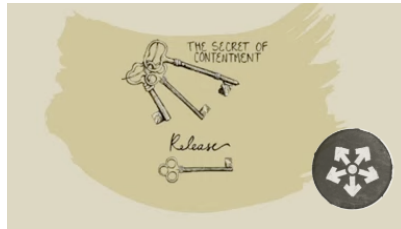


Phil 4:13-13
The Secret of Contentment:
Release

Rod Hagan
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I'm nervous today because one of the reasons I'm here today is what happened to me in the early 1990s. As a businessman, I had helped to start a church in Phoenix and the pastor, John, took a week off and asked me to preach. This was way out of my comfort zone; I had no experience with preaching. John offered to help me and I wrote up my first sermon and met with him ahead of the Sunday service to practice. While I preached, he madly scribbled through seven pages on a yellow legal pad. Obviously, I had a lot to work on...but actually, nearly everything he wrote was encouragement to me detailing the things he liked about what I was saying. So I'm nervous today because John is sitting here with you! He was someone who changed my life when he called me out of being a businessman into being a pastor. His example of raising me up as a leader has fueled my passion to raise up young pastors.

In this sermon series on **Phil. 4:10-13**, I was asked to speak about "Release." I didn't have a context for this and Eric explained that this was from Daniel's sermon that he didn't get to preach last fall because he was ill.

I have been reflecting on this topic: Releasing what we have to release in order to find contentment. Contentment on its own can sound boring: a guy on his couch drinking soda and eating shoe-string potatoes and watching basketball? This is me.

The thing is, we *like* our anxiety; it does something for us.

Phil 4:10

10 I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. **11** I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

12 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. **13** I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

I was driving to a prayer retreat in Scottsdale after being informed by my ENT that the hearing loss in my left ear would be permanent. I had had a virus in my inner ear and I thought the hearing loss was temporary but this was not the case. Furthermore, the doctor said they might have helped me if I had sought treatment earlier. I really struggled with this: doesn't God know that as a pastor, I needed to be able to hear?

As I was driving, the phone rang and it was Kelsey, a woman from the Village whose legs had been permanently disabled after a car wreck. She had just called to see how I was doing: I ranted with her about being a partially blind and deaf pastor. It was my life blood to listen to others: I complained to Kelsey and told her how awful it was that God would let this happen. She listened and offered me sympathy, but after a while I realized I was talking to someone who was in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. She said, "Loss is loss." You can go ahead and grieve and mourn but loss is loss. We live with loss. We live in the age of decay which is real. The mightiest among us will be brought low and it won't get better.

John 21:18 Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

My pastor friend John (mentioned above) has had two knee replacements recently: he said "Now that I'm done with those, things will get a lot better." I privately thought this was not true. Certainly at my age, this wasn't true but John is seven years younger.

I Cor 4:16-18

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. **17** For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. **18** 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.

Paul refers to his affliction as light and momentary. Really? Things weren't great for Paul: he was in prison. We live in a world of trouble and affliction. It reminds me of Jesus's promise:

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Did you think things would be great here? If you follow Jesus, you will have trouble. Isn't this great? What if he didn't promise this!

“But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Imagine if God said, “Give your life to me and all your troubles would be gone,” but, instead, they didn't go away?! Think of all the things you think you can control and imagine they went out of control! But Jesus speaks truth: he has overcome the world. The invitation is to release our burdens to him and then find his presence.

The closest I've ever been to Jesus is in my suffering. Fourteen or so years ago, the vertebrae in my neck were crushing the ulnar nerve and I lost the ability to use my L arm and was therefore in constant nerve pain. It was ruthless and didn't go away. I've dealt with muscle pain but this nerve pain was horrible. My doctor had said I needed to see a neurologist who said when I couldn't endure the pain any longer, he would do surgery. I figured I could make it as a tough guy. But then a year later, my GP said I was dying from pain. He called to schedule the surgery immediately.

During this time, we had to set up equipment every Sunday at the Lutheran church and carry it all in. Julie Swarzentroper is short and was carrying boxes and I wanted to help her and I couldn't. I was worried about what would happen to the Village and I was sitting in my hottub (my prayer tub) in pain and I don't know how this works but Jesus was seated across from me in the hottub and I saw him smiling...I got to share my pain and concerns and frustrations with him: It was amazing. He said he had it all taken care of. I never felt so close to the God of the universe.

Another time, as I was anxious and praying over my dad's impending death, there was a warmth in the room I couldn't explain. The next morning, he died peacefully. These are the places you find intimacy in your pain and struggles.

How do you find contentment in a relationship with God?

1. **Recognize you are helpless.** When my wife's grandmother died, she was in a hospital with tubes and beeps and I thought, “this is the way life ends.” But God said to me that **I also was on total life support!** You think you are all that and a bag of chips...but if God were to take O2 out of the air or suspend gravity, you're done. Recognizing our helplessness is easier said than done. We might say “I'll just control the things I can control and let the rest go.” This week, make a list of the things you think you control: analyze, reflect and think about them. Can you really control your job, your money, the care of your children, your car?? We celebrate our independence in N.

America but this isn't even close to biblical. **We are called to total dependence on God.** Let go of the things you think you can control and give them to God.

2. **Hang out with God.** Some of you are disciplined people: you set aside daily time to spend time with God, time when you meditate on scripture, etc. However, you are different than I am! You are insane and I'm jealous of you. I'm crazy ADD and I cannot find a routine at any time. I cannot even sleep at the same time ever! I might sleep at 8 p.m. or 2 a.m. or not at all or all day. The call is to hang out with God: **that** I can do! My ADD brain is flying and I sit in the hottub at 3 a.m. and I hang out with God and God tells me He loves me, more than anyone could. I can tell Him anything.
3. **Cry out to God:** yell at him! Don't be a stoic; it only gives you internal issues. You cannot bear it in your strength.

I Pet 5:6-7

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. **7** Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

This means cast your anxiety. God knows everything about what you are going through. By the way, "cast" means a fast ball, not a gentle toss. Throw it with all your might. Heave your anxieties. This is a hard thing for me to do.

Back to driving to the Scottsdale prayer retreat, I really yelled at God. I am needy: it's humiliating to be needy: this requires you to humble yourself.

Rejoice in suffering. Re-listen to Eric's message from last week: it's hard to rejoice in suffering.

I didn't think I could be a pastor without hearing or seeing: With this belief, I came to the Village and Emily Lewis was sitting in the healing chair. I walked over to pray for her and she started pouring her heart about what she wanted me to pray for. I realized I didn't know what she was saying because I couldn't hear her: I felt stupid and incompetent! Finally, I confessed to Emily that I didn't know what she was asking me to pray for. So I just prayed for her. At the end, she said I prayed exactly what she needed. God can make a rock a pastor: **he can do anything. He doesn't need me to hear in order to be a pastor.** He is the one who thinks about all of us all the time. We can count it all joy....lacking in nothing.

God is working in you!

We rejoice...character produces hope...God's love has been poured out and given to us.

Isn't this awesome?! God is working in you and will use you to do his purposes and in this, you will find his presence in the richest way.

I finally arrived at the prayer retreat. We were assigned a passage to read and meditate on during the night. I got "Mary's Song." God, do you know what you did to Mary? A poor pregnant girl who faced the possibility of being stoned to death? Isn't there some other way? And why did you take my dad from me? You are mean: why are you this way? Why are you tormenting me? I decided at 4 a.m. I couldn't attend a prayer retreat. I got in my gray Buick and left to go home. The coordinator saw me and stopped me. I rolled down my window and he said at this pivotal moment, if I left the retreat, I would leave everything: my family and my faith. He told me to get out of my car and go to the chapel across campus and thank God for something every time my foot hit the ground. Each step of the way over there, I had to thank him for something. Twenty steps in, I was in tears. God said to me, "You don't know why I took your father: I brought him to a place where he could breathe. I didn't leave you: I brought men into your life to care for you. I'm your daddy, your papa, your father." That is where intimacy is: don't be afraid to shout it out and rejoice in your suffering. Don't be afraid to ask God the hard questions. You are going to find the beauty of the presence of God and that is where contentment is: it's not in a job, a marriage, your money, or your children. NO! It's intimacy with God.