

## Contentment

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Contentment (peace of mind) is something we are all seeking but often find an elusive state to attain. Why the difficulty? It seems that we think contentment can only be attained if the conditions of our life change in a way that we think of as better. Contentment is 'done' to us, that in essence we are at the mercy of circumstances. Why do we become discontented? What exactly is being content? This is part of the difficulty in understanding contentment, because each of us defines contentment in the context of their own life. What other words do you associate with being content: happiness, fulfillment, joy, satisfaction, peace, calm, patience, strength, perseverance and so on. By understanding the words we each associate with contentment it will help us understand what we think it will take for us to be content.

My simple working definition of contentment is the state of mind attained when our expectations for our life match the reality of our life. The extent to which our expectations match reality defines our level of contentment. As we age, marry, have children our expectations will no doubt change making contentment a moving target. Thus, how we define contentment becomes important in our quest to obtain it. There are two components to contentment; 1. our expectations for our life and 2. the actual events in our life. It is interesting that of these two components we most often try to base our contentment on our ability to control circumstances. We attempt to make life pleasant, free from care by accumulating wealth, becoming powerful, maintaining social status, attempting to stay young, and so forth. I am pretty sure we have all thought at one time or another; If only I \_\_\_\_\_, I would be content. (You fill in the blank.) Often our expectations for contentment are based on other's lives. This is the idea that if we "keep up with the Jones's" we will be content. We spend most of our energy doing what we think will make us content but find that when we "arrive" the target has changed and we are not content.

Consider that Solomon spent years looking for meaning in his life, in effect searching for contentment. His wealth and power made it possible for him to seek contentment by controlling the events of his life. Did Solomon find contentment and meaning by controlling his life? In Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 Solomon says; <sup>1</sup>The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Vanity of vanities,

says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. <sup>3</sup>What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?' No matter how successful he was in meeting his expectations, all his efforts were in vain. For many people they would conclude, if Solomon couldn't find contentment what hope do we have. If we think that we attain contentment by controlling all the things that occur in our lives, Solomon teaches us we cannot. Solomon's conclusion was that contentment is attained only by acknowledging God as the Lord of one's life. Solomon writes in Ecc 12:13; Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

However, it is also clear that the scriptures teach that we can be content. Paul writing to the Philippians states in Php 4:11-12; <sup>11</sup>Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup>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". He had learned that contentment was not dependent on his circumstances but rather on what his expectations in life were.

If we are content, does that mean we are acceptable to God? Can people who consider themselves saved, be completely content, yet live lives unacceptable to God? Consider Jesus parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12: 16-21); <sup>16</sup>And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, <sup>17</sup>and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup>And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" <sup>20</sup>But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and those things you have prepared, whose will they be?' <sup>21</sup>So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." Like Solomon this man appeared to have successfully controlled his circumstances, but unlike Solomon he thought he had succeeded in fulfilling all his dreams and was now self-sufficient. The rich man had left God out of his life. His expectations were based solely on attaining earthly goals. He died and all his labors were in vain. In the letter to the Laodiceans in Rev 3:17 John wrote; <sup>17</sup>For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." The Laodiceans were Christians who were clearly content, but their lives were unacceptable to

God. Therefore, feeling content is not in itself enough to ensure that we are living our life acceptably to God.

Should we then as Christian expect or even desire to be content? Paul as noted above said he learned the secret to being acceptably content. What is the secret? Paul discussed his thorn in the flesh in II Cor. 12. In verses 7-10 Paul wrote; “<sup>7</sup>So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup>But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Clearly Paul wanted to be free of his infirmity pleading with God to remove it. Paul learned the secret of contentment, seeking God and trusting Him to do what is best.

Paul tells Timothy to teach that contentment coupled with a Godly attitude is a means of great gain (I Tim 6:3-10). In verses 3-5 Paul notes that some were preaching and perverting the gospel as a means of getting rich, and their actions are condemned by Paul. Paul goes on to say in verses 6 to 10; “<sup>6</sup>But godliness with contentment is great gain, <sup>7</sup>for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. <sup>8</sup>But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. <sup>9</sup>But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. Paul’s complete trust in God meant that in hard times or in times of plenty, his focus stayed firmly on God not on his own situation.

The first 5 words of Psalm 23 encapsulate why David could be content in his life independent of circumstances, “The LORD is my shepherd”. His contentment was based upon trust in God, not trust in himself. Continuing in the Psalm David says; “I shall not want. <sup>2</sup>He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. <sup>3</sup>He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. <sup>5</sup>Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. <sup>6</sup>Surely goodness

and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. This describes contentment as occurring in both good times (vss 1-3) and bad (vss 4,5). This was echoed by Paul in Php 4:11-13 when he said “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. <sup>12</sup>I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Does this mean that the child of God can't have ambitions or hopes and desires? In the sermon on the mount Jesus said; (Mat 6:31-33) “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we clothed? <sup>33</sup>(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. <sup>33</sup>But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” We can work hard, have hopes and desires with the realization that these wants must be of secondary importance to seeking God.

In conclusion, we should change the way we think about contentment. I don't make myself content through my strength and hard work or luck. I can only be content by having faith and trust in God who has already provided proof of His care for me; **For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.** (John 3:16)

Submitted for your consideration, *JMF*.