

CONTENTMENT

(*αὐτάρκης* = 'avtarkis')

To be content, self-sufficient, sufficient in oneself, adequate, needing no assistance, having sufficient strength.

Philippians 4:11, "*Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.*" The unique word there is "content" (*αὐτάρκης*). It's quite an unusual Greek word because it comes from stoic philosophy. Paul has chosen to use one of the great words of Pagan ethics, 'avtarkis', which means to be entirely "self-sufficient." But why has he gone down this route? Let's first look at what the stoics meant by it and then we will compare it to what Paul meant. Self-sufficiency was the highest aim of the stoics. In stoic thinking it meant a state of mind in which a person was absolutely independent of all things and all people, and they proposed to reach this state by applying certain reasoning. They chose to do this by first eliminating all desire and then eliminating all emotion - to get people to a point where they didn't care what happened to themselves or to other people. Paul uses that word, but he uses it differently because Paul cannot (and does not) mean the elimination of all emotion and desire. After all, Paul really cared for other people.

In Philippians 1:7 we read, "*Its right for me to feel this way about all of you since I have you in my hearts.*" According to this statement, Paul really does care! Paul genuinely loves people. Paul is deeply interested in the lives of these people and prays for them continually. Therefore, Paul is not talking about not caring when he uses this word for "contentment." However, there is a point where his meaning mingles with that of the stoics; since Paul is suggesting that there is a place in life where we can live independently of our circumstances. He is convinced that there can be a peace, a stability in us, a sense of contentment and joy, that's not connected to storms of life. In fact, the reason why Paul can be **content** is because he is certain (fully persuaded) that everything is subject to change for the better! And this is how he puts it; "*I learned how to be content in good times and in bad, rich times and in poor, when I am hungry and when I am feasting. In all of these kinds of times, I have learned how to have a sense of wholeness that's independent of all of that. I have learned the secret of having all of these kinds of things happening, and despite all of that, being free inside, being whole, being safe.*"

Notice, Paul is happy to share his secret with us, and it's quite simple. It's not complicated, but it's not easy either. His secret still means that we are going to have to live through the ups and downs of life. However, it does work! It worked for him again and again - in beatings, in shipwrecks, in hunger, and in sorrows that he faced. And it will work for us today!

We can also learn to be "content" in every circumstance in life. So what exactly is the key? Paul learnt to be self-sufficient with regards people and things, while being totally reliant of God. He had taught himself to be completely dependent on God, while staying independent of his circumstances. Paul's sufficiency was first in God and then in himself (because of God). As a result, he knew that whatever he was going through was subject to change for the better. This is true contentment.