

Letting Go (Part One)

“The secret of being content in any and every situation”

Reflection 8 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

At the heart of learning to live a life of love is knowing the secret of being content. Near the end of his life, Paul writes to the church in Philippi, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13). Paul learning the secret of being content whatever his circumstances is of course pretty remarkable because Paul is writing as prisoner in Rome awaiting trial before Nero. He is “in chains for Christ” (Philippians 1:13). And yet he is content.

When was the last time you were content? At peace with your life, and the way your life is going? At peace inside? Satisfied, having this sense that even if things aren’t going as you want them to, your life will still work out over time, somehow, by a power beyond us all, beautifully?

Paul is content. He’s learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. He’s been through floggings, and a stoning when he was left for dead outside the city walls. He’s spent nights in prison; in fact, he’s spent years in prison. He’s been shipwrecked three times; once he spent a night and a day in the open sea. He was always on the move, in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, in danger from false friends. He’s often gone without sleep. He’s known hunger and thirst. He has no home. He owns no property. He has no investments and no retirement plan. And always there is the pressure of church work which is not easy.

Yet somehow he’s content. Maybe it was because he knew trouble, real trouble, that he found contentment. In fact, if you haven’t been through trouble, how would you even know? How would you even know if you’d found contentment?

It’s not that Paul never worried. Paul could really get worked up about things. He could get so worked up that sometimes he couldn’t get his stuff done. I’ve been there. He was often on edge. He could hurl anathemas. He could wish emasculation on some. So every strong feeling you’ve ever had Paul had. I love that about Paul – that he tells us these things.

But over the years Paul has also learned some things – and what he’s learned becomes clear in the Philippian letter from which our opening text comes. He’s learned, for instance, that God is in control whatever happens. So he’s already written in Philippians, “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (1:12-14) and “God works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (2:13).

He's learned that certain things really matter and others don't, and one does best by keeping one's priorities really clear. So he's written, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (3:8).

He's learned that the past is the past. So he's written, "Forgetting what is behind I press on" (3:13-14).

He's learned that others don't have to agree with him. So he's written, "If on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (3:15-16).

He's learned that when you're tempted to worry, pray. So he's written, "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 hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7).

He's learned that it all comes down to what you think about. So he's written, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things" (4:8).

So all in all Paul has learned that it comes down to letting go, relaxing and letting go, or as 12-Step wisdom puts it, letting go and letting God.

This is what Paul had learned. Trust. God is in control; God is at work in us to will and to act according to his good purposes. We can do everything through him who gives us strength. Whether or not it is clear to us, our lives will work out beautifully even if things aren't going the way we want. The past is the past. The future is filled with things you can't ever anticipate. Do what it is right to do in the present. Others don't have to agree with us; we don't really need their approval. Choose joy. Sense God's nearness. Pray. Focus on what lifts you up, and keep your focus there.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week