

The Secret

Philippians 4:10-23

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Several years ago a book came out called "The Secret". It was written by a woman named Rhonda Byrne and had several well known contributors including Jack Canfield the author of the whole Chicken Soup for the Soul library. The premise of the book is that there is a Law of Attraction in the universe. And if you know this secret law then you can use it to enhance your life.

Because the book talks a lot about being positive people and especially because it has several Christian contributors, including some pastors, many church folk were drawn into its appealing message. The problem is the book shifts the readers focus towards themselves and their own wellbeing – the universe and even God Himself, they are taught, exists for our pleasure rather than us for God's.

That said, there is a secret tied to Christianity that brings joy to life, but it isn't one hidden in the writings of ancient mystics, instead it is written in black and white in the book of Philippians.

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This sermon will be our second last in the book of Philippians which we will finish next week – Lord willing. Today we will be jumping ahead to look at the conclusion of the letter and then will come back next time to look at the paragraph just before.

If you haven't already, please open your Bibles to Philippians chapter 4 starting in verse 10.

In today's passage we get two of the most well known promises in the New Testament. In verse 13 Paul says "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." And then in verse 19 he says "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Today we are going to unpack both those verses in their contexts.

1.) But before we can do that I want to start by looking at the greater context of these verses because here we find the occasion for Paul's writing this letter.

And that occasion is directly connected with a man named Epaphroditus that we come across in verse 18. There Paul writes:

[Read Philippians 4:18]

As we have referred to many times throughout this series, Paul is in prison as he writes this letter. And this was a serious imprisonment, he had been charged with treason against Cesar because of His faith in Jesus. In Rome Cesar was the name at which every knee should bow, but for Paul, Cesar didn't cut it, there was a higher name and a higher authority.

And so his case had been presented before the crown and he was awaiting the response as he writes this letter.

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Enter the church in Philippi. Paul started this church on his second missionary journey, and they immediately joined him in ministry in a way no other church had done.

In fact Paul's testimony of this church is absolutely astounding. In Corinthians he writes:

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches (and this is primarily the church in Philippi). ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

This is about as glowing a report as anyone can give about a church. In the midst of hardship the Philippians had a history of incredible generosity.

And they had just done it again. They heard that Paul had been imprisoned and so sent Epaphroditus with a financial gift to take care of his needs, but more than just that they sent Epaphroditus himself to take care of Paul.

And so Paul is writing the letter of Philippians to thank them for their gift... but here is something funny.

Let me ask you, have you ever received a generous gift? I know I have. I've lived a very blessed life and am often given generous gifts. So what do you do when you receive a gift? We say thank you, right? And depending on how big the gift is we expand our thank you accordingly – that's what we do.

But look at what Paul has done here. The occasion for this letter is this incredible gift the Philippians gave including the service of Epaphroditus, and yet he hasn't even mentioned their gift until now – the closing of the letter – and even here he never actually says the word "thank-you". Did you notice that?

Instead in verse 11 Paul says basically “hey I’m not in as desperate need as you think” and in verse 17 he says “I’m not even asking for a gift” and then in verse 18 “I’ve got more than enough”.

Does this seem a little strange? Especially for a traveling missionary? Shouldn’t Paul be a little more appreciative of what they gave him and a little more open to more support? What’s Paul doing here?

It is here that we need to look at verse 11

[Read Philippians 4:11]

I know that a lot of you support different charities financially. Imagine your surprise if you received a letter one day from one of them that said:

Dear Supporter,

In order to be better stewards of the funds God provides, we did an efficiency study and found several areas of waste in our organization. We also learned that my salary was too high and that we didn’t need several of our other staff members. As a result, we are over funded and recommend that you consider giving some of your contribution to another worthy ministry.¹

Wouldn’t that be shocking! But in a way this is what Paul is doing here. He isn’t being rude or unappreciative of their gift, but he is turning the attention away from his own need.

Notice the careful wording in verse 11. Paul says “I am not saying this because I am in need.” Notice he doesn’t say “I have no needs”, nor is he saying “I need help desperately.”

Neither of these would be true. Certainly we know from other passages that Paul faced all kinds of needs. He went hungry; he suffered imprisonment and ship wreck and floggings and all sorts of stuff like that. But what he is saying here is “I didn’t mean to let you know about my needs.”

And this is an important principle in Christian living. Just because we have needs does not mean that we should always seek to have those needs met.

Consider Jesus. Just after He was baptized the Spirit led Him out into the wilderness to fast and pray. The Bible then tells us:

¹ Idea adapted from Bob Deffinbaugh http://bible.org/seriespage/give-and-take-phil-410-20#P1535_543430

After fasting forty days and forty nights, [Jesus] was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' (Matthew 4:2-3)

Satan identifies a real need that Jesus and, and challenged Him to use His power to meet that need.

Now I used to wonder what the problem was with Satan's temptation here. After all, would it really have been sin for Jesus to turn rocks into bread? I don't think so. But what Satan is saying is "it is inconceivable that any of God's children, especially the Son of God, should ever have unmet needs." "Doing without is inconsistent with who you say you are Jesus." But in saying this he ignores the fact that it was the Spirit of God that led Jesus out into the wilderness in the first place – God put Jesus in this position of need.

Need is not a bad thing in and of itself. In fact need is one of God's most powerful tools to teach us how to rely on Him. And Jesus knew this and so He defeated the devil's temptation by quoting the Old Testament

It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Matthew 4:4)

And Paul knows this too and so he isn't afraid of a little need. Instead he says "I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

And this is why fundraising isn't Paul's primary concern. In fact personal fundraising isn't a concern of his at all. And it shouldn't be one of ours either.

In North America it is really easy to fall into believing that we need new stuff if we are going to reach our goals. In our case that might mean, if we want our church to grow then we need to redecorate – put in new carpet and update our sound system.

But friends, I don't want people to start coming to church because they like our carpet! I want people to be drawn to this place because they've encountered a radical picture of Christ in one of you that was so opposite to what they were expecting that they just had to find out who Jesus was. As a result we desperately need more Jesus, we don't need more money....

Is that a strange thing for a preacher to say? I'm getting a death glare from our treasurer... no I'm not (I'm just joking). Here's what I'm not saying: I'm not saying stop giving money to church – the Philippians were incredibly generous towards God with their money, but I am saying let's get our focus off of money because the Gospel isn't about money. Let's be a church that focuses on Christ and is comfortable with need whether it is personal or as a body. Amen?

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Are you comfortable with experiencing need? Do you allow it to draw your heart towards God? Or when pain or discomfort or relational or emotional turmoil raise their heads in your life do you simply try to dull it with spiritual Tylenol?

Let me just say up front that this is one of the most difficult things for North Americans to comprehend because we think our safety and our comfort should be God's biggest priority. But it isn't. God seeks first His Kingdom and His glory and God wants His people to allow Him to work in our hearts such that His glory becomes our greatest desire as well. Need is not a bad thing.

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2.) With this as the greater context I want to transition towards those two famous sayings. First I want to look at verse 19 where Paul tells the Philippians "And my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

How does that line up with what we said?

I don't know about you, but whenever people have quoted this verse to me it has usually been in the context expecting God to cater to my perceived needs. But then when I look back at those needs I realize that they were really more like wants.

Have you heard people say things like: "Well University was certainly tight financially, but praise God, I got a scholarship and He met all my needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus"?

Or "I wasn't sure how we were going to make it, with the credit card bills I racked up over Christmas I didn't have enough money to buy groceries. But God promised He will meet all our needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus – and there was just enough to get by."

Or how about "God knew I couldn't have survived if my husband died of cancer and so remarkably He met my needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus and my husband recovered."

Are these really instances where God has met our needs? Or are we cheapening God's promise here by attributing to Him stuff that really happens because we live in a rich country with a great medical system where we get most of what we want?

Now I'm not just trying to cause trouble when I say that. Here is what I mean. If we teach people that our medical system is God providing for us, what do we say when we encounter thousands of orphans living in South Korea born to parents who don't want them in a culture that looks down on adoption? Or what do we say about the millions of children who will die of dysentery in Ethiopia or Chad where they have access to less than 30% of the clean drinking water their population needs?

Or what do we say to the thousands of refugees in Mali, the Congo or Somalia fleeing war torn areas of the world with nothing to call their own but the skin on their backs?

How can we talk about the same God allowing things like that while meeting needs of ours that are frivolous by comparison? Do you see the problem?

I would like to suggest that we in North America have grossly misread this text to assume that God is blessing us. It doesn't make sense to me that God could be blessing North America while, if we take the Bible seriously, most of the people around us are going to hell, while the majority of the world's Christians live in South America or central Africa in despicable poverty!

Somehow the needs that Paul is talking about God meeting here must be different than we are thinking such that those who suffer may in fact be those who are blessed.

The question we should ask is "what is it that we actually need?"

In Romans Paul tackles this question for another group of Christians who were suffering for their faith similar to the Philippians. He writes.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies...

Paul encourages them that the suffering they were experiencing was a tool to cause them to long for what they actually needed – to become children of God.

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Ok that's fine. But when you are in the middle of a situation like this how do you know what to pray for? How can we have the eyes to see God's big picture and know that through these difficulties we are being transformed into who He wants us to become? Romans continues.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans... because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

The Holy Spirit knows what the Christian actually needs and so He intercedes for us changing our prayers so that they line up with God's will. When Christians find themselves praying "God take me out of this situation", the Holy Spirit knows that the true prayer of a Christian is "God cause me to look like You, use my situation to transform me into Your image." And the Holy Spirit actually reinterprets our prayer to line up with that.

And Romans 8 concludes:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:18-27)

See it isn't that God necessarily changes the circumstances that we find ourselves in, or gives us what we ask. But He gives us what it is we really need. And Christians need to look like Him – that is the only thing that matters.

And so as if you ever want to pray a prayer that God will answer with "yes" pray "Jesus use my situation to transform me into Your image." That is what the Holy Spirit prays for you, and that is the prayer that God always answers with "yes".

And that is why Paul can tell the Philippians "My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Paul knows he only has one need and the Philippians only have one need as well – to be transformed into God's image.

That's also why Paul includes verse 20.

[Read Philippians 4:20]

When God causes His children to look like Him, He receives glory.

Just think of Paul sitting in Prison rejoicing

That what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. (Philippians 1:12-13)

Paul's response to his situation was to allow God to transform his character and as He did thousands of soldiers encountered Christ.

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3.) Finally I want to look at verse 13 where Paul says:

[Read Philippians 4:13]

Again this is a verse that I have heard used to encourage people to set high goals.

I know you didn't do well in school little Johnnie, but if you want to be a doctor you can do it. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

But the context here is very specific. Paul isn't talking about achieving great things in his personal life. Instead he is talking about being content regardless of what circumstances he has found himself in.

In fact the point of this verse is the very opposite of what our culture wants to make it read. Our culture wants this verse to say "because God is behind you, you can achieve whatever you want." But Paul's point is "because God is behind us we don't need to change our circumstances at all.

Here is where we come around to the secret that Paul talks about in verse 12 – the secret of contentment. And this is something that eludes North American culture.

But it doesn't have to elude the believer – Christians are people who don't have to play the world's game of continually desiring more than we have. In verse 11 Paul says "whatever the circumstances" and in verse 12 he says "in any and every situation" we can be content.

Are you depressed because of relational problems in your family? Are you facing financial trouble? Are you suffering from de-habilitating health problems? Paul knows a secret that will change your life.

So what is this secret to finding joy in the midst of any circumstance?

The secret is verse 13 – we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.... The secret isn't "with Christ I get what I want." The secret is "with Christ I don't need my situation to change in order to live a life of joy because Christ is enough.

Is Christ enough for you today? Is Christ enough?

I want to leave us with three things we can do to live this secret out:

First, we need to give thanks all the time. Thankfulness for a Christian is a matter of obedience. The Bible tells us:

In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Thankfulness isn't an option for Christians it is a command. Because it means we understand that God is using our circumstances to teach us to want what we actually need.

Second, we need to be satisfied with little. Paul once told the young pastor Timothy:

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” (1 Timothy 6:6-8)

North America says you always need something more, but Paul understood that covetousness and contentment are mutually exclusive.

Finally, we need to be preoccupied with the well-being of others. Paul summarized this in chapter 2 where he wrote:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:3-4)²

Brothers and sisters, the secret of contentment has nothing to do with laws of attraction. It has nothing to do with what we have or what we lack; really it has nothing to do with us at all. The secret of contentment is found when we get what we actually need.

Do you have what you actually need this morning? Friends, do you have Jesus? Do you share His attitude? Do you look like Him? If not don't leave here today seeking any other secret – Jesus is the secret.

² Three points adapted from John MacArthur
<http://www.gtycanada.org/resources/questions/QA149/What-Is-the-Secret-to-Contentment>
 (accessed Feb 15, 2013)