

7 Learn the Secret

“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.” (Philippians 4:11-13)

A few years ago, a movie came out entitled, “Pleasantville.” Nothing changed in Pleasantville. Everything remained the same. Everyone was happy. Same routines, same daily schedules, and the same cycle of events day by day. Slowly, through a chain of events, things began to change. The change was very unsettling to most as they did not know how to respond to it.

We do not live in Pleasantville. Life changes rapidly. More often than not, too rapidly. Years ago, the world around us embraced stability as something to be valued. That too has changed. Today, the world values change. Remaining the same as we were yesterday is considered a weakness. Doing things the same way we used to is a sure way to failure in the technology and life style of today’s world.

The problem I find in all of this is adjusting to change. Just about the time that I finally catch up to the changes around me, things change again. I was just beginning to catch on to VCR’s—at least how to change the clock on them—and then out came DVD’s. I was just beginning to catch on to DVD’s, and out came the MP3’s. There is no end. Change in technology is one thing. Change in my personal life is another. Life can be such a yo-yo at times. Calm one moment and chaotic the next. Exciting one day and exasperating the very next. How does one adjust to the sudden changes around us and within? We don’t live in Pleasantville.

However, this very characteristic of our world is what God can use to open the doors of mission before us. Our mission is to enter into the lives of people torn by change and offer them a changeless Christ. His Word assures us, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).*

This was the secret that Paul discovered through the many changes in his life. He knew what it was like to experience the highs and the lows of life. He knew what it was like to have food on the table and what it was like to wonder where tomorrow’s supper would come from. He knew what it was like to be respected by many and what it was like to be reviled by others. Paul did not live in Pleasantville either, but he did live in contentment. His secret: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).*

This is not mere positive thinking where we say with the little red engine in a children’s story, “I think I can, I think I can.” This is a confidence that is rooted in Christ, not me, who enables me to accomplish what He calls me to do. The changes of life can be overwhelming, flooding over us and filling us with despair and fear. The disciples knew all too well the unsettling nature of change. Anticipating the death of Jesus, their lives were soon to be turned upside down. Listen to what He says to them and to us, *“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1).* These words, “let not your hearts be troubled” are a command of Christ. When the spirit is

troubled and we find ourselves worrying, there is something we can do: *“Believe in God; believe also in Me.”* The way to stop worrying in the midst of change begins when we stop focusing on ourselves. That is what worry is all about. When I worry, I focus on me. When my heart is directed to focus on Him, I worship. In the midst of changes, Jesus invites and even commands us to focus on Him, the one who never changes. A Lutheran prayer book from 1862 has this prayer:

“Let not the world ensnare our hearts by its attractions nor overburden us by its cares. Enable us to abandon all hope of lasting consolation from created things, and to esteem nothing honorable, nothing pleasing, nothing great and worthy the affections of our souls, but thee, the Lord, and that which directly tends to the improvement of our state in thee. Lord, thou art the chief among ten thousand, and the one altogether lovely. It is only by abiding in thy truth that we can taste the consolations of grace or the hopes of glory. Wherever we look for support out of thee, we find nothing but weakness and distress. If thou dost not strengthen, illumine, deliver and preserve us, the friendship of mankind can give no consolation, the strength of the might bring no support, the counsels of the wise and the labors of the learned impart no instruction, the treasures of the earth purchase no deliverance, and the most secret places afford no protection. Thou, Lord, thou alone art the supreme, the essential and final good, the perfection of life, and light, and love. Oh grant us thyself; may we ever abide in thy doctrine; then shall we have both the Father and the Son, and then shall we be able to do all things through Christ who strengtheneth us” (Family Prayer, pp. 146-147.)

As we learn His Word, we not only learn to revere Him, but we learn the secret to a contented life—Jesus. In Him we too can

say, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

One year after that prayer was written, Abraham Lincoln would offer his own testimony as to how he or a nation could find strength in the midst of change. Ponder his words of March 1863:

“It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord. We know that by His divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world. May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end our national reformation as a whole people? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have daily imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us” (Lincoln Proclamation Appointing National Fast Day, March 30, 1863, Washington, DC).

It is as if those words could have been written today about the world we live in. Self-

sufficiency is a cancer of the soul. It creeps in, robbing us of the very thing that the world hungers for—contentment.

Take a close look at the commercials on television or in print and ask what they are selling. Beyond the cars and clothes and comforts of life, they promise something they cannot deliver—contentment. We chase after this most of our lives, believing that if we buy this or invest here, that in the end we will be satisfied and secure.

One thing and one thing only can offer an abiding contentment—Jesus Christ. A few years ago, a dear friend of mine was diagnosed with lung cancer. The future looked bleak. He was very anxious. As I sat with him in the hospital, I told him, “I have no idea whether you will make it through this or not. I cannot promise you that you will beat the cancer. What I can promise you is what God promises:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance,

character and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:1-5).”

I assured my friend that while I did not know the outcome of his battle with cancer, I knew by God’s promise that God could use the suffering to bring about perseverance and character and, ultimately, hope. All the while, God would pour into his heart truckloads of love by the Holy Spirit. I then asked him, “Is this enough?” God be praised, I saw in his eyes at that moment and through the rest of his battle with cancer contentment and peace that was unshakeable. There are certain things that cancer cannot do, and one of those is to rob us of the strength of Christ.

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This is the secret to contentment. This is our message to a world no longer living in Pleasantville.

Prayer: Father, may I in the hours that lie ahead, keep close to mind and heart that I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me. On His strength alone, not mine, may I rely and at the end of the day, may the glory be yours alone. **Amen.**

Challenge: Identify one area in your life where you frequently worry. Ask God to help you to rely on His strength, not yours. Focus your prayer and thoughts on what He is able to do.

Scripture Reading: Romans 5

From the Book of Concord: “Now although untested people despise this teaching completely, it is nevertheless the case that it is very comforting and beneficial for timid and terrified consciences. For the conscience cannot find rest and peace through works but by faith alone, when it concludes on its own with certainty that it has a gracious God for Christ’s sake, as Paul says (Rom. 5:1): ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God’ (The Augsburg Confession – German Text, Article XX: Faith, p. 54.15-16).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Learn and/or a thought you would like to explore further.