

True contentment in Christ alone.

I might be wrong, but I don't think anyone here is going to say that 2020 has been an easy year. It's very fashionable, especially on social media, to say how 2020 has been a year we'd rather forget. I will not repeat the words used to describe the year 2020. Yet, in my reflections on the past year, there is perhaps one thing that marked my mind the most and it is not coronavirus. In the middle of a year where everyone was complaining, everyone was moaning, everyone was talking about how difficult life was, what struck me the most was a woman's speech, of a widow, during the recognition ceremony in memory of her husband. This is the speech of a young woman, mother of 4, who had just lost her husband in a rock climbing accident. Her husband was a brilliant man, a devoted husband and father. He was in his prime with years of service ahead of him. But in the blink of an eye, he fell and was killed. So what was in his widow's speech? What did she have to say a few weeks after losing her husband? There was thanksgiving. There was worship. Not the slightest trace of bitterness or anger. Thanksgiving, praise, contentment. Does that mean she didn't suffer? Does that mean her heart wasn't broken with the pain of her husband's death? No! She suffered a lot. She suffered crushing pain. Yet, listening to her speak, we heard gratitude, contentment, even joy.

How is it possible to experience such suffering with joy and contentment? How do you explain this to a world that never stops complaining? How do you explain that to a world marked by discontent? Discontent is part of the human condition, and we've all seen it in 2020, we've all seen it in ourselves. At the end of his letter to the Philippians, Paul gives the secret to a life of contentment and gratitude. Paul explains Laura Nelson's speech. He explains her heart. And Paul shows us how this contentment and thankfulness are possible for us too even at the end of 2020, and who knows what the year 2021 will bring? How to live a life of contentment, joy and gratitude in the year 2021?

The joy of the Christian in the Lord

Paul is in prison in Rome. He knows he is nearing the end of his life after years of suffering and trials in the service of Jesus Christ. He writes elsewhere about lashes, stoning, shipwrecks, sleepless nights. But by the grace of God Paul can speak not only of his joy but of his great joy. He received a gift from the Philippians. So his joy, is it because thanks to this gift his life will be more comfortable? Can buy a few decent meals, can he afford a new blanket, a new coat? No, his joy is not related to his needs. He says it in verse 11: "I do not say this because of my needs." His joy is deeper than that. He feels great joy because the gift of the Philippians is a proof of their love both for him and for the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 10 he says his joy is "in the Lord". He rejoices in what Jesus is doing in his Philippian friends. Paul sees their generosity, despite their poverty. He sees the sacrifices they make for the gospel. He sees Christ in them and he rejoices. He rejoices to see evidence of God's grace in the lives of others. He rejoices because he sees the love of Christ at work in the lives of others. And at the end of 2020, we can rejoice in what we see of Christ in each other's lives. As the pastor of this church, I rejoice to see a thirst for the word and for prayer develop in you. I rejoice to see the desire to serve. I rejoice in your burden for your friends and relatives who do not know the Lord. These are subjects of great joy. We should rejoice in seeing the work of God advance in each other's lives. This is what Paul is describing here. Despite his own suffering. He finds great joy when he sees Jesus Christ at work in his brothers and sisters. Phil 1.4 "Whenever I pray for you, I do it with joy". We have our prayer list to help us pray for one another. Do we pray with joy, with gratitude for what God is doing in each other's lives? JP Sartre said, "Hell is other people." The Christian says the opposite. He says, "I look at my brothers and my sisters in Christ and have great joy in the Lord. I thank God for you. I pray for you with joy."

The contentment of the Christian in the Lord

Chapter 4 of the Philippians is a funny chapter, isn't it? Several times in this chapter we are tempted to say, "Paul, is what you are describing really possible? »: « Rejoice always », « don't worry about anything », « always pray », « give thanks in all things ». He speaks of a peace that guards our hearts and thoughts. I want to believe it but is it possible? And in verse 11 Paul seems to go even further. Paul says, "I have learned to be content with the condition I am in. The great apostle had learned to be content regardless of his situation - Contentment. No grumbling, no jealousy, no resentment, no discontent. Perfect contentment, sometimes in the worst of circumstances. And maybe in a society that seems to be based on people's dissatisfaction, we find it hard to believe that it is possible to have true contentment. There seem to be so many things and circumstances that prevent us being content. If we are honest, we must confess that we often lack contentment. Let's take a close look at Paul's contentment. How can we explain it?"

The contentment of the Christian does not depend on his circumstances. V 11-12

The word Paul uses here for "content" is a word that speaks of independence, self-sufficiency in circumstances. Paul does not depend on others or on circumstances to be content. His level of contentment does not change depending on his situation. In verse 11 we see that Paul found contentment in all the states he was in. Verse 12 speaks of the ups and downs of his life. There have been many downs: humiliation, hunger, famine. On his way to Rome Paul had spent two weeks without food. Two weeks. He had been publicly flogged and beaten several times for his faith in Jesus. The Philippians knew this well because they had seen him in the stocks in Philippi Prison. What was he doing while he was in the stocks? "Towards the middle of the night, Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to God" Acts 16:25. Here is a contentment which does not depend on circumstances.

But Paul also had times of comfort and plenty. He spent time with Lydia after being released from prison. One can imagine that the bed was more comfortable at Lydia's than in prison. But Paul said, "It doesn't matter what these circumstances are. I've known both extremes, my contentment doesn't depend on these things."

There are temptations both for those in want and for those in abundance. In want, in difficult circumstances, the temptation is to curse God, to tell him: This isn't fair. You can become envious of others and say, "It's not fair that I am in so much pain. I'd be happy if I had this, if I had that." But Paul writes, "I have learned to be happy." He is not saying that we are forced to accept difficult circumstances if we are in a position to change them. If you have a toothache, you don't say: I'm not going to the dentist. It is God's will that I am hurting. I must learn to endure pain to the glory of God. Or if I'm made redundant, I don't say: Too bad, I will have to learn to live with it. No, we go looking for a job. But we do that while saying, "It's good to be able to work, but contentment doesn't depend on my job." But the person who lives in abundance can experience the same discontent. Living in material abundance does not guarantee contentment. We live in a consumer society where advertising campaigns fuel desire in our hearts. We are encouraged to pursue contentment in goods, in relationships. But there is always a void, a lack. Family, health, home, career - all of these things are important but in the end, if your contentment depends on these things, it will end in disappointment. All of these things are fleeting.

They will never be able to satisfy our greatest need. Paul is not saying not to start a family, not to have a comfortable house, not to take care of your health. He just says that true contentment is not in these things, however good they are. Solomon in his proverbs says: "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle." Pro 23: 4-5

If we learned one thing in 2020, it's that in anyone's life, anything can change at any time. You can lose everything in the blink of an eye. Everything that is dear to us in this world, family, money, work, health, we can lose everything. And if our contentment, our happiness depends on these things, what do we have left?

Maybe this morning I am talking to someone and your contentment is linked to the circumstances of your life. You lack contentment. The circumstances in your life are not what you dreamed of. You are frustrated in your life. You look at others and you are consumed with jealousy or envy. You lack peace. Despite your various successes, despite all your material possessions, you are still not happy, really happy inside. Paul says: let your contentment be based on something solid, sure, and certain.

The content of the Christian is found in the Lord

When we read verses 11 and 12 we are tempted to say: Paul, this contentment of which you speak, how is it possible? Some versions say that Paul learned the secret of being happy. So what's the secret? Tell us Paul. With all the terrible situations you've been through, with your current situation, how is it possible to be content? Paul gives us the answer in verse 13: "I can do everything through him who strengthens me." Nowadays, some use this verse to say that if we want to do something in life, there is no reason not to be able to do it. If I want to be a millionaire, or if I want to get the job of my dreams, I can do anything through the one who strengthens me. Whatever my dream, I can make it happen. I can do everything! But that's not what this verse means at all. This verse is found in the context of contentment in easy situations and difficult situations. Paul talks about contentment despite everything. And this verse confirms that contentment is possible through one who strengthens.

The secret, says Paul, to knowing contentment does not come from oneself or from circumstances. It comes from "the one who strengthens me". I can experience this contentment in plenty and in need because of Jesus Christ who strengthens me.

For all the trials that God puts the Christian through, He does not promise to anesthetize him against suffering, pain and disease. God never promises an easy life, a life without trial. Never! What God promises is to give the Christian the strength, the grace necessary for the trial. Paul had prayed several times for God to deliver him from a "thorn in the flesh," but instead of delivering him, God reminded him of the sufficiency of his grace. Hear what he says in 2 Corinthians 12: 8-10 "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

But we must underline the key phrase in this verse. And that's the little phrase at the end of the verse: "through or in him who strengthens me." Paul's confidence in his contentment is not in himself but through "him who strengthens him" that is, through Jesus Christ. Paul is sure to experience this contentment because Paul is "in Christ Jesus". He is united to Jesus by faith and that changes everything. Jesus is his supreme treasure, so Paul has learned not to value fleeting things too much. Paul does not seek to know wealth and comfort. He seeks to know Jesus, his Savior, his Lord. His eternal contentment is found in Jesus Christ and not in temporary things. Even death cannot prevent his contentment because he says in chapter 1 that death would be a gain for him because he would have more of Jesus Christ. He would lose all his material possessions but he would gain Christ.

Contentment is possible "in Christ". For Paul, without Jesus Christ there is no contentment. Jesus is the source of his contentment but he is also the model of contentment. Jesus had the right attitude towards abundance and need. Jesus was ready to leave the abundance of glory in heaven because he knew that obeying his Father's will was more important. Jesus did not seek a life of comfort and ease because he knew he had come to suffer and to die. Jesus was ready to endure humiliation, hunger, persecution, and shame. He never complained. He never said, "This is not fair! ". He endured humiliation and suffering, content to do his Father's will and complete the salvation of his people. His satisfaction did not depend on the circumstances. In his perfect obedience to his Father's will, Jesus experienced perfect contentment and joy. And he promises this same contentment to all who are in him.

The Christian is called to live in a discontented world. In order to do this, we must remember what we have in Jesus Christ. Satan will try to do with you what he did with Adam and Eve. He will show you all the things that God has chosen not to give you. But look at all that you have in Christ, all that you are in Christ; you've got to remember who you are in him. All your sin is forgiven. Jesus saved you from the hell you deserve. In him you have the assurance of eternal life. You have been adopted into the family of God. In Jesus Christ all the riches of God are yours. Paul tells us in Ephesians 3 of "the power of God working in us to do infinitely beyond anything we ask or think." All of these things are true of you if you're in Christ. Meditate at length on your identity in Christ. May these great realities dominate your thoughts. I listen to Laura Nelson's speech and hear a deep contentment in the one who strengthens her. Never a word of self-pity. She accepts the will of her Lord. She cries, she suffers but she prays: Your will be done. What makes these people say, "Your will be done"? It is the presence of Jesus in them. They just pray what their Lord prayed. Yes, with tears, yes with questions, but they look at the cross of Jesus Christ, they see his pain, his suffering for them, they see his love and in this, Jesus strengthens them to say: "I can do everything through him who strengthens me."

And notice that Paul had to learn this contentment. Twice he said, "I have learned". And we too have to learn it. Our teachers in the school of contentment are teachers like disappointment, suffering, sickness, humiliation, hunger. These teachers can be tough, but the lessons we learn from them are so important. I once quoted a song written by an American evangelist after the death of his 4 daughters, lost when their boat sank. He writes: whatever my lot, you have taught me to say: it is well, it is well with my soul.

This morning, do you have this contentment, this peace? Look inside your heart. Do you know this contentment? This contentment is found in only one place and in one person and that is at the cross of Jesus Christ. Come and gaze on the Lord, the Savior on the cross. He is there for you. He is there to pay the debt of your sin. He is there to take the condemnation that sets you free. He is there to give you peace and contentment. In Jesus Christ you have everything you need. Come to him. Seek your happiness and contentment in him alone. You will find in him true contentment for the year ahead and for all eternity.