

The Secret of Contentment

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WILLIAM B. BARCLEY



P U B L I S H I N G
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To my children,
Leo, Anna, Luke, Maggie, Kate, and Will,
who are a constant source of joy and peace
in the midst of our hectic life together.

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Preface



I DECIDED TO WRITE a book on contentment, not because I have contentment figured out and consider myself the most contented person in the world. Rather, I began to study and ultimately to write about contentment because I am often discontented. The lessons in this book are ones that I need to read and reread, continually applying them to myself. Pastors can sometimes slip into preaching aimed at the specific sins of others. Yet preaching is typically at its best when pastors preach to themselves as well as to their congregation. This book is definitely aimed at myself—as well as at all who share my struggle with contentment.

At the same time that I came to a stark realization of my own discontent, I also began to see how contentment is essential to holiness. Hebrews tells us that we are to pursue that holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Yet, without some level of contentment there cannot be true holiness. The discontented spirit does not rest in God's sovereign control. The discontented spirit desires more of the things of the world, an attitude that the Bible calls covetousness. Covetousness in turn leads to a host of other sins. So if we are going to achieve holiness, we must pursue contentment.

In this book I am mainly using the insights of others, especially the Puritan writers Jeremiah Burroughs (*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*)¹ and Thomas Watson (*The Art of Divine Contentment*).² My goal by and large has been to take some of the wisdom of these “physicians of the soul” and, using modern language, apply it to a modern context. At the same time I have attempted to wed their insights to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Paul’s letter of joy. I have gone beyond Burroughs and Watson in some places, but not very often.

I want to thank P&R Publishing for its willingness to work with me on this project and for its patience in seeing this come to fruition. This book was a long time in the making. I’m grateful to Allan Fisher, now of Crossway Books, for originally contacting me about writing for P&R and for his encouragement in the early stages of this work. Marvin Padgett skillfully guided me through an important process of re-writing which required me to think less like a scholar and more like a pastor. The book is much better as a result of this. Thanks too to Aaron Gottier, who led me through the final stages of editing.

I want to thank the two people who read almost all of what I write and give invaluable feedback—my friend and pastoral mentor Dr. Charles Wingard, Senior Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama, and my wife, Kristy. I also want to thank the Session and dear congregation of Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church in Charlotte for encouraging me to write and to have a ministry that extends beyond the church. I’m thankful for the study leaves they give me that allow me to take a break from my pastoral duties and focus on writing.

PREFACE

Finally, I want to thank my six children, Leo, Anna, Luke, Maggie, Kate, and Will. They are patient and understanding of my many hours out of the house doing ministry, and even allow me many undisturbed hours in the house working or writing in my study. Having a big, active family does not always lend itself to quiet reflection. There are many days that it seems we live in chaos, running from one event to the next or solving one crisis after another. Yet I wouldn't trade it for anything. My children give me great joy and peace in the midst of life's many storms. We as a family have made two major moves in the last ten years that have been very difficult on all of us. My kids have left friends and schools they loved to go to the unknown. But their ability to trust God (and Dad!) and adjust to their new surroundings—and even to prosper in the midst of change—has taught me much. Their sweet spirits and unconditional love have sweetened and softened me. In the midst of the mess and stress of everyday life, they have taught me much about contentment. This book is dedicated to them.

Introduction



I BEGAN STUDYING contentment several years ago during a dark period in my life. I had just moved my family across the country to begin a new job. It was a great job—one that I had previously dreamed about and hoped for. But I had also applied for another position that would not require a move. I had my heart set on it. Yet I was not offered that job. This left me angry, bitter, discontent.

Now in a new state, in a new part of the country, I struggled with God's sovereignty. I found no delight in my new job. I found no delight in God and his plan for me. My anger and disappointment kept me up at night. I struggled to do the new work that I had been called to do. For a year I accomplished very little and performed poorly on the job.

My discontent also affected my family. I sulked around the house. I withdrew from my family. I was quick-tempered and yelled when something disrupted me. In my misery I'm afraid I made everyone else miserable. I became a self-absorbed, unloving husband and father.

It would be easy to look at the external symptoms—anger, moderate depression, lack of joy, being filled with self and

unable to love—and see them as the main problem. But at the root of it all was the sin of discontent. I did not rest in God’s sovereignty. I did not delight in him and his will. I sat on the throne of my life and wallowed in my own self-pitying resentment. I refused to yield to the One whose purposes and plans are perfect, who can use me as he sees fit, and who knows what is best for my life.

I know discontent. It is a great sin!

Evidently my own discontent places me in good company. Over one hundred years ago J. C. Ryle wrote, “Two things are said to be very rare sights in the world—one is a young man humble, and the other is an old man content. I fear this saying is only too true.”¹ Almost four hundred years ago Puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs wrote of the “rare jewel” of Christian contentment. If it is true that contentment was rare in the days of Ryle and Burroughs, how much more is it true in our own day.

In his book *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*,² Gregg Easterbrook shows that while life in the Western world has dramatically improved over the last several decades, the level of happiness and contentment has declined. We live in an age of discontent.

Ours is a fast-paced world of tremendous change. We change jobs, change homes, even change the part of the country in which we live with tremendous frequency. Statistics and casual observation tell us that we also change spouses frequently. When we grow discontented in our current marriage, we move on to another. We are tempted to blame our culture for these things. But it is clear that the problem at the root is a sinful, discontented heart.

At the same time, our world does breed discontent in us. We are bombarded by advertisements that tell us we are incomplete or unfulfilled unless we have such and such a product. We have the Home Shopping Network, eBay, and glitzy, well-crafted commercials that attempt to lure our hearts after the things of this world. The modern, technological innovations are not bad in themselves. They can perhaps serve a good purpose (though personally I think Christians would be better off not watching the Home Shopping Network!). The problem is that they appeal to the sinful heart, which is already a discontented, idol-making factory (to use Calvin’s expression).

This book addresses the heart of the matter—the discontent that lies within.

Not a lot of books have been written recently on the theme of Christian contentment. John Piper’s *Desiring God*, though not explicitly addressing contentment, certainly speaks volumes on this subject. Piper’s now famous line, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him,”³ is a biblical truth that we would do well to ponder.

The old Puritan writers, on the other hand, seem fond of speaking and writing of contentment. Indeed, the Puritans have produced two classics on the subject. The first is Jeremiah Burroughs’s book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. The second is Thomas Watson’s *The Art of Divine Contentment*. The present work does not attempt to be original. I have blatantly, shamelessly ripped off ideas from these classic writings. Even the title, *The Secret of Contentment*, comes from what I would consider to be the heart of Burroughs’s work. It is based on Paul’s words in Philippians 4:11–12 that he has learned the “secret” or the “mystery” of being

content. Contentment must be learned, and the way that we must pursue contentment is contrary to our natural ways of thinking. Burroughs speaks to the heart, calling us to a contentment that is the outcome of knowing God and delighting in his sovereign goodness and fatherly care. The present work simply seeks to meditate on and modernize Burroughs's important insights.

The idea for this book came from Kris Lundgaard's *The Enemy Within*. In that book, Lundgaard makes the writings of the Puritan John Owen accessible to modern readers. The insights that Lundgaard brings to light and applies are invaluable. He has done a great service to the church.

Burroughs and Watson are not as difficult to wade through as Owen. Everyone can and should read them. At the same time, I hope that this book can be helpful to those who are currently wrestling with their own discontent.

The rest of the story in our lives is that the move across country to the new job turned out to be one of the best moves of our lives. I loved the job, my colleagues, the place where we lived. It was a source of satisfaction and brought great joy. I am no longer at that job. God, in his providence, has moved us to a new work. But I learned and grew in ways that were invaluable for future ministry. Though disappointed and discontented initially, I can now look back and see God's hand at work. And I'm thankful for it.

I pray, however, that that earlier dark period in my life, which drove me to my knees and to the study of contentment, will bear fruit for the good of God's people, so that we might show forth his goodness to the world.

To God be the glory!

Discussion Questions

1. What are some situations in your life that have led you to question God's providence and resulted in a joyless discontent?
2. When are you the most contented in your life? What brings about the greatest discontent?
3. What are some ways that we can see God's hand at work, and take pleasure in it, while difficult circumstances are going on in our lives, rather than seeing later how God was working?
4. What aspects of modern life feed the sinful discontent of our heart? What steps can we take to avoid them?
5. Is a change in job or life situation always a sign of discontent? How can you tell the difference between a discontented desire for something new and a genuine submission to follow God's will for your life?

PART ONE



Pursuing Contentment

CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Christian Contentment



NELSON ROCKEFELLER was once asked, “How much money does it take to make a person happy?” He reportedly answered, “Just a little bit more.” This frank response gives us an insight into the human soul. We are tempted to think that we’d be happy with just a little bit more—though at times we are also tempted to admit that in reality happiness will require a LOT MORE!

Human beings always seem to want what they cannot have. This is true with jobs, houses, talents, and very often with spouses. The job we have never seems good enough, and the ideal job always seems just out of reach. Our houses are never big enough or never in just the right location; but we can’t quite get the one we want. We recognize many of the talents that we have (and sometimes brag about them!), but we have a nagging envy of the other guy’s abilities. Our divorce rate indicates that we are always looking for something more in marriage.

This problem is made worse by the fact that we think that if we had the right job, house, talent, or spouse, we'd be happy and content. But because these things are just out of reach, so is contentment—or so the common wisdom goes. The search for happiness based on our circumstances in life creates a restlessness and discontent in our souls.

Now listen to someone who did not think that life was about a constant search for something different or for more of what this life offers:

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. (Phil. 4:10–13)

That's the apostle Paul. He testifies that he has learned to be content in any and every circumstance. His is not a constant search for the right circumstances that will bring him happiness. He is content wherever he is.

Paul's letter to the Philippians exudes Christian contentment. Not only does Philippians contain the classic passage on contentment quoted above, but contentment permeates the entire letter. Sixteen times in this letter Paul uses the noun *joy* or the verb *rejoice*. Joy refers to a state of gladness that typically occurs in Scripture with the recognition that God is in control no matter where we find ourselves. Joy is

not a mere surface or momentary happiness. It goes deeper than that. The joyful heart is the contented heart, because it recognizes and delights in God's sovereign power and providential goodness.

Paul wrote Philippians from prison. He had been struggling with the question of whether his imprisonment would end in release or in death (1:19–26). He knows of others who are stirring up trouble for him while he is in chains (1:15–17). Yet, in spite of his circumstances, he has joy, and he exhorts the Philippians to rejoice. That's contentment!

If we want to learn contentment, a good place to start is by meditating on Philippians. Philippians will be the focus of much of this current study. We will learn from Philippians how to have contentment in afflictions and about the dangers of a murmuring, discontented spirit, among other things. But we will begin by looking at that classic biblical passage in which Paul describes for us the nature of Christian contentment, Philippians 4:11–13.

This passage teaches us several things about the nature of Christian contentment.

1. You can be content.

The first lesson we learn from Philippians 4:11–13 is that contentment is attainable. We know it is attainable because Paul has attained contentment. We might be tempted to think, "Well, Paul was an apostle; he was on a higher spiritual plane than I am. He may have attained contentment, but I can't."

But Paul did not attain contentment because he was a spiritual superstar. He says, "I can do all things through him

who strengthens me.” The same God who strengthens Paul also strengthens all who believe in Christ.

Philippians 4:13 is sometimes taken out of context and used in ways it was not intended to be used. Some take it to mean that there is nothing a Christian cannot do, because God is strengthening him or her. It almost becomes a motivational, self-help verse, in which people grit their teeth and say, “I can do this because God is strengthening me.”

But it is important to recognize that when Paul says “all things,” he doesn’t mean that God gives you the ability to do whatever you want, even good things that you desire to do. Instead Paul is referring to God’s empowering his people to acquire an important Christian virtue, namely, being content wherever God leads them. While growth in holiness does require effort and struggle on our part, ultimately we grow because of the power of God at work through his Holy Spirit within us.

The development of Christian contentment in a sinful, discontented heart is an impossible task. But what sinful human beings cannot achieve, God can and will. In addition, God promises to work in us, transforming us and conforming us into the image of Christ “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). God is carrying on his sanctifying work, so we can pursue contentment with confidence that God can develop this in our lives, just as he did in Paul’s life.

The good news is that in the midst of your current struggles contentment can be yours. As you wrestle with a chronic health problem, a difficult job, or troubled relationships at home, you can have contentment as God gives you grace.

2. You need to learn contentment.

Twice in Philippians 4:11–13 Paul specifically says that he has “learned” to be content. In the Greek, Paul uses two different verbs to express the idea of learning. The first verb is a common word in the New Testament for learning something. The second verb, which appears in verse 12, is a little more unusual and occurs only here in the New Testament (though Greek writers outside the New Testament use it).

Paul’s statement regarding learning in verse 12 is typically translated “I have learned the secret” (ESV, NASB, NIV, NLT, etc.). The verb is a verbal form of the Greek noun for “mystery.” It was a verb that was used in the Greek mystery religions and sometimes took on the meaning “to be initiated” by various rites into these mystery religions.

Paul’s use of this verb indicates that contentment does not come naturally. Not only must contentment be learned, but learning contentment is contrary to our normal (and sinful) ways of thinking. We cannot pursue Christian contentment the way the world pursues contentment, or even in the ways that we would be naturally inclined to pursue contentment.

This is what Jeremiah Burroughs refers to as “the mystery of contentment.” The idea is not that Christianity attempts to be secretive, like the Greek mystery religions. The idea is, rather, that Christian contentment and how we pursue it are at odds with the thinking of this age and even of believers to the extent that the old sinful nature continues to influence our hearts and minds.

For example, the world says that to be content you need to get out of a bad situation. The Bible says that we are to

find contentment in the midst of even the most difficult circumstances. The world says that contentment comes by getting what you want in this world. The Bible teaches that true contentment comes by being satisfied with God and longing for heaven. In this sense the truly contented Christian is always discontented in this life as he longs to be filled with God. We will discuss these matters in more depth in later chapters.

But the key idea here is that we have to work at contentment. We have to learn it. We have to study it. And we especially need to be “reprogrammed” in our thinking. God’s way of achieving contentment, which is the only way to true contentment, is not our way.

I earlier referred to my own discontent when God closed one door and opened another, which required a major family move. Well, it recently happened again. In the process of God’s moving us on to a new avenue of ministry, one door closed that would have kept us in the same general area, and another door opened that required a move to a new state. In fact, without going into detail, the circumstances were eerily similar to the earlier events. By his grace, however, God enabled me to delight in this work of his providence.

Don’t get me wrong. My reaction was by no means perfect. Getting rejected for a job is never pleasant. As a friend who had also recently been turned down for a job wrote to me, “I wanted to say to them, ‘You don’t know what you’re missing,’ but then they also don’t know how truly incompetent I can be!” There were some twinges of anger and a deep-seated pain that could be acute at times.

But there was also a joy and contentment that filled my heart most of the time. This came only by the grace of God, by repenting of my earlier sin of discontent, and by hours of study and reflection on contentment and God's sovereignty. Contentment is not the natural human response to difficulty. But we can—we must—learn it.

3. You will not be truly content until you learn to be content in every situation that you face in life.

Notice again Paul's description of his own contentment:

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. (Phil. 4:11–12)

He is content in every possible situation that he faces in life—in every circumstance, in great abundance, and in great need. In the same way, we have not truly learned contentment when we are content in some circumstances but not in others. Real Christian contentment entails being content in every situation in life.

Paul says, first, that he is content in plenty and in abundance. We may think that it is easy to be content when we are not in situations of hardship. But that's not true! Times of abundance and ease, though a great blessing, are often times when we become spiritually complacent. We easily forget God and pursue the things of the world, which in themselves never satisfy but only leave us longing for more.

We need to guard against an ungodly discontent when life is going well and God blesses us with material abundance and health.

But we also need to learn contentment in times of need. The contented Christian recognizes both the inevitability and the importance of afflictions. Paul knows hardship all too well. Remember, he is a prisoner as he writes this letter. Listen to what Paul writes to the Corinthians:

As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger. . . . We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Cor. 6:4–5, 8–10)

Can we truly say that when sorrowful, we still rejoice; that when poor, we are content to make many rich; that even when having nothing, we still possess all things?

Afflictions will come. This is true for all who live in a fallen world. But it is especially true for Christians who face the additional difficulties that come with being followers of Christ—persecution, self-denial, etc. Christ calls his people to suffer. As Burroughs writes, “Christ does not say, ‘Recognize your crosses as crosses.’ He says, ‘Take up your cross daily.’”¹ Paul instructs Timothy, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Recognizing the inevitability of hardship helps us face them with a certain degree of contentment.

But hardship also has a God-ordained and Christ-exalting place in our lives. God uses affliction to sanctify us, to make us holy (cf. Rom. 5:3–5; Heb. 12:4–12). But afflictions work in this way only if we face them with a certain degree of contentment—accepting them as from the hand of God.

When a person has a bodily ailment—for instance, a stomach pain—and a doctor prescribes medicine to relieve the pain, if that person vomits the medicine up, not only will the medicine be ineffective with regard to the pain, it may also indicate a more serious medical problem. In the same way, when we cannot bear the hardships that God brings, it reveals a deeper problem in our souls. We’re in spiritual danger.

We must recognize God’s providence in every situation that we face, even when we are mistreated by sinful men. This was Joseph’s perspective when he said to his brothers, who had sold him into slavery, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). When we accept all hardships as from the hand of our heavenly Father, we grow in maturity, holiness, and contentment.

Furthermore, we must learn to be content with all types of afflictions, as well as with afflictions that last varying degrees of time. Sometimes Christians are able to endure one type of affliction but not another. Many Christians, for instance, will say that they are willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. But it becomes more difficult when we begin to talk about specifics, especially if they cut too close to our hearts’ desires. Are we willing to endure if those hardships affect our families, our jobs, or our children? Often the loss of “the apple of one’s eye,” whether it be a spouse or a child, has led to anger, discontent, even a loss of faith.

With regard to types of afflictions, we also need to remember that afflictions often do not come one at a time. Rather, they come in bunches. Look at the sufferings of Job.

Hardships also last different lengths of time. Thankfully, many afflictions come and go quickly. Others last extended periods of time. Many Christians are forced to endure bodily ailments—headaches, backaches, etc.—for many years. Others, like hymn-writer William Cowper, suffer from depression that lasts much of their lives. The apostle Paul suffered from “a thorn in the flesh” that was especially troubling and plagued him for a long period of time. Three times he pleaded with God to take it away. Yet, though God could have done so, he chose not to. This thorn was sent to humble Paul and to reveal God’s power at work in human weakness. It was purposeful. It resulted in glory to God.

How long are we willing to endure afflictions? Can we, like Paul, recognize them as coming from God, even though they are messengers of Satan (2 Cor. 12:7)? Are we, for the glory of God, willing to persevere through them, by the grace of God? We have no choice whether we face hardship. The choice is whether we glorify God in contentment or dishonor him in bitterness.

Contentment comes not by finding conditions suitable to us but by God’s fashioning our spirits to our conditions.

4. You should understand contentment as “self-sufficiency.”

This is tricky and could lead to misunderstanding, so we need to explore carefully the meaning of this.

The Greek word in verse 11 that is typically translated as “content” literally means “self-sufficient.” In fact, the word was often used by Greek philosophers to describe what they held to be one of the chief virtues and was frequently described as non-attachment or not being dependent on others.² Now, it is important to recognize that this is decidedly *not* what Paul means by his use of the word here in Philippians. In fact, the type of “self-sufficiency” that Paul is describing here is different from worldly self-sufficiency in a number of ways.

First, this is not a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” type of self-sufficiency. As we have already seen, it is attained only by the power of God. It is all of grace.

Second, it is not an individualistic self-sufficiency that says, “I don’t need other people.” The context of Philippians makes this clear. Paul recognizes the importance of the Philippians in his life and ministry. He is thankful for their “partnership in the gospel” (1:5), which has included both financial assistance (4:14–18) and the personal support of Epaphroditus (2:25–30). Paul also recognizes the need for their prayers, which will lead to his “deliverance” (or salvation, 1:19). The rest of Paul’s letters bring out clearly his understanding that Christians need one another and can function properly as Christians only within the context of the community of believers.

Third, it is not a Stoic self-sufficiency. Stoicism was a popular philosophical system during Paul’s day that essentially taught that everyone is subject to an impersonal power of fate that rules the universe. The key to life is not resisting but going along with what fate has determined. A famous illustration from Stoicism was that of a dog and a cart. Imagine

a dog tied to the back of a cart. When the cart begins to move, the dog can choose either to go along and follow or he can choose to resist. Either way the dog will be pulled where the cart is going. The trip will be much more pleasant if he simply chooses to follow.

In light of this, Stoicism taught the importance of self-control and mastery of one's emotions. The person not in control of his thoughts and emotions will inevitably imitate the dog who resists the direction of the cart. To switch to a modern example, the Simon and Garfunkel song "I Am a Rock, I Am an Island" is in many ways a fitting description of this aspect of Stoicism. I will not let others affect me. "And a rock feels no pain; and an island never cries."

Although there might be aspects of Stoic teaching that have echoes in Paul, he would have stood firmly against this philosophical system. Paul's letters reveal a man who understood the importance of the bonds of Christian community, who loved and needed others. (See especially 2 Timothy as an example of this.)

What, then, does Paul mean by "self-sufficiency" in Philipians 4:11? In context, the idea of self-sufficiency here is that outward circumstances do not determine us. We are content no matter where God puts us, no matter what our situation. Furthermore, we do not rely on externals to bring us contentment. Instead it comes through the work of the Holy Spirit within us. God's grace at work within our hearts gives us an inner tranquility despite outward circumstances.

When little children are crying, we often give them things in an attempt to keep them quiet. If this works, it is the object that makes the child quiet and temporarily content. It is not

the disposition of their spirits that has brought this about. Of course, the goal in parenting is to bring our children to the place where they are content apart from things, apart from always getting their way.

My brother-in-law tells the story of waiting in line at a bakery behind a young mother and her child. When they got to the counter, the little boy looked through the glass and said in a loud voice, “I want dat tookie.” His mother responded calmly, “No, you can’t have a cookie.” The child repeated in a louder voice, “I want dat tookie. Gimme dat tookie.” The mother repeated that he could not have a cookie. This went on for several minutes with the boy getting louder and louder and the mother clearly getting more and more exasperated. It was causing a scene in the bakery. Finally the mother gave up, bought the cookie, gave it to her child, and left the store.

All of us have faced the temptation, and most likely given in to it, of giving our children things simply to make them quiet. We also, however, recognize its dangers. Demanding children whose every need is catered to become a terror to parents—and to the rest of society. Furthermore, they never learn to have a quiet, contented spirit. This should be one of the goals of parenting.

But adults, too, need to learn this lesson. We need to develop the contentment, or “self-sufficiency,” that is not based on externals but comes from within. This requires God’s grace, but it also requires that we engage in the spiritual training of our hearts. Depending on our upbringing, this process might be more difficult for some than for others. Yet all of us have sinful hearts, and so all of us need the learning, training, and discipline required to achieve true Christian contentment.

There are times when it is right and legitimate to deal with a troubled soul by treating the symptoms with externals. When a person has lost all hope and becomes suicidal, that is not the time to talk about the need for extended training of the heart. We find other ways to keep that person from destroying himself. Other means, such as medication, vigorous exercise, or various diversions, can also be helpful at various times in life.

But we need to recognize that these external means only content us for a time. When various sets of circumstances present themselves again, discontent returns. Our world generally settles for quick fixes to heal the discontent of the soul. But true contentment only comes by addressing heart issues.

In light of all of this, we can now move toward a definition of Christian contentment. Burroughs defines it as follows: “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”³

It is hard to improve upon this clear, succinct, yet thorough definition. It brings together much of what we have seen so far.

First, contentment is inward. We can be calm on the outside, while inside trouble and disturbance rage. Contentment must be rooted in the heart.

Second, it is gracious. That is, it is rooted in God’s grace, but it also graciously responds to every situation that one encounters.

Third, it delights in—or finds joy in—what God brings.

Fourth, it recognizes that every situation that we encounter in life comes from the hand of God. We must constantly

be aware of God's providence and recognize that God has ordained all things for our good and for his glory.

Fifth, because our circumstances come from the hand of God, we must submit to them. The restless spirit, then, is the rebellious spirit.

Sixth, we must learn, like Paul, to be content in every condition. We have not learned contentment when we are ready to accept God's providence in some circumstances but not in others.

One final point: The type of contentment described in Philippians 4 reflects God's self-sufficiency. Theologians refer to self-sufficiency as one of God's attributes. God is not dependent on anyone. God does not need anyone or anything outside of himself. He is fully self-sufficient.

Now, we need to recognize that God is the Creator; we are creatures. We will never be self-sufficient in the way that God is. God has made us dependent beings—dependent on God first and foremost, dependent on others, dependent on other aspects of God's creation for survival.

Yet, to the extent that we achieve the "self-sufficiency" described in Philippians 4, we reflect in a small way this one aspect of the being of God. As our self-sufficiency reflects God's self-sufficiency, God's character is revealed in us. To put it differently, our contentment brings glory to God.

That is the goal of this book, and that should be the goal of our pursuit of Christian contentment—that God be glorified. In this sense, our study lines up wonderfully with John Piper's maxim, "God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in him."

May we achieve contentment, being satisfied in God, so that he might be glorified.

Discussion Questions

1. Most people harbor misperceptions about what will lead to contentment in their lives, whether they recognize them as misperceptions or not. What are some wrong ways of thinking that you have about how to attain contentment? What practical steps can you take to study and learn contentment and to correct those misperceptions in your life?
2. Have you learned, like Paul, to be content in any and every circumstance in life? What are some times that you struggle with contentment, and how can you begin to learn to be content in those times?
3. Do you find that you are more apt to be discontented in times of abundance or in times of need? Why?
4. How can the Bible's teaching on suffering and affliction help you to be content in the difficult times of life?
5. How is the "self-sufficiency" that Paul talks about in Philip-pians 4 different from the self-sufficiency of the world? In what ways do you find that you rely on externals to bring you happiness?
6. As you examine your heart, do you find that you have the quiet, sweet, gracious spirit that delights in all that God brings to you? How can you begin to develop the mindset that all that happens to us is from the hand of God?