

The Apostle's Secret of Sufficiency In Christ

Scripture Reading: Phil. 4:10-13; 3:9

LEARNING THE SECRET

In chapter one, Christ is the life for us to live; in chapter two, Christ is the pattern for us to follow; and in chapter three, Christ is the goal and the prize for us to pursue. Now in chapter four, Paul says, he had learned the secret of how to be content in all circumstances, both to be filled and to hunger. (v. 11-12) He then testifies that he can do all things in Him who empowers him (v. 13). So Paul had learned the secret of sufficiency, of satisfaction and of contentment through the empowering Christ. Christ is the secret and also the power for us to enjoy. In doing many things we must first know the secret and also have the power, the strength, the energy, to accomplish those things. We may talk a great deal about the book of Philippians, but not know the secret of experiencing Christ. We do not have the key, we cannot open the door to the experience of Christ.

When Paul says, "*I have learned the secret*" he is saying he has been "initiated." The metaphor is that of a person being initiated into a secret society with instruction in its rudimentary principles. (v.12) Paul had not only learned a secret; he had been initiated and had learned certain basic principles. Paul was saying that a church, which is rather mysterious, has certain basic principles. After Paul was converted to Christ, he was in a sense initiated into the church life. This means that he was instructed in the secret of how to enjoy Christ, how to take Christ as life, how to live Christ, how to magnify Christ, how to gain Christ, and also how to have the church life. These are the rudimentary principles of the church life. Although the church, the Body of Christ, is somewhat mysterious, the church definitely is not a secret society. On the contrary, the church is a bright city set on a hill. Furthermore, the church is open to all who are willing to come. But because the church has a mysterious aspect, there is the need of a spiritual initiation in order to learn the principles of the church life.

The basic principles of the church life are altogether different from the basic principles of the world. We may know all the rudimentary principles of the world and yet not know anything of the church life. Thus, when we are saved and come into the church, the Body of Christ, we need to be initiated by learning certain basic principles. The secret of the Body is to take Christ as our life, to live Christ, to pursue Christ, to gain Christ, to magnify Christ, and to express Christ. These are the basic principles of the church, the Body of Christ. As one who had been initiated into the Body, Paul had learned the secret. Many Christians today have not been initiated into the church life in such a way. Although they have been converted to Christ, baptized, and have joined a denomination, they have not been initiated into the Body of Christ. They have not learned how to take Christ as life, how to live Christ, how to take Christ as their pattern, and how to count all religious, cultural, and philosophical things as refuse in order to gain Christ. In contrast to Paul, they have not learned the secret of experiencing Christ. Paul had been initiated both into the proper Christian life and into the proper church life.

APPLYING THE SECRET

According to 4:10-13, Paul applies the secret he has learned to his circumstances in prison. As a prisoner in Rome, he was far away from many of the believers and from many churches which had been raised up through his ministry. No doubt, during his imprisonment, he suffered both psychologically and physically. He was in need of a material supply. It certainly was not easy for him to be in prison under such circumstances. According to the record in the New Testament, when Paul was journeying in Europe for the ministry, the church in Philippi was unique in taking care of Paul's material needs. (4:15-16) The Philippian believers had opened a heavenly account with Paul and were known for the way they had supplied his material needs. However, when Paul was in prison, he had certain physical needs. Because Paul was still human, he expected the Philippians to continue remembering him. But for a period of time, the Philippians did not do this. (v.10) For some time, the Philippians' thinking of Paul had been dormant; it might even have withered. Their thinking for him certainly was not blossoming. But when Paul wrote this verse, winter had passed, and spring had come. He could now say that their thinking for him had begun to blossom anew.

It was sovereign of the Lord that the material supply from the Philippians had stopped temporarily. Yes, they had opened an account with Paul, but what is the use of an account if no deposits come in? This time, when there was no supply, was a time of testing for Paul, a time for him to be abased. No doubt, when Epaphroditus came with the supply, making a large deposit into the heavenly account, that was the time for Paul to abound. Therefore, in verse 12 he could declare, "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound." He knew both how to be humbled and be in lowly circumstances and also how to live with abundance. In these verses Paul indicates that he was in want; he needed a material supply. When he was in want, he was abased. In the presence of the jailers, the guards, and even the whole praetorium he was in want and was abased. Perhaps others said of him, "Poor prisoner! No one takes care of him, and nothing comes as a supply to him." Then suddenly Epaphroditus arrived with a gift from the Philippians. Before Epaphroditus came, Paul was abased. After he came with the supply, Paul was abounding. But he did not know how long this abounding would last. He knew that probably the time would come when once again he would be in

want. Knowing that his circumstances could change again very soon, Paul said that he knew not only how to be abased and how to abound, but also how to abound and how to be in want.

Our circumstances are always sovereignly arranged by God. Sometimes His sovereign arrangement puts us in a low situation, and at other times in circumstances that are quite good. Paul realized that even though the supply had come from the church at Philippi, his circumstances were still in the hand of God. In God's sovereign arrangement, the Philippian church did not send the supply until now. Perhaps they had the heart to send him a gift, but not the opportunity until Epaphroditus could come. When the opportunity was available, the Philippian believers sent a gift to Paul. This supply brought him out of the condition of humiliation, want, and abasement and set him on a peak. But he did not know how long that would last. Nevertheless, he had the assurance that he knew both how to be abased and how to abound, and how to abound and how to be in want. He had learned the secret; he had been initiated into the basic principles of Christ and the church.

DOING ALL THINGS IN HIM WHO EMPOWERS US

Paul was a person in Christ (**2Cor.12:2**), and he desired to be found in Christ by others. Now he declared that he could do all things in Him, in the very Christ who empowered him. This is an all-inclusive and concluding word concerning his experience of Christ. It is the converse of the Lord's word concerning our organic relationship with Him in John 15:5: "Apart from Me you can do nothing." To be so empowered is to be made dynamic inwardly. Christ dwells in us (**Col.1:27**). He empowers us, makes us dynamic, from within, not from without. By such inward empowering Paul could do all things in Christ. In 4:13 we find the secret to which Paul refers in verse 12. Here Paul says that he is in Christ, in the One who empowers him. In chapter three Paul testified that he pursued Christ in order to gain Him and be found in Him. Now in 4:13 Paul says that he is in Him. In Christ as the One who empowers him Paul could do all things. He could say, "Christ is my secret of sufficiency. As long as I have Him and as long as I am in Him, I can do all things in Him." To appreciate Paul's word we need to join the phrase *in Him* in 4:13 to the same phrase in 3:9. In 3:9 Paul aspired to be found in Him; in 4:13 Paul declared that being in Him he could do all things in the One who empowered him. This is the secret. Have you seen the secret? Do you have this secret? Our circumstances may change. In certain circumstances we may abound, and in others we may be abased. But whether we abound or are abased, the enjoyment of the Lord is the same.

When he was in want and was tempted to worry about his situation, he applied this secret. Then, in his experience, this secret eliminated his worry. Therefore, he could have the boldness to testify that he knew both how to be abased and how to abound. The very fact that Paul knew how to be abased indicates that he experienced feelings of abasement. He knew what it was to have worry and anxiety in times of suffering. But at those times he applied the secret of the indwelling Christ. He applied the very Christ in whom he could be found. This Christ is real, living, near, available, and prevailing. This was the Christ who was Paul's secret. Using a Stoic term, Paul could say that he had learned, in whatever circumstances he was, to be content. Although Paul used a Stoic word, he was by no means a Stoic. On the contrary, he was a person in Christ, and he experienced Christ and applied Him in all circumstances. Paul could be content not because he had been instructed by the Stoics, but because he applied the very Christ in whom he lived and in whom he remained. This Christ became Paul's secret.

The Christian life does not stay on one level; it has many ups and downs. It is normal to be up and down, down and up. It is not normal to remain on one level and not experience ups or downs. Likewise, it is not normal to experience day and not night. Whose spiritual day is two hundred hours long? However, our account should be balanced: the ups should equal the downs, and the debit should equal the credit. When we have such a balance in our experience, we are normal. According to the Lord's sovereign arrangement, we need both the ups and downs in order to experience Christ. Thank the Lord for all the valleys through which He has taken us. But with the valleys, there have also been hills. The Christian life is not one vast plain; it is a land with many hills and valleys. It is by the hills and valleys that we experience Christ.

In verse 12 Paul uses the puzzling expression "in everything and in all things." What is the difference between "everything" and "all things"? We experience one thing at a time. We cannot experience all things at once. Therefore, according to our experience in time, it is everything. But after a long period of experiences has gone by, the everything becomes all things. We need to recall that the book of Philippians was written according to experience. In time we experience one thing after another. This fact is denoted by the word *everything*. But after a prolonged period of experience, the everything becomes all things. The words *in everything* refer to a particular time when we experience a certain thing of the Lord. The words *all things* refer to a broad range of experiences over a period of time. Paul could say that both on a particular occasion and on all occasions, both at a certain time and throughout the course of his life, he had learned the secret. Paul experienced Christ moment by moment. On the one hand, he experienced Christ in particular things at particular times. On the other hand, he experienced Christ in all things and at all times.