

Facing our Fears #5

He was standing by the window of his office several stories up on 5th Avenue in New York City contemplating whether he should step out onto the ledge and end it all when he saw a body drop down before him. At first, that suicide that he witnessed seemed to confirm the decision that he had been wrestling with. Many others were ending their lives signifying the hopelessness that they felt- why shouldn't he as well? After all, on this Friday in October, 1929- the day after black Thursday- all hope seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. The stock market had crashed, and his fortunes had vanished along with so many others. He had left Europe to make his fortune as a writer, and had done very well. He had made lots of money, gained many influential friends. These very friends had convinced him to invest all of his money in the Wall Street stock market to multiply his riches. His desire to amass a fortune led him to follow their advice and he had invested everything he had in stocks – the fastest growing, most volatile stocks. And his investments had mushroomed for a while. But now, he was completely penniless. 55 years old and completely broke. *Certainly it seemed to be the easy way out to jump from the ledge as so many others were doing and end it all*, he thought as he walked over to that office window.

But then he thought of his family back across the ocean. His wife was just recovering from an expensive operation and his 4 children and their families looked to him for leadership. And what had he lost anyway? It was just money. All of life was not composed of mere material things. No, he would not end his life this way. He would not allow his fear of poverty to take his life prematurely. He would go on to rebuild his life again even though this meant starting all over again as a middle-aged man.

So he did not leave the world by way of his office window that afternoon, but rather he went to his telephone and made an overseas call to his wife. He explained what had happened, that the family would have to move from their house and rent it out while living in a smaller apartment for a while in order to get their feet back on the ground financially. And then he worked for several months earning meager wages to pay for passage back across the ocean to join his family once again in England. Perhaps it was his courage under such a difficult time in his personal life that provided the foundation for a time when even greater courage and resolve would be needed in leading a nation. Perhaps it was the insight gained in facing the fear of poverty successfully that provided the pattern in his facing many other fears successfully as well. For the man who did not give up when the going was tough in 1929, was the same man who eventually got his feet back on the ground again, just in time to carry a nation upon his shoulders during some of its most difficult

years in all of its illustrious history. Happily, we will never know what the world might be like today if Winston Churchill had jumped from that office building on 5th avenue in 1929.

One of the greatest fears that many people have is the fear that they will lose all of their material assets. Many live in anxiety that they will one day become penniless paupers without any means to sustain their lives. This fear of poverty has intensified in many as they have watched their 401k's become 201k's during these past few months. Many fear that they will run out of money, that they won't have enough money to live on for the rest of their lives, as they have helplessly watched their financial assets be cut in half and the value of their homes plummet during this time of financial upheaval in our nation and in the world. It is a most interesting phenomenon that so many living in a nation that is without question the wealthiest in all of human history would be bound by this fear when even our social classes on government welfare programs are still in the top 10% in the world in financial prosperity. So many in our country have become imprisoned with the fear of financial loss. How can we be free from the fear of poverty in our lives?

The Apostle Paul could have easily become paralyzed by the fear of poverty as he sat in his Roman prison cell. At the time when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, he was under house arrest. Now being under house arrest was both good news and bad news for the one who was confined. The good news was that it was certainly considered the lesser of the Roman punishments and actually offered the prisoner more benefits than the more severe sentences. Under house arrest, the prisoner stayed in his own house under Roman guard. Under house arrest, the prisoner could entertain some guests from time to time so he had some contact with the outside world. Certainly Paul's situation at the time when he wrote this epistle during his first Roman imprisonment was far more comfortable than it would be later when he was thrown into the filthy, damp, rat-infested hole in the ground known as the Mammertine Prison. But the bad news was that Paul still was incarcerated and that he had to provide for all of his necessities. While house arrest allowed the prisoner to live in his own house, the Roman government didn't supply that house – the prisoner had to rent his own house. Nor did the Roman government provide food to eat or furnishings for the house or a clothing allowance. The prisoner had to supply all of these necessities for himself. So here was the Apostle Paul, without the ability to work because he still was in prison, but with the responsibility of providing for all of his material needs – a house, food, clothing, etc. Here was Paul completely dependent on resources outside of himself that would have been so contrary to his nature. In fact, the main reason for this letter to the Philippian church was to thank them for a financial gift sent to help the Apostle during this critical time of need in his life. We could certainly understand if Paul would have suffered some sleepless nights fretting over how he was going to pay the bills. But Paul not only evidences a freedom from the fear of poverty, he also

reveals a critical insight that he had learned that had helped to bring freedom to him in this area. Let's look together at this insight that can be summed up in one phrase – **the secret of being content**.

READ Phil. 4:11-12:

*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.*

Now this concept of contentment is foreign to many Americans today. Webster defines *contentment* as the state of being completely satisfied. The Greek term that Paul uses here has this very meaning. The word is *autarkes*. It is a compound term combining *autos* (self) with *arkes* (to be satisfied or have enough). So the one who is content is the one who is satisfied, the one who is able to say *I have enough*.

Now there are many reasons why so many have so much trouble with contentment today – but let me just highlight perhaps one of the major reasons.

Our whole economy is built on convincing us that we don't have enough. The economic system that we live in every day is often referred to as a consumerism economy. Basically, growth in our economy is dependent upon people buying and consuming the goods that are produced. The more goods that are consumed, the better our economy functions. Simply put, if people buy more things, then our industries are able to produce more products that in turn require more people to fill more jobs producing them, putting more wages in the pockets of more people, enabling more people to buy more products. This produces a cycle of economic growth. The converse trend is also true of course. And we are in a period now where we are experiencing this converse trend. When people buy fewer things, then our industries have to limit the amount of products that are made, requiring them to lay off people from their jobs, causing more people to have less money to buy the products that are made. So it is best for our economy for people to be buying products. The more that is purchased, the more growth in our economy.

The extent to which we have become a consumer economy is seen in how our country has faced this war in Iraq that we have been involved in for the past 5 years or so. Many of our senior saints will remember the encouraged response of the American people during World War 2. During World War 2, President Roosevelt encouraged the American people to conserve in order to help the war effort. Oil products were rationed, more clothing was homemade, car factories were turned into plants producing tanks so fewer cars were made and purchased – Americans were encouraged to demonstrate their patriotism by sacrificing and conserving. During the past years as our war in Iraq has been waged, the message has been quite different, hasn't it? Spend, travel, live your normal life has been President Bush's advise to us. Americans are now being encouraged to demonstrate their patriotism by traveling and spending. This change in message reveals

in part the extent to which we have traveled down the road of consumerism as a nation. And our journey down this road has brought many benefits to each of us. I think that we would all agree that the cumulative wealth that our nation has gained has multiplied exponentially during just the past few decades since World War 2. And our personal lives have benefited as well. Most of us enjoy more luxuries today than our parents did – and certainly far more luxuries than our grandparents did. So there is an up-side to our consumerism economy that makes it the envy of most of the nations and peoples in the world today. I think if given the opportunity most of our senior saints really wouldn't choose to go back to the *good old days* walking outside through the snow to the out house in the middle of the night. I remember doing that as a kid when we visited Grandma Rowland in Iowa. I prefer indoor plumbing.

But we also must be objective enough to recognize the fact that there is a down-side to our economic system. And this down-side can run contrary to the basic principle of godliness that Paul speaks of here in Philippians 4. In order for a consumer economy to be most effective, people can't be satisfied with what they have. In order for a consumer economy to be most effective, people need to always want the newer and more improved product. So companies spend a great deal of money and effort to make us feel dissatisfied. Advertising companies are hired in order to make us feel that our lives would be happier and more fulfilled if we just bought the products that they represent.

I remember the time when the single-bladed safety razor came out. What a blessing that was! No longer did men have to handle those double-edged razor blades that you had to fit into that razor that you screwed down risking cuts on fingers and chin as well. Now men could just snap that stainless steel blade in a cartridge in place and shave for weeks with a sharp blade. But it wasn't too long before an advertising campaign was launched to convince us that a single blade wasn't enough. That second blade was needed to cut the whisker before it could snap back to skin level again. *A two-bladed razor could actually cut whiskers below the skin level*, we were told. After several years of twin-bladed razors, the triple-bladed razor made its appearance. Now this defied all logic because if we were actually cutting our whiskers below the skin level as had been promised, what good was the 3rd blade? But advertisers convinced us that we needed 3 blade, didn't they? Now, if you want to get a really close shave, you have to have 5 blades in your razor. It makes us wonder if there isn't coming a day when men will be shaving with 10 blades in their razors. But this is the nature of a consumer economy.

Now we need to realize that the end result of this barrage of advertising that we are subjected to on a daily basis can be a spirit of dissatisfaction and covetousness that is cultivated and fed. But while dissatisfied people might be good for the economy because they are motivated to spend more money on newer products

to replace perfectly good but outdated appliances, this spirit of dissatisfaction runs directly against the grain of the contentment that God desires to give to His people.

In order to be content, we have to be able to say *I have enough, I am satisfied*. Now what is enough? What are the basic necessities of life? Paul speaks of what should bring satisfaction to us when writing to Timothy. READ 1 Timothy 6:6-12:

1TI 6:6 But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 9 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 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. 11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

What are the basic necessities of life according to the Apostle Paul? 1 Timothy 6: 8 gives them to us – if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. The word that Paul uses for clothing here means more than just the shirt and pants and shoes that we wear. It is a more general term indicating shelter or protection. It certainly would include the clothing that we wear but would also include a house or shelter. So what Paul is saying here to Timothy is that we should be content with sufficient food to eat and adequate protection from the elements of nature. These are what we need to survive.

The illustration that Paul gives us is so picturesque, isn't it? We brought nothing into this world and we will take nothing out of it. There are probably few more complete pictures of contentment than a newborn baby nestled in a mother's arms. What does that baby have that brings such complete contentment? The baby has food – his belly is full – and shelter – the security and protection of a mother from the natural elements. The baby is perfectly content. But then the baby grows. And the toddler now sees on T.V. that she will be happier and more fulfilled if she has the latest Barbie doll with all of the clothing outfits to play with. And then the toddler grows into an older child and realizes that he will be happier if he has a Play Station so that he can play video games. The child grows into a teenager and hears from friends that life would be a lot better with a cell phone and iPod. And so begins a life quest, a search for contentment in material things. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is never found – the contentment that once was found in a mother's arms is lost forever, never to be found again.

When the oil tycoon, J.D. Rockefeller, was once asked how much money he considered to be enough, he immediately answered, *Just one more dollar*. Here he was one of the richest men in our country. Here he had so much money that he probably never could have spent it all if he would have tried. Yet he was dissatisfied. He always wanted just one more dollar.

The Apostle Paul had learned the secret to true contentment. He had relearned what he instinctively knew as a child – that enough food and adequate shelter were all that he really needed. And God had promised him that he would always provide these for him so he didn't have to live his life enslaved by the fear of poverty. Paul undoubtedly recalled the words of the Lord Jesus Christ given in the Sermon on the Mount,

MT 6:25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

MT 6:28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin.²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matt. 6:25-33)

Now here again, there is a natural tendency that we all face that works against our contentment. That natural tendency can be summed up in this principle:

One generation's luxury becomes the next generation's necessity.

If you look at the map of our country, you will notice that the oldest and largest cities are all situated near bodies of water. The reason for this is obvious, isn't it? Water is a necessity for life, and waterways were a great means of transportation. We can just imagine the joy when the first pioneers found a large body of fresh water. What convenience to be able to just walk down to the lake or river with a bucket and get all the water they wanted. When these first settlers found a plot of land near fresh water, they thought that they had reached the Promised Land. They built a log house for shelter, planted crops and raised their families. And soon others had joined them making a community. But their children didn't want to make that trip down

to the river for water, so they found that they could dig wells so that water could be attained right there on their own property, within a few feet of their house. And then their children didn't want to have to go outside for water so they had the water piped into their houses so that it ran into sinks and toilets. With each new generation that was raised, what the former generation considered to be a luxury now became a necessity. And now, we just don't know how we could survive without automatic washing machines and dishwashers. How could we ever survive if we had to wash our dishes by hand?

There is great blessing in being able to wash our clothes and dishes automatically without having to take them down to the river and wash them there. But we must realize that with each luxury that becomes a necessity in our lives, we also have more to protect and more fear of loss. Life becomes far more complicated with each generation. We can become more shackled with debt and installment payments because we feel compelled to have what we have come to consider to be necessities in our lives.

Now what's the answer to this dilemma that we all face in the quest for contentment? Should we all just sell everything we have and go find a cabin by some river to live in? Of course not. This in itself wouldn't bring contentment to us. The answer is to learn the lesson that the Apostle Paul learned. You see, contentment is not found in material things and discontentment found in the lack of them. Remember, Paul admits that he knew what it was to be in need and he also knew what it was to have plenty. Paul had experienced times of abundance in his life. He had experienced times when he had enjoyed many luxuries, when the bank account was healthy, when he had a financial cushion. Paul was the same person who wrote to Timothy that God has given to us all good gifts to enjoy in life as long as we receive them with thanksgiving.

But Paul never forgot the basic elements of contentment. In the final analysis, if we have food and shelter, we can be and should be content. And God has promised to supply at least these to every single one of his children. Now God might give us more. If He does, we receive His good gifts with thanksgiving and commit ourselves to be good stewards of the resources that He has entrusted to us. But we all need to realize that we don't need the newest product in order to be content. So we resist the lies that we are being bombarded with all the time – we reject them as the enslaving deceptions that they are. And we realize that the luxuries that we have been given because of the sacrifices of our ancestors who have lived before us are just that – they are luxuries, they are not necessities. We could live without them and be perfectly content. For in the final analysis freedom from the fear of poverty is worth far more than any amount of material things that could be accumulated.

This lesson of learning to be content whatever our circumstances is a critical lesson to be learned in our lives, especially at this time of year when greed and avarice so often raise their ugly heads during this Christmas season trying to divert our attention from the celebration of God's precious gift to the human race.

Freedom from fears – that is one of the most valuable gifts that God offers to each of His children. Freedom from the fear of death, freedom from the fear of what others think about us, freedom from the fear of failure, and freedom from the fear of poverty. As we grow in our walk with the Lord and as we learn His truth and apply it to our lives, God allows us to experience the kind of freedom that only He can give – the truth that will set us free.