

Contentment – A secret to be learned

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.”

If this saying was thought to be true over a hundred years ago, it is even more amazing that today with all the benefits that we enjoy, in so many areas of our lives, we still struggle to genuinely describe ourselves as the apostle Paul did:-

“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.” Philippians 4:12

“We tend to want a Christian life that is full of personal hope and happiness. We tend to want a Christian life of comfort and peace, whose rare problems are easily solved by a theological dictionary and a little bit of prayer. We just want to be happy, and that doesn’t seem too much to ask of a God who owns everything and is in control of everything.”
(Tripp p60)

Perhaps we see contentment just as something elusive like happiness or not really that important, a kind of luxury or optional extra. This was not the view of the Puritan writers, who four centuries ago wrote of *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Burroughs) and *The Art of Divine Contentment* (Watson). It seems that they valued Christian contentment so much, since they saw it as the indicator of the believer’s heart towards God and its antithesis, discontent, as leading to the destruction of the believer’s worship and their witness for Christ.

But this lack of contentment is not just a personal experience it is the cultural climate that surrounds us day to day and it is the spirit of our age. Our times have been described as “the age of envy” and E.F. Schumacher accuses our economic system as using “greed and envy as its motive power”. (quoted by Swenson p152)

In his book *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, 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. (Quoted by William B. Barclay in “The Secret of Contentment”)

What are the marks of our 21st century culture that cause contentment to be such a challenge:-

- **Selfish Culture** – materialism and consumerism create a desire for instant gratification and the pursuit of pleasure. “When we have everything we need, we complain that we do not have more of everything or that others have a better everything than we have, or we manufacture new things to crave. We worry more and are depressed more easily. We have the time and money to pay attention to things that we were once too busy to notice.” (Tripp p84)

- **Fast moving culture** – always wanting the next thing, always expecting something bigger and better, especially in technology. Think of the queues at the Apple shop when a new “iphone” arrives; and very soon that one will be out of date too!
- **Image aware culture** – compulsive compare syndrome, image and performance are considered high value and status. Social media has raised this phenomenon to frightening levels especially among our young people. Identity becomes tied to how we look, what we own and how we perform. “When popular media dominates the thoughts, desires and expectations of the culture, its projected ideals become the “norms,” even when those “norms” are far from normal on the streets. These ideals have a powerful ability to shape the way we see ourselves and others. They stimulate desire and dissatisfaction, excitement and disappointment.” (Tripp p90)
- **Media and celebrity driven culture** – advertising and the media in general, create in us the “wants” that in time become the “needs” and the “must haves”. The advertising industry spends vast amounts of money inducing in us a chronic state of discontent because they convince us that we need “more” or “better”. The gateway of the eyes is significant here. We see and desire, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, which leads to discontentment, whether it is gadgets, clothes, houses or holidays. But that for which I long becomes that to which I belong.
- **Youth obsessed culture** – our culture craves youth and youthfulness thus aging with all its attendant physical signs is despised and dreaded. “This ageism is part of the oxygen of our culture. We all breathe it in daily, and it has affected how each of us views who we are and where we are going.” (Tripp p84)
- **Happiness culture** – happiness is seen as the ultimate goal, so when unexpected factors, over which we have no control, intrude and deny us that happiness it results in discontent.
- **Entitlement culture** – there is a sense that we have a right to certain things in our affluent culture and to be denied what we feel entitled to, for whatever reason, drains away our sense of gratitude; we no longer see all the wonderful advantages we have as blessings and privileges but as our birth right.
- **Leisure and pleasure culture** – unlike our forebears and indeed many in the less developed and less affluent parts of the world, we no longer need to spend huge amounts of our time on providing the basics of life and survival for ourselves or our families. This means that we have more time for leisure, but of itself this does not provide the happiness or contentment we might expect. Paul Tripp explains that in a culture that focuses on leisure there is a natural craving to be entertained. Since we want to be entertained in ways that give us pleasure and makes us happy, life morphs into an unceasing pursuit of comfort, ease and individualistic satisfaction. “The good life” becomes the easy, pleasure filled life.

The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote “Society is marked by an inextinguishable discontent.”

Defining Contentment

Swenson describes it this way “Contentment is not at all like cutting down a tree, which, when it is done, it is done. It is more like trying to pick up mercury with tweezers – it keeps squirting away – it is like the carrot suspended two feet in front of our face that moves every time we do.”

Vines Expository dictionary – Satisfaction with what one has, needing nothing more, it uses words like sufficient, adequate, enough.

New Bible Dictionary

- Satisfaction of one’s needs, enough, sufficient.
- Freedom from reliance on other people or other things in order to be content, since God is sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9) and able to provide all that we need (2 Cor. 9:8)
- The control of one’s desires (1 Tim. 6:6,8)
- It is not the passive acceptance of the status quo, but the positive assurance that God has supplied one’s needs and we are therefore released from unnecessary desire.
- We are satisfied by the grace of God and thus it is the opposite of the spirit of discontent that causes us to grasp at material possessions to the neglect of God.
- Contentment is the application of the biblical commands against covetousness (Ex 20:17) and to be content with what we have (Hebrews 13:5)
- It is supremely the example and teaching of the Lord Jesus. In the parable of the rich fool he commands us to guard against greed and not to spend our lives seeking contentment in what will not last (Luke 12:15-21) also in (Matthew 6:25-34) Jesus commands confidence in our Heavenly Father to supply all our needs and therefore to dispel all anxiety concerning our physical needs.

“Contentment is essentially a matter of accepting from God’s hand what He sends because we know that He is good and therefore it is good.” (J.I. Packer)

Jeremiah Burroughs defined contentment in this way “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of the spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”

William B. Barclay takes this 17th century definition and looks at its component elements to help us to grasp its meaning:-

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 – or finds joy in – what God brings.

Fourth, it recognises 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

What contentment is not

Swenson also helps us to understand contentment better by thinking about *what contentment is not*.....

Contentment isn't denying one's feelings about unhappiness, but instead a freedom from being controlled by those feelings.

It isn't pretending that things are right when they are not, but instead the peace that comes from knowing that God is bigger than any problem and that He works them all out for our good.

Contentment isn't the complacency that defeats any attempt to make things better, but instead the willingness to work tirelessly for improvement, clinging to God rather than results.

It isn't the feeling of wellbeing contingent on keeping circumstances under control, but instead a joy that exists in spite of circumstances and looks to the God who never varies.

It isn't the comfortable feeling we get when all our needs and desires are met, but instead the security of knowing as A.W. Tozer reminds us, that "The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One."

Finally, contentment is not that pseudo-virtue of claiming solidarity with Paul that we have learned to be content in all circumstances, when we have never had to face real need or to stand the test of serious hardship, suffering, or persecution.

What can rob us of Contentment

"Discontent will destroy your peace, rob you of joy, make you miserable and spoil your witness. We dishonour God if we proclaim a Saviour that satisfies and then go around discontent." (J.I. Packer)

Envy

Envy is not the same as covetousness, although it probably develops from that root. Coveting is basically wanting to have more and to have what belongs to another. Although it is usually associated with money and material possessions, the tenth commandment also refers to sensual desire i.e. for another man's wife. Barclay writes "A coveting spirit is a discontented spirit because it desires what God has not given to us. A contented spirit, on

the other hand, finds delight in what God has provided. It does not long for what it does not have.”

Envy goes a stage further, it is described in Vines dictionary as the feeling of displeasure produced by witnessing or hearing of the advantages or prosperity of others. As Swenson puts it “Envy makes it hard to have friends – everyone I know has something I do not.”

“Envy is not only being angry that I don’t have something, but being angry that someone else does. It is a wish that He would take away what He has given you and return it to me where it rightfully belongs. When envy rules your heart it will control your eyes. Envy will cause you to notice the success, fortune, prosperity, possessions, relationships and joy of others. Envy will cause you to be much too vigilant and to pay far too much attention on how God has blessed others. Envy will cause you to be sad when you should be happy, to be angry when you should be grateful, and to be disappointed when you should be experiencing the rest of contentment.” (Tripp p150)

He goes on to say that envy destroys our loving worship of God. Indeed it puts God in the dock of our Judgement accusing Him of failing to be a good and wise father. If left unchecked it will destroy our fellowship with others and rob us of the ability to love our neighbour. He describes envy as a moral cancer that eats away at our heart.

Psalm 73

This psalm provides us with a wonderful example of a godly man struggling with envy to the point that his feet had almost slipped and his faith was in jeopardy. His journey takes him through crisis to the eventual regaining of eternal perspective and secure faith.

The psalm is written by Asaph, the leader of one of David’s Levitical choirs. He begins with a creedal statement of belief “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” He may have sung or recited this often, but now he questions its truth. How is it that the wicked so often prosper while the godly suffer so much? He arrives at a crisis of faith as he cannot put together his belief that God is good with what he sees around him. This is where envy comes to the fore and all he sees is that those with no interest in God and in fact oppose God and His people, seem prosperous, healthy, strong, arrogant, free from burdens and anxiety. As the NIV notes say “this is hardly an objective account; it is rather the exaggerated picture that envious and troubled eyes perceive.”

He reaches crisis point as he compares his own situation and complains v13 “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure, in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.” His envy has turned his eyes inward and from a self-centred position he cries out “What was the point of trying to do right? What did I get out of it?”

Derek Kidner describes v15 as the dawn of truth for the psalmist and his first step to enlightenment as moral and not mental. He turns from self-interest and self-pity to remembering his basic loyalties and responsibilities to the family of fellow believers. He begins to see that there are riches in other places than the world has them.

V17 The light fully dawns as he turns to God Himself in worship and praise – being in the house of God, hearing the word of God, in fellowship with other believers worshipping God he regains an eternal perspective and to see the ultimate destiny of those who reject God (v18-20,27).

V21-26 He realises that with a grieved heart, embittered spirit and senseless mind he had fallen far from God. But God had kept hold of him in the past, was guiding him in the present and had a future for him in glory. Like the apostle Paul he could say “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain”. He had moved from envy and grievance to realising that he possessed the chief and only good, which is to be near God.

“This psalm is instructive because it indicates to us that there is a time to register our complaints and to relate the experiences of our souls. But contentment comes only when we look away from self and rest in God’s sovereign control.” (Barclay p89)

Bitterness

This can be a particular danger in the second half of life as we look back and do an accounting. “We add up all of our hard choices, good decisions and disciplined labours and compare them to the ‘good things’ in life that we think we have earned the right to. If the good results do not match the labour that we have invested, then we tend to feel that we have been the victims of a cosmic con.” (Tripp p151)

He goes on to explain that bitterness often focusses on other people – the boss who never recognised what we were capable of, the spouse who didn’t get their act together, the child who ruined the family dream or a church that failed to recognise our ministry potential.

But our bitterness and anger is always ultimately towards God, who we believe should be in control of all these things and is therefore in our judgement unloving, unfair, unkind and unfaithful. “This deep and personal bitterness against God produces a cruel harvest. It will suck the life out of your passion for the gospel, your delight in worship, your zeal for ministry and your trust in the only place where true wisdom, life, hope, and peace can ever be found.” (Tripp p152)

Horsfall recommends forgiveness as the means of freedom from bitterness and resentment “Forgiveness is of course a vital ingredient – forgiving those who have hurt us and seeking forgiveness for the hurt we have caused others. Sometimes this can lead to reconciliation, but not always. What is important is to come to peace within ourselves by letting go of any resentment or bitterness we may hold towards others so that we do not bear them any ill will, and to set our own hearts free.” (p44)

Regret

Although this may vary according to our temperament type, to some extent we all find ourselves struggling with regret. This can be an increasing problem in midlife and beyond as we assess our lives and the contribution that we have made. Paul Tripp recognises that peace and contentment can be lost as we play and replay in our mind the videos of past decisions and actions. All those words that we wish now we could take back or the things

that we wished we had said. The mistakes that we made, the times that we failed and the opportunities lost forever fill us with a regret which seems inescapable and paralysing.

“As we subject our past to this searching critique, time and distance add another dimension to our view of the landscape: the ways in which our life situation itself limited the choices we were able to make. We may feel our options were so shaped and circumscribed that we never made an independent decision at all. Perhaps we never had a real chance to choose.” (McGuinness p16)

She then goes on “But God is the God of the impossible, and offers us His compassion and companionship as we bring Him our losses and limitations. God specialises in meeting people where they are, even when that is not where they have chosen to be or where He would have them remain.”

“The reason regret tends to hit us so hard in midlife is that for years we have been convincing ourselves that the problem isn’t really us.....our greatest problem exists somewhere outside ourselves.” (Tripp p113) This leaves us with no means of relief since we are trying to justify ourselves instead of coming to Christ and receiving His justification.

As the general confession reminds us our sin may be through weakness, negligence or our own deliberate fault, but the Lord promises to forgive it all and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, when we confess our sin to Him (1 John1:9)

Regret may be a reminder that we need to depend more on Him and His forgiveness and less on our performance. It also points us to our hope in eternity “One of the brightest, most wonderful realities of eternity is that we will be delivered from our weakness and sin and therefore freed from regret.” (Tripp p109)

Let’s emulate the attitude of Paul in Philippians 3:13-14 “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”

The Death of our dreams

“Now what exactly is a dream? *A dream is imagination coupled with desire and projected into the future.....*The more I replay my dream, the more detailed it gets and the more it gets control of me.....Before long the dream is not just a feint and distant hope for the future. It becomes a prized possession. I become convinced that life without the dream would be unthinkable and unliveable. My sense of identity, purpose, well-being, contentment and satisfaction becomes directly connected to the realisation of the dream.” (Tripp p142)

Our dreams may not be wrong, they may be good and wholesome, but when our dream captures our heart, gives us purpose and meaning and eventually competes with Christ for first place in our lives, we are in a dangerous place. Since our dreams can never give us real purpose, meaning, security and fulfilment, they will always disappoint us, whether they are realised or crushed.

In the second half of life we may look back to a cherished dream of our younger self and mourn the fact that it is now too late to ever achieve that goal. Perhaps we have achieved the goal of our dream but its fulfilment seems pretty empty and we can only think of what next to fill the void. Sometimes we think back over the cost of accomplishing the thing that we prized and wonder if in the end we sacrificed more important things to get where we are.

When the death of our dreams leaves us discontent, dissatisfied and possibly disappointed with ourselves it is not a huge step to being disappointed with God and to call into question His love and faithfulness to us.

The apostle Paul saw the loss of many of those goals and prized dreams of his youth when his life was turned around after that encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. As he looked back his testimony was not of disappointment but of joy and contentment with what he had gained.

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.” Phil 3:7-8

Desire for Control

“One of the most dangerous delusions for each of us is the delusion of our own sovereignty. And one of our most dangerous idols is the idol of control. If we spend our days trying to establish our sovereignty and our control, then we have not yet learned to rest in the Lord’s control.....Beneath the struggles of ageing, regret and disappointment are haunting questions of God’s sovereign wisdom, goodness and love. In those moments when your mind wanders into fantasy and you create worlds of your own making that do your bidding, you are actually expressing a deep dissatisfaction with God’s rule and wishing you could have your hand on the cosmic joystick.” (Tripp p214)

As we thought earlier, contentment is not pretending things are right and that we are happy when we are not. It is not just settling, in a defeatist, way for the status quo without seeking for improvement. But godly contentment is not based on our circumstances being just as we would want them or according to the script that we would have written.

“The search for happiness based on our circumstances in life creates a restlessness and discontent in our souls.” (Barclay p22)

This is the whole point of Paul’s assertion that he had learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. This is why the letter to the Philippians overflows with joy and rejoicing in the Lord, since Paul had learned to view every circumstance through the lens of God’s sovereign control and His loving kindness that always works for our good.

This is exemplified in chapter 1 of Philippians where Paul is under house arrest in Rome, a prisoner chained to a guard. For Paul, a man literally on a mission, what a frustration this must have been. But instead of thinking – How can this be right? Has God really got things under control? Wouldn’t it be a much better plan to be free to spread the Gospel and to

strengthen the churches? – He writes “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” (Chapter 1:12) He goes on to explain that far from limiting the spread of the gospel, the whole palace guard and others had become aware that Paul was in prison for Christ and that through Paul’s example most of the other believers had been encouraged to speak out fearlessly as well.

“The joyful heart is the contented heart, because it recognises and delights in God’s sovereign power and providential goodness.” Barclay p23)

A Grumbling Spirit

A grumbling spirit is the exact opposite of contentment. In fact Barclay would suggest that “Grumbling is tied to our unbelief, questioning not only God’s providence but also His provision. When we grumble, we don’t believe that God is in control, and we question His ability to make good on His promises. At root then it is a lack of faith.” (Barclay p43)

Grumbling causes us to have a kind of spiritual amnesia, we forget all that God has done for us in the past, His provision, protection and His presence with us and focuses discontentedly on some immediate difficulty or misfortune.

There is an example of this in Numbers 11:1 which records how the Israelites were only three days on their journey in the wilderness before they began grumbling and complaining.

“Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when He heard them His anger was aroused.”

It reminds us that grumbling not only robs us of contentment but it displeases our Heavenly Father and shows a failure to submit to His lordship. “Murmuring reveals the absence of grace in our hearts. We must see a grumbling, discontented spirit as the enemy of our souls.” (Barclay p54)

In Philippians 2:14-16 Paul also sees refraining from grumbling and complaining as an important element of our witness to a watching world, in which we are to “Shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” Now there’s a challenge!

Affliction and suffering

“Affliction is the greatest test of our contentment. When our world is falling apart, trust in God’s sovereignty wavers, and a peaceful frame of mind becomes unsettled. Our faith is challenged. We learn the depth of our contentment. When sickness comes, when the tests reveal the spot to be cancer, when we lose our job, when a child is taken away from us, when our good name is unjustly defamed, how do we respond?” (Barclay p79)

The theology of suffering is not our brief here, but there are one or two points that may help us in relating suffering to contentment.

Our expectations can affect our response to suffering:-

“A subtle expectation of uninterrupted ease, coupled with the thought that the ‘good life’ is the pain-free life, leaves us often frustrated, confused, and angry when suffering comes our

way. It is hard for us to 'count it all joy' when the pain we are experiencing not only doesn't seem good in itself, but seems like an unnecessary obstacle in the way of obviously good things." (Tripp p180)

Throughout the New Testament there is a clear promise that suffering and persecution in particular is part of our calling as Christ's disciples. Perhaps part of Paul's ability to be content in all circumstances was that his expectation was that he would suffer, since it had been revealed to him at his call Acts 9:16 "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name". Paul did suffer as he recounts in 1 Corinthians 4 and 2 Corinthians 11. He also taught the churches to expect suffering "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him" (Philippians 1:29)

In addition to the suffering we may face as believers, there is the universal suffering that all experience as a result of living in this fallen world. "We must recognise the inevitability of suffering and hardship.....Sickness, failed relationships, death of loved ones, failures and setbacks are inescapable. They are simply part of living in a fallen world.....Accepting the reality is a large part of the battle of finding contentment in the midst of our afflictions." (Barclay p81)

He goes on to point out that "Contentment in affliction comes by recognising how God is working in our hardship. When we do this, we see our afflictions not as setbacks or inconveniences. Rather they are mercies from God." (p82) He does allow for the fact that it is usually easier to recognise that truth in principle but much harder when we are in the midst of our own hardships, afflictions and sufferings.

Benefits of Contentment

- Contentment is a priceless treasure – "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it." (1 Timothy 6:6-7) Barclay would say that contentment is a priceless treasure since it focusses on what really matters and what is really important i.e. eternity. "The jewel of a contented heart is precious in God's sight and lasts into eternity.....Material wealth cannot be compared to the radiant beauty of a quiet, peaceful, contented spirit." (p40)
- Contentment is a response of obedience and trust in God. It is a recognition of our total dependence on him for all we need and true satisfaction with what he provides. It frees us from the relentless search for other things that can never fully meet our needs. "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" (Hebrews 13:5-6.) John Piper has a maxim "God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in him."
- Contentment frees us from anxiety about the transient and allows us to focus on eternal priorities. This is what Jesus was teaching his disciples in Matthew 6:25-34. He wanted his disciples not to be driven by anxiety about their daily needs, not because they weren't important, but that their Heavenly Father knew about them and would provide, allowing them to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness.

Jesus also points out that this is a way that we are able to live distinctively as his followers, content with what God provides, not as unbelievers worrying about the latest fashion accessory or fretting over the appearance of wrinkles and greying hair. "For the pagans run after all these things." Matthew 6:32

- Joy and peace are a result of a contented heart that is resting in God and trusting in Him. We thought earlier about how amazing it was that Paul could write the letter to the Philippian church from his place of imprisonment, with an unknown future, and express not only contentment with his circumstances but a deep joy and peace that literally transcends all human understanding. This letter exudes joy from the beginning to the end "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say again: Rejoice!" Phil 4:4
- Contentment frees us from a grumbling, complaining spirit, since it produces an attitude of gratitude in our hearts. We see God's hand of goodness daily at work in our lives providing, protecting, strengthening, guiding and walking with us even in the hard times. Rather than demanding our way and blaming God when we don't get what we want. We are grateful as we recognise God's grace, mercy, love and faithfulness to us who don't deserve it.
- Contentment means that I have better relationships - I relate better to God because I am satisfied with what He has given. I relate better to myself since I am at peace about my circumstances. I relate better to others since contentment brings freedom from envy and comparison. (Concept from Swenson p161-162)

Since contentment is such a rare and precious jewel to be treasured, how can we learn this secret or mystery of contentment that Paul wrote about?

Pursuing Contentment

"Contentment makes poor men rich; discontentment makes rich men poor"
Benjamin Franklin

Deposing the idols of our hearts-

"We have an alternate or counterfeit god if we take anything in creation and begin to "bow down" to it - that is to love, serve and derive meaning from it more than the true God. Because we can set up idols in our hearts we recognise that "making an image" of something is not necessarily a physical process but is certainly a spiritual and psychological one. It means imagining and trusting anything to deliver the control, security, significance, satisfaction and beauty that only the real God can give. It means turning a good thing into an ultimate thing." (Keller p131-132)

When we examined some of those things that can rob us of contentment, it may be that they represent what has become most important to us, in fact what has functionally replaced God as the deepest affection of our hearts and thus become an idol.

"In ways that we did not realise, we gave up on God and gave our heart to things that we could see, hear, touch, taste, measure, and quantify. These things became our 'plan B messiahs'. We asked them to give us the things that only God is able to give. We looked to created things, maybe things that we had made ourselves, to give us meaning and purpose,

a sense of identity, hope and security, contentment and peace. We hoped that houses, cars, careers, experiences and people would satisfy our hearts. We looked to those things to give us life. We got tired of waiting on God.” (Tripp p246)

It may not be an overt idolatry but a subtle migration of our hearts affection, as Paul Tripp would describe it, but when our soul is discontent with God, or with life in general, what have we replaced Him with? In the pursuit of contentment this is where we must start, re-establishing that God is the first in our worship and in our affections.

Obedience

Contentment is a choice that we make in obedience to God. Swenson writes “No formula exists to finding contentment other than obedience.” The verses that we looked at in Hebrews 13:5-6 also emphasises obedience within the context of God’s unfailing presence, provision and strength.

“Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” So we say with confidence. “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid, what can man do to me?””

It is as if when we choose to take that first step of obedience, trusting in God that He is there with us, our loving Heavenly Father surrounding us with His unfailing grace and strength.

“If God has commanded us to be content, it is for our good and His glory.” (Barclay p39)

Finding contentment through enjoying God

“Man is a social being. He is made to be in relationship with others. This is part of being created in the image of God....But in particular we were made to live in fellowship and communion with God himself. When this is missing from our lives, there is disorder and discontent. As Augustine put it “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”. Christian satisfaction and contentment come primarily through our relationship with God in Christ.” (Barclay p126)

As we spend time with God, feeding our hearts and minds on His Word, talking to him about our needs and desires, we get to know God’s character and to trust him and his answers in all the circumstances of our lives.

“Our deepest need is to find and rest in the thing for which we were created – a right relationship with God. In surrendering our sovereignty, in confessing that His wisdom is infinitely more wise than our most brilliant thought, and in admitting that no plan could be more perfect than the plan that comes from the mind of the Almighty, we can begin to reach out to the One who is near and find just what we need for the difficult moments that we face.” (Tripp p234)

Regain an eternal perspective

“The only way you can make sense out of life is to look at it from the vantage point of eternity. Eternity defines, motivates and clarifies the life that God has called us to.”
(Tripp p297)

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Cor. 4:16-18

I think that the longer we journey into the second half of life the more precious these verses become to us. As we mourn the loss of our younger selves, deal with the ravages of time on our physical appearance, struggle with the loss of strength, capacity and possibly health and as we look into the face of our mortality we need an eternal perspective and a hope of Heaven that keeps us pressing forward.

An eternal perspective helps us to remember that we are “aliens and strangers” in this world and that “our citizenship is in heaven”, so that we invest in that which is eternal not in that which is fading away. Perhaps this is most relevant in times of suffering:-

“No matter how hard the difficulties of the present seem, you need to say to yourself, “This is not *it* for me, because I have a rich and eternal future that has been locked away and guaranteed. Whatever is at stake at this moment cannot rob me of the new life and eternal hope that God has given me, and those are the only things that are really worth living for.”
(Tripp p196)

Contentment in looking to the needs of others

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Phil 2:3-4

This is both a corrective for the envy and comparisons that can so easily sour our relationships and one of the means by which we can learn to be content. The world often advocates greater self-esteem and self-fulfilment as the means of attaining contentment, but Paul recommends a different way.

“Joy and contentment come not in self-esteem, in self-fulfilment, in living for self. Rather they come in living for others.....Believers are to live in humble service, considering others above themselves, pouring themselves out for others. This is the path to the joy and contentment so critical to Paul’s discussion in Philippians.” (Barclay p150)

Guarding the gateways to our eyes and hearts

“There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, *yet his eyes were not content with his wealth* “For whom am I toiling,” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” This too is meaningless – a miserable business!”
Ecclesiastes 4:8 (italics added)

Advertisers and sales people know well how to create a sense of need in us so that we will want to buy their products or services. They are masters of the art of using the senses, especially our eyes, to arouse that sense of need. What we watch, the screens we look at, the magazines etc. that we read, the huge amount of digital input that we are exposed to is all about manipulating our craving for stuff, status symbols, experiences, relationships that they persuade us will make us content.

“If we actually needed the thing, advertisers would not have to convince us of it. “The fact that wants can be synthesized by advertising, catalysed by salesmanship, and shaped by the discreet manipulations of the persuaders shows that they are not very urgent. A man who is hungry need never be told of his need for food.” (Kenneth Galbraith quoted in Swenson p160)

If we want to pursue a contented heart we need to pray with the psalmist:-

“Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.”
Psalm 119:37

Making peace with our past

Julia McGuinness writes about this process which often begins as part of midlife:-

“As we look back and face the truth about where we are and who we have become, our midlife task is to make peace with our past so that we can move forward freely. This involves gaining insight into our story; acknowledging the part played by others in our lives, including God, and grieving our losses and missed opportunities. But it also involves recognising our blessings, celebrating our achievements and being grateful for the personal resources our experiences have given us.” (p22)

There is a need to let go of the baggage of the past, but this will not be achieved by denial, repression, rationalisation or avoidance of facing the issues. We have thought about how regret, bitterness, crushed dreams, broken relationships, hurt and injustice can rob us of our contentment and joy, so it is time to make peace with the past.

We need to grieve the losses, disappointments and regrets, those things in our lives that we can never change or put right. But we need to remember and celebrate the good things, the blessings, the successes and the achievements. In time we will come to see that even in the failures, hurts and struggles God has been at work, drawing us closer to Him, helping us to depend more on his grace, making us more like Christ.

But making peace with the past also means that hard work of both forgiving and receiving forgiveness. R.T. Kendall has written widely on this subject of forgiveness and his books on the subject would be a real help to those struggling with this issue.

Experiencing contentment may not depend for you on restoring relationships with others but on forgiving and further to that accepting yourself. In Kendall’s book “Totally forgiving yourself” he writes this quote:-

“John Newton, author of the famed ‘Amazing Grace’, was one day speaking to his close friend, the poet William Cowper, musing over 1 Corinthians 15:10: ‘But by the grace of God I am what I am’. Newton said to him ‘I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be, but thank God I am not what I used to be.’ Anybody who follows Christ ought to be able to say that. We are all a work in progress. The same God who has commanded you to forgive yourself now says: accept yourself.” (p201)

The Sufficiency of God’s Grace

We have thought of the apostle Paul as the one who could say that he had learned to be content in all and every circumstance of life, but there was a time when Paul was not content and pleaded with God to change his circumstances:-

“There was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest upon me.” (2 Cor 12:7-9)

In his discontent with whatever his problem was, Paul asked for it to be taken away, but he was able to come to a place of contentment and joy as he both received God’s grace to cope and realised that his dependence on that grace gave most glory to God.

“All that God is doing in your life has this one goal in view. His grace has been given so that he would have a people that are in every way eager to do what he says is good. This is the purpose behind all the grace that daily operates in the life of each of his children. It is a subtle and subversive grace. It is designed once for all to destroy the culture of self-absorption that seduces and controls us all and is tailored to produce a counter-culture of zeal for divine good....It is grace that will finally take your eyes off your agenda for yourself and put them where they were designed to focus in the beginning – on God’s kingdom and His glory.” (Tripp p334)

Enjoying God’s Good Gifts

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” (1 Timothy 6:17)

We should enjoy what God has given us in this life, since everything that He has created ‘is good’ (1 Tim 4:4). Our enjoyment of those good gifts is meant to point us to our delight in the Giver. “While God gives us good things to enjoy, we must pursue the Giver, not the gift.” (Barclay p166)

“Blaise Pascal wrote, “Happiness can be found neither in ourselves nor in external things, but in God and in ourselves as united to him.” This is a succinct summation of biblical contentment. Human beings were created with a soul-thirst for God. Nothing but God can satisfy that thirst.” (Barclay p159).

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Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What aspects of 21st century culture tend to feed discontent in your heart?
2. Do you find that you are more likely to be discontent in times of abundance or in times of need? Why do you think that is?
3. How do we guard the gateways to our eyes and hearts?
4. When are you most contented? How would you recognise that you are content?
5. Do you identify with the struggles that the psalmist expresses in Psalm 73? Are you able to think of specific situations, how you felt and how it was resolved?
6. Barclay says "This psalm is instructive because it indicates to us that there is a time to register our complaints and to relate the experiences of our souls....." How do we do this without just being a grumbler and being a problem to other people's faith?
7. For many of us reviewing our past with its regrets, bitterness, disappointments and crushed dreams can destroy our present contentment and joy. What has helped you personally in facing some of these issues? How important has forgiveness been in the process?
8. What can you celebrate in your past? What can you thank God for?
9. What part do circumstances play in your experience of contentment; both the major issues and the small daily frustrations? How do you respond when things don't work out according to the script you would have written?
10. Do difficult circumstances cause you to question the sovereignty, goodness and providence of God in your life?
11. Why does discontented grumbling anger God and weaken our witness? How can we recognise God's goodness to us on a daily basis?
12. Do you agree that contentment can be more elusive in the second half of life? Why do you think that is? What are some of the specific challenges that you face?
13. What struggles do you have, or anticipate that you may have, with the ageing process?
14. Does regaining and focussing on an eternal perspective as a believer help you in some of these struggles?
15. If Augustine was right when he said "Our hearts are restless until they find our rest in you" how can you seek contentment in your relationship with God? Do you need to review how much time you spend in God's presence and nourishing your soul on his word?
16. How do we enjoy God's good gifts while recognising that it is the Giver, not the gifts that truly satisfy our deepest needs?

