

How are you? I just got back last Thursday from Africa. The Lord's really been teaching me a lot, and I've been processing a lot about what that has looked like for me personally. And I want to share it with you. The trip in and of itself was interesting. It was hard. It was hard, it was good and I'm glad to be home. Those are my three bullet points. There were five of us that went. There was Matt Elkins, a staff guy who is an associate pastor here, Jeremy Pace, who is our director of missions and then two elder candidates: Dick McFarland and John Wright. The five of us headed out February 2 on a journey through Africa. And our reason for going was to learn from a church in Sudan. This church has had a tremendous impact on the southern region of Sudan, and we wanted to learn from them. We wanted to encourage and spend time with some of our covenant members who are in Ethiopia and pray with them and be with them and just kind of have this ministry of presence with Shane and Alison Smith and their three kids. And we wanted to go to Zambia and see what the Lord might have for us as a church in Zambia. So that was the purpose of this trip. And it was hard. There were so many things that just assaulted me from all different angles whether it be sights, sounds, smells, experiences, things that I've seen now that I can't unsee. And that's a good thing for me to have gone through this. Travel wise, we were either in an airplane, driving somewhere or waiting in an airport the equivalent of ten-twelve hour days. It just felt like that's what we did. We were on the road or in the air. For nine nights in a row, we slept in a different bed. And most of those days, we would wake up not knowing exactly where the next night's sleep was going to come from. It wasn't like we were wondering around the bush or anything; we were just dealing with some natives and they would say, "No, we've got it tonight. Don't worry." And we found a bed and made do, and it turned out to be okay. It was just different.

There were a lot of experiences that I'm still processing through. When we landed in Sudan, we landed on a dirt strip. There's not pavement for the airplane, and there's someone hoeing the dirt to level it out for the airplane. And then the other employee was keeping the goats off of the runway. I'm just like, 'iPod in. Dear Lord, land this plane.' And He did. And we get there and get in the car and drive straight to an orphanage. And on the way to the orphanage, we have to stop because they have a rope across the main road and they're demining the road. You see, for the past 21 years Sudan has been in an unbelievable civil war between the north and the south. And the north has planted mines all throughout the south. And so they were demining the road, which I was grateful for because I was about to go down that road. It was just a new experience; I've never had to do that on Morris Road. It just hasn't happened. But when we got to the orphanage, there was a guy on crutches, a boy named John who's missing his right leg and the front of his face is completely blown off because he stepped on a mine. It was just reality.

We went to a market in Sudan, and there was a smell that I wish I could forget as I was walking down a corridor to get into this enclosed open-air market. We turn the corner and there's just a wave of rotten fish that's for sale. It's out on the table, and it's woven together. It's raw fish, it's rotting fish and it's for sale. People are going to eat this. I thought I was going to lose it.

I called my wife at one point on a satphone. That was my only Jack Bauer moment when I was on a satphone in Africa. And so I'm on the phone and she's saying, "It's okay. I'm adjusting here." She's staying with her parents with the kids and is just getting used to the house and everything. And I have this bitterness in me. I'm like, "Oh really? It must be real rough in Highland Shores. How are you doing it, Nat?" I just had like this bitterness in me. At this moment when I'm on the phone with her, she's adjusting to Highland Shores and I'm looking out over a river with thirty naked Sudanese who are looking back at me, because they think I'm as weird as I think they are. So we're just staring at each other and I'm

like, "You know what, Nat. I'm actually adjusting to some things here too. I can relate to where you are." And I just had that in me. It's kind of frustrating.

A sound that I won't forget was on the night that I went to bed in the Sudan exhausted. At 9:15, the generator shuts off, and I wake up jet lagged at 10:45. I was up. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'll just turn over." I was up. And I laid there asking and begging the Lord to either take me home (as in kill me) or let me go to sleep. And as I'm pleading with Him to do one or the other, I'm hearing tribal music from the village we were staying in. There were people singing, chanting and pounding on drums. And it went all through the night.

It just came at me from every angle. When we got to Ethiopia, the day that we got there they said, "Yeah, we actually had to spear a baboon." Why? "Well it was charging at us." This is in front of their house where the Smiths are living. They can't let their little one Moses run around and play because there are about 40 baboons that are right around their little area that will attack him because he's little. That was different for me. Seeing five little babies whose mom had died in childbirth and now they're in this little care house. And it was like the pictures that you've seen with the flies on their faces. You couldn't get them off enough. There's tuberculosis. They're coughing. They're babies; they're infants. It's just the sight of it all. And I'm trying to process what this means.

I walked from Zambia into Zimbabwe, I stayed for five minutes, turned around and walked out. I just wanted to say that I've been there. And on the way, someone was selling a one hundred trillion dollar bill. I thought it was monopoly money. It's not. The Zimbabwe monthly inflation rate has passed the 50% mark, which has passed the hyperinflation rate. That was in March of '07. In January of '09, the bankers of Zimbabwe issued the first one hundred trillion dollar bill. Stephen Hanke, a senior fellow at Johns Hopkins who works with the Cato Institute, says it's gotten much worse. He writes, "The latest official figure from the RBZ [which is the bank in Zimbabwe] dating back to July of '08 put the year on year inflation rate of nearly 231,000,000%." Think about inflation of 231 million percent. In Zimbabwe, the prices of goods double every 24.7 hours. Let that sink in. Milk, bread costs a dollar today, two tomorrow, four the next day, 8 the next, 16, 32, 64... How can you do survive? They're not. Their economy is not a recession, it's not a depression. It's broken. It doesn't work. They have a cholera outbreak right now. Four thousand people dead, 80 thousand people infected. Do you know why? Disease is everywhere because water is stagnant everywhere. There is no economy to move any industry. So what is their president Mugabe doing to help out? Yesterday he threw himself a birthday party that cost \$250 thousand.

So how do we reconcile all of this? I eventually got on a plane and came home after touching down in seven countries and just going all over the place. And walking out to my family and my friends and people on staff that were there and embraced me and hugged me, it was unbelievable. I prayed for a sweet reunion, and it was. I got in the car, I drove home, I took a hot shower, I washed my hair with shampoo, which I hadn't done in seventeen days. Then I put conditioner in my hair and rinsed it. Then I used my loofah and I scrubbed. I could have stayed there for 45 minutes. I just had hot water. I dried off, put on clean clothes and then we do what all right and good thinking people do, which is eat Mexican food. So we had queso and hot sauce and fajitas and water with ice in it. I could eat the ice and eat vegetables. I hadn't eaten vegetables. All of these things, I just ate and ate, which wasn't that much because I think I lost like seven pounds over there. My stomach shrunk. I ate and went home that night, and it was dark. I turned on the light, I turned off the light, I turned on the light. I set the thermostat on cold and flipped the fan on. I got in bed with clean sheets and I just went to bed. I woke up and turned on the TV the next day. HDTV, I watched it. And then I drove to the men's retreat that Friday night. I drove down there with some friends, and there were no donkeys, cows or people there that could cross the road at any moment. There was no oncoming traffic that would swerve over and swerve back. And it took us just about an hour to get down there where the travel time in Africa would have taken maybe three or four hours. I came home and I went to bed. I woke up in the morning and there was food there. I had a choice and if I didn't have a choice, we could

have gone to Corner Bakery and gotten anything that we wanted. Hot, cold, it was there and we had money to pay for it. So as I'm reentering into this world, I'm trying to make sense of all the dissidence that was happening in me when I was in that world.

So how do I relate? Because the frustrating thing for me was when I was looking at the orphans. I didn't have enough money to give them, I didn't have enough water to quench their thirst or enough food to satisfy their bellies. So the question that haunted me while I was there and has been haunting me since I got back is this. Do I really believe that Jesus is enough? Do I really believe that He is sufficient? Because if I do, then I really have something to give, I have something to tell them, some hope to pass on. If not, I just don't ever want to go back if I don't believe that. If I do, then I have a reason. If I don't, then I'm staying here. But then the same question haunts me here. In light of all that is Dallas around me (and it's all me, I'm not immune to it), do I believe that He is enough? Because I have all the trappings of false securities that are telling me that I need this and this is what I need and this satisfies. And yet the question for the one in abject poverty is the same question for the one who lives in abundance: Do I believe that He is sufficient, that He is enough? Will my circumstances become irrelevant to the fact that my confidence is rooted in the person and the work of Christ? So it's been a hard lesson.

I want to look in Philippians 4. We'll be in verses 10-13. The apostle Paul wrote this book to the church at Philippi. This was a church that he loved and he had deep affection for. In fact, in this letter he uses the word "rejoice" or "joy" more than any other time in any other book he writes. This church was the first church that Paul started when he was in Europe. We read about it in Acts 16 when he goes over and they go by the river where there's a crowd gathering and seeking. And he preaches the gospel and it says that there was a woman named Lydia and the Lord opened her heart that she might believe, and she believes. And then they go on, he continues to preach. And then he casts out a demon from a little girl who was possessed. That causes him to be put in prison with Silas. They're in prison in the stocks with their hands and feet bound, they're singing hymns and the Lord shakes the prison, it releases them and they stay. The jailer is about to kill himself because he thinks that everyone's leaving and he says, "No no no, we're still here." They preach the gospel to the jailer, he believes and he and his household are saved. This is how the church started in Philippi. This is a church that Paul deeply loves, and this is a church that he tells these promises to that you and I hang on to, where he says, "What the Lord has started in you, church, He's going to bring to completion."

This is where he writes about the wonderful hymn of Christ where he says that Jesus didn't consider Himself equal with God so He made Himself nothing, and He was obedient to death, even death on a cross, that God might highly exalt Him and give Him a name that's above every name, that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is this book. Philippians 3, "That I might know Him and the power of His resurrection, that I might share in the sufferings of my Lord, that somehow I might attain to the resurrection of the dead. . .and I press on for these things." This is what he's writing to the church about, that the church might progress, that the church might grow in maturity. And growth in maturity, Paul says, is looking like Christ, the One who humbled Himself and made Himself a servant as He demonstrates His love for people.

And at the end of the letter, he's writing a word of thanks, and that's where we're going to pick it up. In Philippians 4:10, he says this, "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." The thing that's interesting here is that Paul is saying that contentment is not contingent on circumstance, but it's rooted in your confidence in Christ. The more confidence you have in Christ is sufficient, He is who He says He is, He does what He says He does, then circumstances become irrelevant, and that your hope, your

focus, your peace and your contentment are satisfied in Him and Him alone. And the first thing Paul's going to say is that contentment for himself is learned. It's not something that just happens. You don't just come to faith and all of a sudden go, "Put me anywhere." He's saying that this is a learned response. He says, "I rejoice in the Lord greatly." He starts off by saying, "My joy is in the Lord. The object of my joy here is the Lord, the basis for which I have joy is the Lord and I rejoice greatly that you have concern for me." Notice Paul's not talking about a gift here. He's not talking about a material need that was met. He's saying, "What has brought me joy is the fact that you showed concern for me." And he says, "It was revived again in you." It's idea of flower coming forth and blooming. Paul says, "Whatever has happened, the Lord has stirred up in you a concern for me, and that has moved me to joy." But just to clarify, Paul says in verse 11, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." He has learned it. This is the word to mean "to instruct." "The Lord has instructed me that wherever I am, I have been taught that contentment is rooted in Him." Paul is saying, "It started for me at conversion and has continued through all of my experiences." The sum total where he stands as he writes this letter is this: He is enough. "Wherever I find myself, I can say this with confidence. He's enough."

And he goes on in verse 12 to say this, "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." It's a different word there. The word that he uses here as "learned" borrows from these mystery religions where there was this kind of rite of passage or this rite of initiation. Paul's using that word to say, "The Lord has initiated into context in which I can learn this. I've been initiated into seasons of abundance, into seasons of need, into seasons of hunger, into seasons of plenty. The Lord, by His grace, has initiated me into these learning contexts that I might know that He's sufficient. I have learned that wherever I find myself, in whatever context, in whatever situation or circumstance, He is enough." That's powerful. Contentment is learned. It's learned through instruction, through you being taught through the Spirit that He is enough and it's learned through these initiations, these seasons. And surely you've walked through these, right? You've walked through these where you've suffered loss and you've had to say, "As painful as that loss is, in it He is enough. He is sufficient." And hopefully, if you walk in a season of blessing, if you walk in a season of abundance, you can say, "God is good. Every good and perfect gift comes from above. He is enough. All of the trappings that are around me, they're false securities that bring a false contentment. He alone is the anchor for my soul." So contentment is learned.

And then he goes on and says that contentment is not contingent on your circumstance. Here's the interesting thing. He says, "I have learned how to be brought low, how to live in plenty." What's interesting here is Paul speaks about a difference in knowing the what and the how. For instance, you could say this, "I know what it's like to live in poverty" vs. "I know how to live in poverty." "I know what it's like to have affluence," vs. "I know how to live for Christ in affluence." There's a difference. What I've learned is how to live with Christ here, but I have not learned it in Africa. I just haven't. I know what it's like there, I know what the situations is like, but I have not learned how to cope with the sufficiency of Christ there yet. Do you know who is getting to learn that? Shane and Allison and their family. As they left their Flower Mound two-story, 3,000ft² home and are now living in 250ft², as they're leaving washers and dryers and now boiling water to cook, clean and do their laundry, as they're spearing baboons outside their house, they're learning this by God's grace that He's enough. They're learning how to live in that context. And in that context, they're learning, "Wherever you put me, Christ is sufficient." And it's interesting, Paul doesn't give a preference. He doesn't say, "I know what it's like to live in abundance and I know what it's like to live in need, and give me abundance." He doesn't say that. And he's not a masochist either. He doesn't say, "Give me poverty." He's saying, "It's just irrelevant to the reality of life. The reality of life is Christ and Him crucified. That's what I'm after. Circumstances are where I just happen to be." That's interesting. I mean, that's hard for me. I'm not there yet, but by God's grace He's initiating me into these little seasons that are stretching me and pulling me and giving me opportunities to see how circumstantial my faith really is. That's grace. That's God's grace to reveal that to me.

The last thing Paul says that I think is interesting is maybe the most misquoted verse in the New Testament, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." I have a friend who has a tattoo on his back. It's this big cross and it has this banner across it that says, "Philippians 4:13 – I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians is misspelled on his back. So, "I can do all things (except spell) through Christ who strengthens me." Or you'll see the athlete goes, "Man, I've got to bench press today. 'I can do all things through Christ.' Put 300 lbs. on there." It's going to cave my chest. I can never dunk a basketball. "I can do all things through Christ. Surely I can dunk. Surely I can throw a football 70 yards." That verse is just so stripped out of its context. What Paul is talking about here is poverty, need, abundance and learning that those things are not what defines him, rather those are simply situations that the Lord has given him to learn that the Lord is sufficient. He uses the word "content" here. It's the only time that it's used here in the New Testament. Do you know what the word means? Self-sufficient. Is that weird? Paul's saying this, "I'm self-sufficient." And look how he qualifies it here. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Again he's borrowing another word from stoic philosophers. Stoic philosophy says this, "I am self-sufficient, and I find contentment because everything is external to me. And I won't let anything in, I'm going to press against circumstances so I'm not going to be bothered by this, I'm not going to be bothered by that. It's not going to have an effect on me. I am completely isolated and independent." That's a reality that you and I face all the time. "I'm not going to deal with it. I'm going to push it out. I'm going to chin up and bow up. I'll be fine. I'm content." That's not what Paul's talking about here. Paul takes this word that's a stoic word and he flips it and says, "I'm completely dependent. My self-sufficiency is completely insufficient, therefore I'm completely dependent on the One who is totally sufficient – Christ. My sufficiency is in Him. He is the One who strengthens me. I cannot do it. Contentment is nowhere to be found in me."

And so how does a relationship with Christ for you and me sustain contentment? How does it happen? What does it look like here, in Dallas, in the metroplex, in Africa, wherever you find yourself? Because according to Paul, it doesn't matter where you find yourself. I can do all things through Christ who give me strength because of the death and resurrection of Christ, and he's already talked about it. If you flip back to Philippians 3, he says this, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Paul's saying it's not a stoic self-sufficiency, it's a complete dependence upon the death and resurrection of Christ. That's where contentment is found. What happened at the death and resurrection of Christ? How does that translate to you and to me? Paul just said it. In the death of Christ, I am given the righteousness of Christ. He has taken my filthy rags and exchanged them in the death of Christ and given me His righteousness. This is what has been purchased on the cross – forgiveness, the opportunity to be forgiven. That is my greatest need. When that is granted, I begin to be reconciled to the Father, the One who created me, the One who I have offended with my very nature according to Ephesians 2. I was an object of God's wrath, but now I can be reconciled to Him. It is now a relationship of adoption. I have been adopted into His family. So I have been moved from a position as one who is described as an object of His wrath and hostility (and rightly so) to a son, one who is forgiven and blameless and holy before Him. That's incredible. That is my greatest need. That is the death of Christ. It happened, it was accomplished.

And then there's the resurrection. Paul says this, "Hey, if there's no resurrection, eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow you die. . .If there is no resurrection we are to be pitied above all people, because we're still stuck in our sin." What happened in the resurrection is this. As Jesus rose from the dead, both His person and His work were validated. This means that He is the Messiah, He is the Son of God, He is able to accomplish what was accomplished on the cross. It was accomplished, meaning it is done. It's not something that will be done; it is done through the resurrection of Christ. He is finished. He has done it. When Christ rose, it validated His person and His work. That's great news. But

then He says that He has now endowed this same resurrection power by His Spirit to His church. So you and I are to live in resurrection power. That doesn't mean that we go and zap things and they come to life or crazy stuff like that. It means now that there's victory for us that there never was before. It means that once when I was shackled and bound and mastered by sin with no choice, no opportunity but to be self-centered, self-focused and self-preserving, my entire disposition was an offense to Him and was painful to others. That's just who I was. Sin owned me; it doesn't anymore. I am no longer mastered by sin. That's because of the resurrection. Sin now is no longer my master. And then here, because of the resurrection of Christ, Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, which means that it is guaranteed that I too will rise. It's guaranteed that those who believe will be risen on that day. We have been buried with Him in His death and raised to walk in newness of life. So in this life, I'm a new creation, all the old is becoming new, the old is passing away. That's fantastic. That's glorious.

But then He says this as well, "You will be raised on that last day." So how does that translate to my situation and circumstance now? Well if I really believe that when I breathe that last breath, when I expire that last breath, when my close my eyes, then I will be ushered into the presence of God. If I believe that, then this abundance that is all around me will not have mastery over me. It just means that I just might be more generous because I've got eternity at the banqueting table. I have eternity, so I don't need to horde and gather and keep and build up kingdoms here. Because He's saying that these kingdoms, this stuff is where moth and rust destroys it. Build and invest in the better kingdom. These things are temporary pleasures. Paul says, "Hey, if there is no resurrection, if it's not a reality then you go, you eat, you drink and you be merry, you live it up, because we are to be pitied above all people we're stuck in our sins. But if there is a resurrection, there is a banqueting table, there is a feast, there is a celebration and my life in abundance looks different. Because it's really not that great. It's nice, but it's so temporary. It's such a vapor." And then for that little orphan, those little ones who are stuck in poverty, not only in Africa but down in Dallas, wherever we find ourselves, you can say with the utmost confidence as you look them in the face, "Hey, persevere. Hang in there. There's not enough that I have that will solve this, but what I can tell you is this. On the other side, when you close your eyes, you will wake up in the presence of the king. And although you have endured hardship for 30 years (because that's what the life expectancy is), you will be raised to an eternity to feast with the king. Persevere, be faithful, find sufficiency in Him." It's the same message. He is sufficient. The death and resurrection of Christ means circumstances are irrelevant and He is the center point and the anchor of my life.

So, let me leave you with some thoughts. Scripture says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" I am unbelievably good and have an uncanny ability to justify my life, my sin, my weakness and on and on and on. I am unbelievably good at protecting self and preserving self over and above all things. So are you. So deal with deception. You need to press in and deal with the deception of your heart. The contentment Paul is talking about here is not an excuse for laziness where you just say right where you are. That's not what Paul's talking about here. It's not a lack of ambition or a lack of work ethic. It's not an excuse for laziness. Paul has already said in Philippians 3, "I am pressing on, I am straining forward to win the prize of the high calling that's in Christ that I might know Him." So there's a holy ambition. Paul is just saying, "Whatever circumstance I find myself in while I do that doesn't matter." So deal with the deception of your heart generosity. "Well they just need to learn how to be content. I would give my money, but I just feel like this would be an initiation season for them to learn contentment. I'm that good where I can justify that." Deal with the deception of your heart.

How about this? We're in a recession. Maybe we just need to embrace it. This season for some of us is very, very difficult. For others, we're somewhat sheltered by it. It hasn't affected us at the level it has for others. But what if we just embraced this? Maybe this is one of those learning seasons, those initiations that the Lord is bringing us into to teach us to live with less, to cut out the fat, to move the excess to the side and say, "He's enough. I know what it's like and I know how to live with abundance, and I'm learning how to live with less." That's a gift. And so with this recession, maybe this

is revealing in you how circumstantial your faith is. If you watch the news and follow the ticker in hopes that Obama's stimulus package is going to change the world for you, then your hope is misplaced. You've got to deal with that. That's God's mercy that He would even show that to you. If you and I are banking on congress or banking on legislation or banking on banks or whatever it might be to turn this around so that our 201k becomes a 401k again, then our hope is misplaced. What if this is a gift? What if this is an opportunity to press in and to say that He is enough. What if this is an opportunity to press in and see that the work and the person of Jesus Christ is all that the world is about and that He's sufficient?

And lastly, let me encourage you to preach the gospel. And I would love for you to just start with yourself. This is not some self-help self-talk where you just go, "I am good. I am good. I am good." First of all, that's not the gospel, and secondly I don't know that that's going to help. What I'm talking about is meditating and thinking on the person and work of Christ in His death and resurrection, forgiveness, justification, adoption, reconciliation. Knowing that we will be raised again, think on that. And wondering on that reality might just loosen some chains that are holding us down. Preach the gospel to yourself. Think about it. Think about Him in His death and His resurrection. I have a stoic bent where I'll try to do this through my own strength. And if you're like me, you know that that won't last long. So we'll need the Lord.

Let's go to Him in prayer and ask Him for some help in this. "Father, I do pray and I know that contentment is what You're teaching me. And I know that what You're really teaching me is that You're sufficient, that You're able, You're enough, You sustain, You're the source of life, You're the bread of life and man does not live on bread alone. These are all good things for me, God. Thank You. I pray for our church. I pray that we would be a people and a place that learn what it means by 'To live is Christ and to die is gain.' Because death means being with You and life means Christ. And we're excited about either option, Lord. Circumstances are not what we're after and manipulating them is not what we're trying to do, but what we want to do is know You and the power of Your resurrection. That is so foreign to me, but I pray that You would align my heart with the truth of Your word. We love You. We say all this in the name of Christ. Amen."