

# “All I Need”

*And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*  
Philippians 4:10-20 <sup>1</sup>

Some dozen years ago, Nathan and I backpacked for several days in the Colorado Rockies. Not being a very experienced backpacker, I took way too much stuff with me, and that extra weight, combined with my not being in particularly good physical shape, made hiking in the mountains rather a chore. Nathan has lots of pics of Dad lying down for a rest!

As some of you know from your own outdoor experiences, life gets down to basics pretty quickly when you're in the backcountry. The things I generally need for everyday life in the city make up a very different inventory than what I needed in the high country of Colorado. All of the electronic doodads with which I normally surround myself were useless in the wild.

I didn't need my laptop, because life no longer focused on sermon writing and email. I didn't need *Outlook*, because there were no appointments to keep. Cars were unavailable, and cell phones were useless. No, all of a sudden, life was only about water, food, clothing, and shelter . . . and avoiding bears.<sup>2</sup>

Jill and I are engaged in an inventory of a different sort these days. We're trying to figure out how to get the contents of my very-full condo merged with the contents of her very-full house, and we're wrestling with just what it is that we really *need*. This is not really the typical down-sizing, but it does bring up the questions of what items, out of a lifetime of gathering things, are really central to our sense of self and place. Many of you know what I'm talking about.

We Americans are famous for our “stuff.” We rent 1.7 billion square feet of self-storage to hang onto the stuff that won't fit into our houses. And we continue to spend money we don't have to buy things we don't need to impress people we don't know.

I was shocked—and you might be, too—to learn that the Mall of America, our “mecca of materialism,” had over 40 million visitors in 2011, compared to only 16.1 million at Disneyland and a mere 4.2 million at the Grand Canyon.<sup>3</sup> Can you believe it?

Our inordinate accumulation of things reminds me of one of the *Veggie Tales* episodes for which the punchline was rather similar: “**Happiness lies at the Stuff-Mart. All you need is LOTS MORE STUFF!**”

We hear a lot these days about foreign efforts to spread fake news and influence American politics. But has it ever occurred to you that there is a sophisticated army of home-grown marketers who work around the clock with a virtually limitless budget with the single goal of making you want more stuff?

You and I probably live in the most affluent society that has ever existed on the face of this planet. We have more money; we have more stuff . . . and we have less contentment. The truth is that if we're not *very* careful, even you and I will be tricked into believing into the not-so-subtle mantra of contemporary American culture: “How much is enough? Just a little bit more.”

Not only this, but in order to *pay* for all our stuff, we must now work so hard and so long that we're ruining our health, our marriages, and our families. The biggest problem facing our

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 2, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> If you'd like to take a similar adventure vicariously and hilariously, I recommend Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*, available on *Kindle*.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Moore, “Mall of America's mission at 20: attract millennials,” *Star Tribune*, 8.13.12.

culture is not COVID, huge as that is. The challenge that may be our biggest problem is a disease sometimes called *influenza*, and our Scripture this morning offers some important help for this condition.

Our journey through the Bible has brought us to Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, and today's text comes from the fourth chapter, as Paul is winding down the letter. It's an interesting letter, because Paul's relationship with the Philippian congregation was closer than with any other.

At the time he wrote this letter, it had been about ten years since Paul had established the Philippian church, and Paul was experiencing his first imprisonment in Rome. Paul had been jailed in Philippi, too, among other places.

You may remember that when Paul and Silas were first in Philippi, Paul cast a demon out of a young slave woman whose enslavers had been profiting from her disability. When they lost their source of income, the enslavers managed to have Paul and Silas whipped severely and locked up in the local jail.

In the middle of the night, Paul and Silas were bleeding . . . and singing hymns—imagine that!—when a great earthquake knocked open all the gates to the cells. When Paul and Silas and the other prisoners chose not to escape—imagine that, too!—this amazing turn of events led to the conversion of the jailer and his whole household (Acts 16:16-40). My point is that Paul and the Philippians had been through a lot together and were very fond of one another.

Although Paul often reminded the churches of their responsibility to provide for the material needs of the leaders who served them,<sup>4</sup> he was extremely reluctant to receive such support himself. Paul preferred to support himself through tent making so as to be able to preach without being concerned about how he might be heard by those with the purse strings.<sup>5</sup> Philippi was the only church from whom he was willing to receive any material support.

Although the congregation at Philippi was not well-to-do,<sup>6</sup> they took seriously their responsibility and their opportunity to assist in the spread of the Good News about Jesus, and they had found ways to support and care for Paul's needs on more than one occasion.<sup>7</sup> And of course, our support of ministries such as the Well Project in Africa or the Fire & Light Congregation in Reisterstown or the Route One ministry in Laurel help to spread the Good News in similar ways.

The occasion for Paul's letter appears to be the arrival of Epaphroditus as an emissary from Philippi with a gift for Paul's support while he was in prison and unable to support himself. That reality lies behind the particular verses we consider this morning. Let's look at them again.

v. 10 *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because once again you renewed your care for me. You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it.*

Apparently it had been some time since Paul had heard from Philippi, which is not altogether surprising. Paul moved around a lot in his missionary travels, not to mention his several experiences in jail and a disastrous shipwreck. There not being any GPS system to track his cell phone, the Philippians probably had had a difficult time finding out just where Paul was.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:3-14; 2 Thessalonians 3:9; 1 Timothy 5:17-18

<sup>5</sup> For example, 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

<sup>7</sup> See also Hebrews 13:3

But once they had found out where Paul was imprisoned, the Philippian church had sent Epaphroditus to bless and to encourage Paul, and he was clearly encouraged, because the word he used for “*renewed your care*” is the word that describes the transformation from winter to springtime. Paul was very grateful indeed to hear from his friends, and he wrote this letter to express his appreciation of their care . . . but he was also trying to avoid sounding like he expected material support:

vv. 11-13 *I don't say this out of need, for **I have learned to be content** in whatever circumstances I find myself. I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances **I have learned the secret of being content**—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. **I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.***

We should note that Paul was neither an ascetic who despised the material things of life nor a materialist who lived for such things. He could enjoy material blessings when they came to him, and he could get along without them when they weren't available. Drawing upon the inner resources which he possessed in Christ, Paul found meaning, purpose, and fulfillment independently of his outward circumstances.

Notice also that Paul said that he had *learned* to be content. Contentment doesn't come naturally to us, as I noted as we began. Paul had to *learn* how to do it. And if God could teach contentment to Paul, God can teach it to us as well.

At the same time, I need to point out that Paul was talking about contentment with external *circumstances*, not about contentment with internal *character*. The transformation of our character is a lifelong pursuit for those who follow Jesus.

There's nothing wrong with improving our material circumstances, so long as we do that with integrity, Christian values, and generosity toward the poor. But material circumstances are not what God is chiefly concerned about in our lives. In fact, I doubt that our material circumstances are even on God's short list. God's concern has to do with using our circumstances to develop the character of Christ in us and with deploying that character to push back the darkness in our world.

Further, it's important to note that Paul didn't say that he had learned contentment all at once, or that he had learned it cheaply. After all, much, if not most, of life's most important learning comes through trials and tribulations.<sup>8</sup>

While Paul knew a great deal about trials and tribulations, he was able to be content, even when he was in prison and potentially under a death sentence: “*I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.*” When Paul wrote those familiar words, he was not claiming to be a superhero. He wasn't saying that God would provide the strength to do absolutely anything. He was saying that God would provide the strength to do the things God wanted him to do.

Let me say that again: God gives us the time, the money, the abilities, the wisdom, and the strength to do . . . what God intends for us to do: “*For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, **so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago***” (Ephesians 2:10). My friend, if you want to be content, if you want to have a joyful heart, then focus on what God wants you to do, not on what you think you need to have. Like hikers in the mountains, we need to learn to travel light.

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

After all, the real point of our lives is not to live a long time. The point of our lives is not to make a lot of money. The point of our lives is not to be free of pain. The point of our lives is not to accumulate a lot of stuff. The point of our lives is not even to make a great contribution to humanity.

The point of our lives is to allow God to work in every single circumstance we encounter in such a way that we are gradually shaped into the Character of Christ. As we develop the Character of Jesus, we use that Character to bring about justice, mercy, and redemption in this old world, working together as the Body of Christ to establish a beachhead for the inbreaking Kingdom of God. That's the point of your life, and that's the point of my life.

And so in our text, Paul focuses on God's purpose even as he thanks the Philippians for their gift: "I didn't *need* it. I am content." But he goes on . . . .

vv. 14-17 *Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship. And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that is increasing to your account.*

Can you sense the fine line Paul is trying to walk? "*You did well in partnering with me*"; "*not that I seek the gift.*" Paul is pointing out that they have a greater spiritual need to give to the work of God's Kingdom than he has to receive such support. God doesn't need our money. The Kingdom of God is going to come whether we help or not. But God knows, and Paul knew, that **giving generously to God's work is how God keeps us free from becoming enslaved to stuff.**

Let me say again that it's not wrong to make money, so long as we do it justly, honestly, and compassionately . . . and so long as we do not worship and serve our stuff. That's the main reason why we tithe.

Giving ten percent of our income to God's work as the first check we write makes us worthy partners with the Philippian congregation and with Christian ministries of our own time—and it helps to keep us from the spiritual poverty of trusting in our bank accounts.

*The reason why we struggle with discontent is that we think that getting something we don't currently have is going to make us happy.* But if we're paying attention at all, we already know that nothing could be farther from the truth.

If the possession of material things really brought happiness and contentment, then this would be the happiest and most contented age in history, for never was there such material well-being as there is in Western civilization today. But rather than contentment, we've ended up with the most anxious and dissatisfied age in history instead.

Psychologist Patricia Dalton has pointed out that rampant consumerism, once confined to the Christmas season, has become a year-round affliction for many Americans. "We seem to have forgotten," she says, "that everything you buy owns you."<sup>9</sup> I think it was actor Jim Carrey who said, "I wish everybody could make ten million dollars, so they could know that that's not it."

An unknown author wisely noted that "Money will buy a bed but not sleep; books but not brains; food but not appetite; finery but not beauty; a house but not a home; medicine but not

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Dalton, "Christmas: The Growing Backlash against Greed," *The Week* (12.10.04).

health; luxuries but not culture; amusements but not happiness; religion but not salvation—and a passport to everywhere but heaven.” Having stuff is insufficient, but we still need stuff like food and clothing and shelter. That’s why the Philippian church sent this gift to Paul. And Paul responded . . . .

vv. 18-19 *But I have received everything in full, and I have an abundance. I am fully supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you provided—a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. **And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.***

Here Paul gives us another sentence that is frequently quoted and nearly as frequently misunderstood. The main point Paul has made in the verses we’ve considered this morning is not that we’ll never be hungry. It’s not that we’ll always be able to pay our bills. It’s not that we’ll never be sick. And it’s not that we’re going to be wealthy. *The central need Paul is writing about is **our deep need to learn how to be content**, to have a peaceful heart, to trust God implicitly, explicitly, and always.*

No person is rich to whom the grave brings bankruptcy. Neither is that person a fool who gives up that which cannot be kept in order to gain that which cannot be lost. That’s why Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian activist who became a Christian in a Siberian prison camp, thanked God that he was sent to the Gulag. “It was there,” he wrote, “that I discovered that the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, *but in the development of the soul.*”<sup>10</sup>

My friends, the treasures of this world, wonderful as they are, are always being eaten by the moths of depreciation, eroded by the rust of inflation, and stolen by the thousands of varieties of thieves who inhabit this earth. Paul reminded Timothy that “*we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out.*”<sup>11</sup> **So it is that when we die, our heirs will wonder what we’ve left behind; but the angel who bends over our dying form will be asking about what we’ve sent on ahead.**

And that brings us back to this first Sunday of a COVID August. In our last economic disaster ten years ago, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert noted that “Americans are smiling less and worrying more than they were a year ago, that happiness is down and sadness is up, that we are getting less sleep and smoking more cigarettes, that depression is on the rise.” That’s true today, as well.

Dr. Gilbert then observed that, in his opinion, our real problem is not financial—it’s not about having enough money, but about something else. Our problem, he thinks, is uncertainty. We don’t know what’s going to happen in the short-term future to our jobs, to our health, to our nation. “Our national gloom is real enough,” he said, “but our problem isn’t a matter of insufficient funds. It’s a matter of insufficient certainty.”<sup>12</sup>

When Paul wrote, “*My God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus,*” he was talking about our need for *contentment*, no matter what our circumstances. He was talking about our need to be able to *trust* God. And if we trust God, we can not only live with contentment, we can live with *certainty*. As Paul wrote in other letters . . . .

<sup>10</sup> Tim Bascom, *The Comfort Trap: Spiritual Dangers in the Convenience Culture* (InterVarsity, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> 1 Timothy 6:7

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Gilbert, “What You Don’t Know Makes You Nervous,” (9-21-09); *The Week* (6-5-09), p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. <sup>18</sup> So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

That's all I need to know, my friends.

*The LORD is my Shepherd.* That's all I need.

Amen, and Amen.

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A certain and firm place to stand: **The Solid Rock**

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

When darkness seems to hide his face,  
I rest on his unchanging grace;  
In ev'ry high and stormy gale,  
My anchor holds within the veil.

His oath, his covenant, his blood  
Support me in the whelming flood;  
When all around my soul gives way,  
He then is all my hope and stay.

When he shall come with trumpet sound,  
Oh, may I then in him be found;  
Dressed in his righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before the throne.

*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand,  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Edward Mote (1797-1874)

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<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us — <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

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<sup>13</sup> Romans 8:38-39

# con-tent-ment

Leader: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).*

**People:** ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).***

Leader: *Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income (Ecclesiastes 5:10).*

**People:** ***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 Timothy 6:6-8).***

Leader: *Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:9-10).*

**People:** ***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 all this through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:11-13).***

Leader: *The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake (Psalm 23:1-3).*

**People:** ***So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

**People:** **Thanks be to God!**