gives to prayer in the life of the Christian and of its use in the cultivation of peace in particular. Those who are not at peace are invariably prayerless too. The peace which we so much need to know is one that Paul describes as transcending our understanding. It does so because it is unexpected in the given circumstances. When trials would drive us to the brink of insanity, threatening the very stability of our minds, we must run to what Calvin calls 'God's divine asylum'. Calvin's remarks are worth citing in full:

For we are not made of iron, so as not to be shaken by temptations. But this is our consolation, this our solace—to deposit, or (to speak with greater propriety) to disburden in the bosom of God everything that harasses us. Confidence, it is true, brings tranquillity to our minds, but it is only in the event of our exercising ourselves in prayer. Whenever, therefore, we are assailed by any temptation, let us betake ourselves forthwith to prayer, as to a sacred asylum.⁵

1. Moisés Silva, *The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Philippians)*, Moody (1988), p.226.
2. John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Banner of Truth, 1961), p.161.
3. *Commentary on 1 Peter 1:11*, ad.loc.
4. *The Cost of Discipleship*, p.79.
5. *Commentary on Philippians 4:6*.

Derek Thomas is minister of Stranmillis Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Belfast.