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I Have Learned the Secret

Rick Atchley

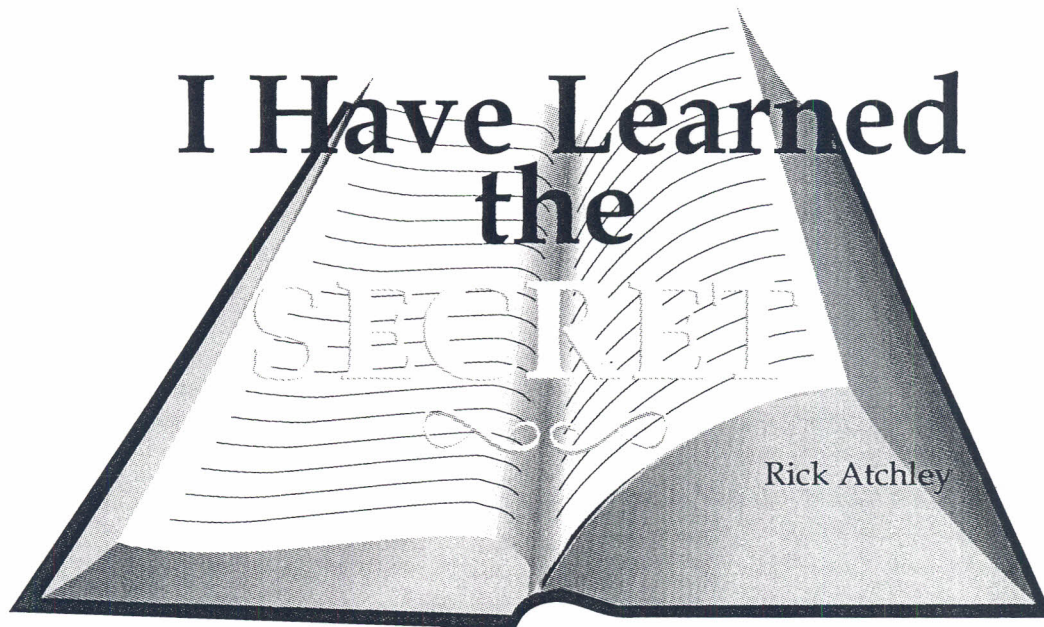
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I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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.

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:10–19)

Why did Paul write Philippians? Was he not responding to the gift the Philippians sent him by Epaphroditus

when they learned he was in prison? At the end of the letter, he thanks them for the gift. But it is interesting that he spends more space telling them that he didn't need it and that he wasn't seeking it than he does thanking them for it. I wonder if any elders have ever given a preacher a raise and had the preacher say, "That's nice but I don't need it, and I wasn't looking for it." Paul wanted to make it clear, "I'm not pacing the cell every five minutes hoping the mail has come." His relationship with this beloved church was not utilitarian. He appreciated their gift. But their level of generosity didn't affect his level of joy. In fact, the main reason he accepted the gift was that he wanted them to be fruitful in their giving of it. In no way did he want to communicate that the physical comfort their money afforded him somehow increased his ability to cope with his circumstances. Paul was not defined by wealth or by poverty, but by a contentment that transcended both. He had discovered a secret that kept his personal happiness from being contingent upon the proper arrangement of external happenings. "It's a secret," he says. It's a secret, obviously, that most people haven't learned.

Surely, the theme song of our age is "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." (Young people don't know that song. An old group called the Rolling Stones—buddies of Engelbert Humperdink—sang it.) This is the season of our discontent, and Madison Avenue is determined to keep it that way. The propaganda bombards us every day: "If I just

had one of those, . . . If this would just get better, . . . If I could just be cured, . . . If I could just get the job, . . . If I could just spray this on, . . . If I could just move there, . . . If I could just have that, . . . If they would just get out of the house, . . . *then* I would be content.” I was reminded of that spirit when I came across a poem by Judith Viorst. She speaks as if she were a seven-year-old little boy:

If I were in charge of the world
I’d cancel oatmeal,
Monday mornings,
Allergy shots. . . .

If I were in charge of the world
There’d be brighter night lights,
Healthier hamsters, and
Basketball baskets forty-eight inches lower.

If I were in charge of the world
You wouldn’t have lonely.
You wouldn’t have clean.
You wouldn’t have bedtimes.
Or “Don’t punch your sister.”
You wouldn’t even have sisters.

If I were in charge of the world
A chocolate sundae with whipped cream and
nuts would be a vegetable.
All 007 movies would be G.
And a person who sometimes forgot to brush,
And sometimes forgot to flush,
Would still be allowed to be
In charge of the world.

Let me ask, though—when are you going to get to be in charge of the world? If happiness depends on happenings, “rejoicing always” is not going to happen.

I suppose your church is like mine. I see people trying to keep their marriages together. I see people working ninety hours a week trying to build that bigger house and going deeper into debt. I see people trying drugs, breaking up their marriages, and forsaking their kids. And do you know what they are doing? They are chasing after the world to find what the world does not have. The world does not have contentment. The world does not know the secret. We’ve been looking for it in all the wrong places.

Paul says he knew the secret, and he lived like he knew what he was talking about. Verse 12: “I’ve learned the secret of being happy at any time, in every thing that hap-

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pens.” The problem is, Paul doesn’t say, “*This* is the secret.” But then again, he does. Because when you study his life and his letters, Paul shares the things he has learned. Let me share at least three things Paul learned that made him happy in any situation.

Paul learned . . . to be grateful for his blessings

Paul learned first to be satisfied with his blessings. Paul says that he knew plenty and he knew want. My personal opinion is that he knew plenty of want. Paul’s definition of plenty was one decent meal and no one beating him with rods that day. Whatever his circumstance—hunger, suffering, imprisonment—he learned contentment (Phil 4:11). Later, he uses that same word in 1 Timothy: “But 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 Tim 6:6–8).

That truth came home to me as a father. My wife and I spent thousands of dollars believing we could not have children biologically, only to find out four years ago that the doctors were wrong. Like Sarah, my wife bore me a son in her old age. I was there when my son was born. And I found out that Paul is right—we don’t bring anything into the world. Everything we have is temporary. We didn’t bring it into this world and we are not taking it with us when we leave. Paul says in verse 19 that we serve a God who is able to meet all our needs. My discontent has never been rooted in a lack of food and clothing. Rather, it has been rooted in the lack of a thankful spirit and a trusting heart.

Scottish pastor John Watson had a member of his flock who suffered a great financial setback. Watson went to visit him. The man was despondent and said, “I’ve lost everything.” Watson said, “I’m sorry to hear that you’ve lost your wife.”

“I haven’t lost my wife.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear you’ve lost your character.”

“I haven’t lost my character at all.”

“I’m sorry to hear you’ve lost your faith.”

“I haven’t lost my faith.” And then Watson said, “Don’t you see, man? You’ve lost none of the things that really matter.”

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May I give you a little test to see if you’ve learned to be satisfied with your blessings? Do you enjoy what you have, or are you waiting to enjoy tomorrow, when you’ll have more? Do you refuse to worry about tomorrow? Do you regularly and joyfully offer thanksgiving to God, today? Do you rejoice at the prosperity of others? I don’t have too much trouble learning to be content when I abound. It’s when *you* abound that I have problems. I don’t think you can really learn contentment unless you’re willing to go through some hard times.

I love the story about the Puritan who sat down one night to supper with only a piece of bread and a glass of water. He bowed his head and said, “What!—all this, and Jesus too?” Paul said, “You don’t be anxious. You pour out your prayers to God *with thanksgiving*” (Phil 4:6).

During the last worship service of a mission trip to a leper colony, Jack Hinton relates that he asked, “Is there a final request?” A woman turned around who had had her back to him during the whole service. Her’s was the most hideous face he had ever seen. The woman had no ears and no nose. Her lips were gone. She raised a fingerless hand and said, “Could we sing ‘Count Your Many Blessings’?” Jack started the song but couldn’t finish. He just had to walk off and weep. Later, somebody came up and said, “I guess you’ll never be able to sing that song again.” He said, “No, I’ll sing it again—but I’ll never sing it the same way.” It is not a big secret. You can’t have a joyful heart if you don’t have a grateful heart. Paul learned to be satisfied with his blessings.

Paul learned . . . to be sustained by God’s strength

The second thing Paul learned was to be sustained by God’s strength. Paul believed that God would meet all his needs. He was confident, not that God would remove all of the difficult circumstances, but that God would supply the resources in Christ to cope with those circumstances. So Paul wrote the words that are on all our refrigerators—one of my favorite verses from Philippians—“I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:13). We’ve taken that verse and turned it into a motivational pep talk for champions. For example, my wife and I joined a health club. Our trainer, who is a Christian, was showing us how to lift weights. My wife was struggling with her set, trying to get it up for the last time. The trainer said, “Philippians 4:13.” I am glad he is a believer, but when Paul wrote Philippians 4:13, he was not thinking about lifting weights, winning Super Bowls, and being champions. Paul did not look like a champion when he wrote Philippians 4:13. He did not look like a winner. He did not look like a strong man. He was a weak man with a strong confidence in the ability of Christ to match every situation. When Paul boasts in his weakness in 2 Corinthians 12, he says that Jesus told him, “I am not going to take away that thorn.” Why? “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor 12:9). That word “sufficient” is the same Greek word as “contentment” in our text. To be content, the Greeks thought, was to be sufficient. Jesus, in essence, said to Paul, “You can be sufficient for any situation if you’ll let me be your sufficiency.” And so Paul said, “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, then. I am going to boast in my weakness so that Christ’s power can rest on me.”

I love the story about Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China. One time a person commended him for his impact on that nation, to which Taylor said, “It seems to me that God looked over the world to find a man who was weak enough to do his work. And when he at last found me he said, ‘He’s weak enough; he’ll do.’ All God’s giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on his being with them. ‘All things,’ Paul says. He’s not talking about Super Bowls and weightlifting. He’s saying, ‘I can do anything in the situation—no matter how tough it is—that Christ wants me to do.’”

Now, let me tell you what I have discovered in our churches. We believe that Jesus has power. We even be-

lieve that Jesus wants to share that power. But we're not too sure how we're supposed to apply for that power so that we can be sustained by his strength. Remember when the children of Israel were about to cross the Jordan into the promised land, God told them, "Walk through the river; I'm going to stop the river." The river was at flood stage! So they began walking—15 yards, it was still flowing; 20 yards, it was still flowing. The Bible says they got in up to their ankles—and God stopped the river. Let me tell you what I think. I think God wants to share his power with us, but he waits for us to trust him by stepping out in obedience. If we do, he will meet us on the way and give us the strength to get it done. The problem is that we want the power before we take a step. God says, "Take a step, and I'll give you the power."

If I didn't believe that, I couldn't do what I do. Have you ever been outside a hospital room when someone inside is dying? You have to go in but you don't know what you are going to do or say. But you claim the promise. You know God wants you to be an instrument of comfort and so you say, "God, you promised that if I was obedient you would give me the words." You open the door, walk in, and minister in Jesus' name. How many times has God given you the power? If I didn't believe Philippians 4:13, I could not stand up to preach. So often after a hard week, my sermon looks so pitiful—such an inadequate offering to our great God. But you walk up those steps and say, "God I know you want your people to be fed and I know your Word is mighty, and I am going to offer up this pitiful little offering because many times in your Bible you did great things with tiny little gifts." Then people come and tell you how their lives were changed by that message. And you know that it was God's strength that sustained you.

I don't want my weakness to be an excuse for inactivity or cowardice. I can do everything God asks me to do with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power. I love the story that the great English pastor John Henry Jowett used to tell about a little woman in the English countryside. She was unsophisticated, poor, and uneducated, but she spent her life doing deeds of kindness and service for others. Do you know what the town put on her tombstone? "She did what she couldn't."

In what area of your life does God want you to do what you can't? Some of you have rough marriages and are thinking, "I just can't do this anymore." God wants you to do what you can't. Take a step in obedience, and

the strength of Jesus will sustain you. Some of you are tired, worn out, and frustrated over church problems. God wants you to do what you can't. God wants you to take steps of obedience, and he's going to sustain you in the weakness. The problem isn't "I can't." The problem is "I won't." That brings us to the third thing Paul learned: to be surrendered to God's will.

Paul learned . . . to be surrendered to God's will

You can't understand Paul's contentment without understanding his commitment. Paul was not preoccupied with his circumstances. Rather, he was preoccupied with how he could honor God in any circumstance. Go ahead, Philippi, throw the man in jail for liberating that teenage girl with that demon (Acts 16). He will sing praises at midnight. Go ahead, Rome, put him in jail. You know what you're going to have to do. You're going to have to chain him to a guard from Caesar's household. Now, who do you think was chained to whom? Have you ever noticed in chapter one that the Philippians want to know how Paul is doing? He doesn't even tell them. He says, "I want you to know how *the gospel* is doing." The man was abso-

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lutely surrendered. He said, "Now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:20–21). He said, "I am a servant—I am a slave—of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:1). Paul was absolutely sold out to Jesus Christ. In the four chapters of Philippians, Paul mentions Jesus fifty-one times in 104 verses. It's not hard to figure out the theme. It's like the little boy who went to Sunday School for the first time, and when he came out, his mother asked him what he thought of his teacher. He said, "Must be Jesus' grandmother, 'cause that was all she talked about."

Let's review the letter for a moment. In chapter 1, Paul says, "Let me tell you, Jesus is my purpose. Whether I live or die, he is going to be exalted in my body." He says he's going to be vindicated—but he doesn't know if

he's going to live or die. It does not matter, since Jesus Christ is his purpose. In chapter 2, he says, "Jesus Christ is my pattern. I'm going to have the mind of Christ. I'm going to empty myself and humble myself. I'm going to follow the one who went all the way to the cross for me." In chapter 3: "He is my prize. Everything else is rubbish. I want only Christ—so much so that I will strain every spiritual muscle so I can take hold of the one who took hold of me. This one thing I am going to do: I am going to reach out for Christ. He is my prize." In chapter 4: "Jesus Christ is my provision. He's going to give me the peace I need. And in his glorious riches, every need I have, God's going to supply."

Paul had discovered the serenity of a totally surrendered life. Loved ones, we're never going to be content until we're sold out for Christ. As long as our commitment is part-time Jesus and part-time job, part-time this and part-time that, we are never going to really find contentment. Paul's contentment wasn't really a big secret, if you knew him. You know what I think the secret was? I think it was this: Paul learned that he could rejoice in anything if Jesus Christ was everything. He could face whatever life had to throw at him if Jesus Christ was his all in all.

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