



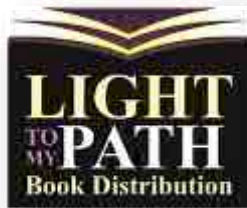
RESTING IN HIS PURPOSE

Learning to be content in a complex world

F. Wayne Mac Leod

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1

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

One of the greatest challenges in our, materialistic and self-centered age is to learn how to define our needs. Television and magazine advertisements have mastered the art of introducing us to needs we didn't know we had. There is a world of difference, however, between what we think we need and what, in fact, we really do need.

This problem is not a new one. Materialism and greed have been a problem since sin entered this world. Listen to what the apostle James tells the people of his day in James 4:2-4:

“You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

Lust and need are not the same. Lust is an unhealthy and sometimes overpowering appetite. It is a consuming fire that never finds satisfaction. Lust can overpower reason or sensibility. Its craving must be satisfied at all costs. The people James mentioned in the passage above were willing to kill, quarrel and fight to satisfy their lustful appetites. They could not be content with what they had.

We can lust for many things in life. Most commonly lust is associated with an unhealthy sexual desire but it is not limited to this. We can lust for material things, reputation or pleasures of all kinds. Lust by its very nature is unhealthy and unbalanced. It can become an unbalanced obsession or god. If unchecked, it can control our thoughts and actions and determine the course of our life. Lust does not promote the overall wellbeing of the person it controls.

Needs on the other hand are necessary to our emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Food, shelter and love are basic needs we all have. Without these needs being met we will suffer as human beings.

If we are to learn to be content we must begin by distinguishing lust from need. Imagine the young child crying out for more candy. As a parent you know that a steady diet of sweet candy is not healthy for your child. At this moment, however, that young child is not interested in the healthy meal you have put before him. All he wants is the candy. God knows what we need but, like this child, we are often not interested in what He says we need.

The world in which we live caters to our lusts. It presents us with its candies and tells us that we can't live without them. All too many people have fallen prey to the temptations and unhealthy attractions of the world. If we are to

experience true Biblical contentment we must learn to listen to our heavenly Father who created us and knows more than us what we truly need.

Have you ever been disappointed when you received what you thought you needed? Jonah felt he needed to take a ship to Tarshish instead of going to Nineveh as God asked. The prodigal son felt he needed to take his inheritance and leave home. Neither Jonah nor the prodigal son were content in the end. No believer can be content when they are not in the will of God. We can fight and plead with God for what we feel we need but more than anything else we need to be in the will and purpose of God. We cannot be content outside of that purpose.

If we want to be content we must learn to agree with God about what we really need. This is not always easy but when we allow God to define our needs, we can be sure that He will also meet those needs. Paul makes this quite clear in Philippians 4:19:

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

The apostle Paul suffered more than any other apostle. He was persecuted, beaten, rejected and thrown into prison but he still wrote this verse. He knew that no matter how difficult things were, God would care for him and provide everything he needed.

If we want to be content, we will need to deal with our fleshly lusts and let God define our needs. We will then need to trust Him with those needs. We can only be content if we learn to let God both define and supply our need.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between need and lust? Do you suppose we often get the two mixed up?
- Why is it important that we learn to allow God to define our needs? Can we be content if we do not accept His definition of need? Explain.
- How does knowing that God will provide all our needs help us to be content?

For Prayer:

- Consider your present situation in life. What do you see as your need? Take a moment to ask the Lord if your definition of need is really from Him.
- Surrender your goals and ambitions in life to God. Ask Him to show you His purpose for your life.
- Thank the Lord that He promises to be your support and to meet your need. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you did not trust Him in this.

2

THIRSTING FOR GOD AND HIS PURPOSES

As we seek to develop our understanding of Biblical contentment it is important that we discuss this matter of contentment and thirsting. When I speak of "thirsting" in this chapter I am speaking about a spiritual hunger and thirst that drives us to desire more of God and His purposes.

We have all met believers who are "content" with where they are in their spiritual lives. The reality of the matter, however, is that they are not growing in their walk with God. They are stuck in a rut. They don't want anyone to challenge them in their spiritual walk or their understanding of God and His purposes. They seem to be happy to stay in their comfort zone. They don't want to be stretched. Is this Biblical contentment? Can I be content and not hunger and thirst for more of God?

To answer this question it is important that we see what the Scripture teaches us about seeking God. In Psalm 42:1-2 we catch a glimpse of the heart of the Psalmist when he says:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

Notice what the Psalmist is saying. He is telling us that his heart “panted” for God. The Psalmist paints a picture of a thirsty deer craving water on a hot day. The deer longs for water with deep passion and intensity. Water becomes its obsession. Everything else is pushed aside in the pursuit of that water. This is how the Psalmist felt about God. He thirsted for Him. He needed to find God and experience His presence in a deeper way. Nothing else mattered as much as this pursuit.

Listen to what the Lord told His people through the prophet in Jeremiah 29:13:

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

God reminded His people that they would find Him if they sought Him “with all their heart.” The picture here is of a believer whose heart aches for God. Notice the phrase “all your heart.” This implies that this is the central focus of the heart of the person seeking God. There is nothing else in his heart but this pursuit of God. Nothing else matters as much to him as finding God. All his heart is devoted to this one purpose. This I believe to be the call of God on the life of every believer. The pursuit of God must be our passion and obsession.

What is true in our pursuit of God is also true of the pursuit of His gifts. Listen to what the apostle Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14:1:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

Notice how the apostle told the Corinthians that they were to "eagerly desire spiritual gifts." The phrase "eagerly desire" in the Greek means "to burn with zeal, to strive after or to covet." This is a strong word. It shows us, however, the heart of the believer. The believer passionately cries out for God's gifts and longs to be more fruitful in the work of His kingdom.

The same principle is true in our prayer life. Jesus told the story of a widow who lived in the same town as an unjust judge. The lady needed justice and the unjust judge kept putting her off. She refused to accept "no" for an answer and kept coming back asking for justice. Eventually, because of her persistence, the judge listened to her. What is the lesson of this story? Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 18:7:

And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?

God will bring justice for those who cry out to Him day and night. The lady did not stop asking. She would not give up seeking His favour. She could not be content until the judge had answered her. God calls us to this type of prayer.

Remember the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis? One day he wrestled with an angel of God. The wrestling match continued all night long. In the morning the angel asked Jacob to let him go. Listen to the response of Jacob in Genesis 32:26:

Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.'
But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you
bless me.'

Jacob received the blessing he desired because he refused to be content without it and insisted that the angel bless him.

The apostle James told his readers in James 4:2 that they did not receive certain things from God because they did not ask:

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

The implication here is that if we want to receive from God we need to ask Him. There is to be in each of us a holy discontentment that drives us to intensely seek God's blessings in prayer. Will we be content to allow our children to wander from the path of truth? Can we ever be content knowing that they are not experiencing God's fullest blessing and purpose for their lives? Should this not drive us to cry out to God on their behalf until He has answered our prayer?

Jesus told His listeners in Matthew 7:7-8:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

We are told that the Greek tense used in this passage indicates that the asking, seeking and knocking is constant. In other words, the passage could be translated in the following way: "for those who keep on asking, seeking and knocking the door will be opened." The idea is that there is persistence in this asking, seeking and knocking. The one who asks in this way does not give up. Like the lady who went to the unjust judge, they keep coming back. Like Jacob, they will not let God go until they have received their request from Him.

What do these verses teach us about Biblical contentment? There are three things we need to understand here.

Contentment is not Apathy or Indifference

What passes for contentment sometimes is apathy or indifference. When we are happy with where we are and have no desire to grow, this is not contentment it is indifference. People who are willing to sit back and not exercise their spiritual gifts are not content, they are spiritually lazy. When God calls us to do something but we are so comfortable with where we are that we don't want to move, this is not contentment, it is disobedience. We need discernment from God to distinguish laziness from contentment. All too often the enemy deceives us into thinking that our indifference, disobedience and apathy are signs of being content. We must not be fooled.

True Contentment will not be Happy with Anything Less than the Will of God

It is also important for us to understand that contentment is never happy with anything less than the heart of God. In the last chapter we discussed the importance of adjusting

our needs to be in line with God's understanding. I want to focus on this again.

True contentment seeks God's heart. We are never to be content with sin. When the widow kept coming back to the unjust judge for justice she was crying out for the will and purpose of God to be done in her life. She would not be content with injustice, nor should we. When Jacob wrestled with the angel and would not let him go, he was crying out for God's blessing in his life. God wanted to bless him. When Jesus told his listeners to keep asking, seeking and knocking, He was telling them to refuse to be content with anything less than the will of their heavenly Father for their lives.

The same is true in our pursuit of God and His empowering in our lives. Should we be content with anything less than what God desires for us? When I keep coming back to God and find myself panting for Him like a thirsty deer in the noontime heat, am I not seeking only what He desires for me? When I fast, pray and plead with God for greater fruit in my life am I not only asking for what He desires to give?

Can we say that we are demonstrating true Biblical contentment if we are content with something that God is not content with for us? We can only be content when we are seeking what God is seeking. We should never be satisfied with anything less than God's fullness for our lives.

True Contentment will not be Happy with Anything More than the Will of God

The believer can only be content when he or she is seeking what God is seeking for their lives. We need to understand, however, that very often we fail to be content because we are not properly discerning God's purpose or

will. Maybe you want your ministry to move in a certain direction but it is not the timing or purpose of God. Maybe you have an idea of how your marriage partner needs to be but God wants to change you instead. God's ways are very different from our ways. Paul wanted to be healed of his infirmity. Maybe he felt that this would enable him to minister more effectively but God wanted to use his weakness to demonstrate His power. Only when Paul understood this could he be content in his infirmity (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

True Biblical contentment is not happy with anything less than the purpose and will of God. At the same time, true contentment will not seek anything more than the purpose and will of God. Paul could not be content with the healing of his "thorn in the flesh" if it was the purpose and will of God to use it. Nor could he have ever been content to be free if God had a purpose for him in a prison cell.

The key to Biblical contentment is to be found in the purpose of God. Nothing more or nothing less will do. As believers we cannot be content until we are where God wants us to be. Sometimes that will mean crying out or wrestling with God for what He has not yet given. Sometimes it will mean sacrificing our ideas and plans and submitting to His purpose. We can only be content when we passionately seek after God and find ourselves walking in His purpose for our lives.

For Consideration:

- How is "contentment" confused sometimes with spiritual laziness or disobedience?

- Should Christians be content with anything less than God's purposes for their lives?
- How do our own ideas of what we want in life or ministry keep us from being content? Why is it important to surrender our ambitions and goals in life to God? Can we be content if we are seeking more than God wants to give? Can we be content if we are seeking less?

For Prayer

- Ask God to increase your passion for Him and His purposes for your life?
- Ask God to forgive you for not pursuing Him and His purposes more fully.
- Ask God to search your heart to see if there is anything in you that is not seeking His will. Ask him to remove anything that is not from Him.

3

STRIVING

In the last chapter we saw how we can only find true contentment by seeking the heart of God. Here in this chapter I would like to consider the word "striving" as it relates to contentment in the Christian life.

Striving for God

The word I want to look at here is a Greek word used in the New Testament on several occasions. This word is the word "*agonizomai*." Notice its similarity to the English word "agonize." "*Agonizoma*" implies striving, fighting, contending or endeavouring with great zeal. The word "*agonizomai*" is used in the New Testament to describe the effort the believer is to make for the sake of the kingdom of God. Let me share some examples of this word in the New Testament.

Jesus told his listeners in Luke 13:24 to "make every effort" (NIV) or "strive" (KJV) to enter through the narrow gate. The idea is that they were not to allow themselves any rest until they had found the gate that led to eternal life.

The apostle Paul illustrated the Christian life in 1 Corinthians 9:25 by speaking of how an athlete competes (*agonizomai*) in the games. There is intense effort in this illustration. Athletes discipline themselves and endure great hardship in an attempt to win.

Paul told the Colossian believers that he “strove” (*agonizomai*) according to the power of God that worked in him (Colossians 1:29). He commended Epaphras for being one who “laboured earnestly” (*agonizomai*) for the cause of the Gospel (Colossians 4:12). Paul encouraged all believers to fight (*agonizomai*) the good fight of faith in 1 Timothy 6:12 and ended his life with the assurance that he had himself fought (*agonizomai*) that good fight (2 Timothy 4:7).

The Christian walk is not an easy one. We will have to labour, contend and fight if we are going to be everything God calls us to be. The apostle Paul, who tells us that he had learned to be content in every situation, also spoke more about striving and fighting than any other apostle. We cannot miss the connection here.

Think of the athlete for a moment. The athlete pushes himself beyond his limit. As he strives, every muscle in his body aches. His heart pounds so hard he wonders if it will explode in his chest. His lungs gasp for air. His brain tells him to stop. Physically his whole body is in agony but he is content. This is where he wants to be. This is hard work but he delights in it.

This is how it ought to be in our Christian life. The apostles were beaten and mistreated as they agonized for the cause of the Gospel. After being flogged and warned never to preach in the name of the Lord Jesus, the apostles left the presence of their accusers in Acts 5:41 with joy in their

hearts because they had been “counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” There was contentment in the hearts of these men as they left their accusers. Like the athlete, their spiritual and physical muscles were aching but their heart was filled with praise, joy and thanksgiving.

Consider what Paul said to the believers in Philippians 4:12:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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.

There was plenty of trouble and trial in Paul's life. He had to fight and contend with hunger, poverty and physical abuse but in it he had learned the art of contentment.

Sometimes the Spirit will take us through deep waters. Sometimes He will move us into the heat of the battle where the enemy surrounds us. Some of us will be put on the front lines where we will feel the sting of the enemy's arrows. There will be casualties. There will be agonizing, fighting and striving but, according to Paul there can also be contentment.

Solomon told his readers in Proverbs 13:4:

The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied

Notice that true satisfaction and contentment comes from hard work and diligence. God has designed us to be hard workers and valiant fighters. True contentment is found in diligent and faithful service for our Lord.

Striving Against God

Not everyone is willing to strive for God. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah decided to go in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship to Tarshish and went the other way. Jonah fought against God and His purposes. Every wave that beat against Jonah's boat told him that he was going in the wrong direction. The captain of the ship found him sleeping and told him to wake up and call on his God. The sailors cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. He was cast into the sea and for three days and nights wrestled with God in the belly of a great fish. He was striving but not for God. There was no contentment for Jonah in this type of striving.

Moses too strove against God. When God called him to return to Egypt, he told God that he was not the right person for the job. He insisted that God send his brother Aaron instead.

There are times when we too wrestle with God because we do not like the way He is leading us. Maybe we have another idea of where we want to be or how we want things to unfold. We may obey like Moses but we do so fighting God. You may not be openly rebelling like Jonah but you still strive against God and His purposes in your heart. There can be no contentment for you until your heart is surrendered to God.

Striving Apart from God

There is another type of "striving" that will take away our contentment and lead to frustration. Paul, speaking to the Galatians in Galatians 3:2 said:

I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?

One of the biggest problems in the church of Galatia was the fact that they did not understand the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit. They had every intention of following the Lord and serving Him with all their heart but they were trying to do so in human effort and wisdom. They had never learned to walk in the Spirit and draw on His strength and wisdom.

Speaking in Romans 7:18-19 Paul said:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.

Paul understood that there was nothing good in his flesh. When he tried to live the Christian life in his own efforts he always failed. The flesh could not give him victory.

Solomon, in his great wisdom wrote in Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

This passage is very important if we are to understand what it means to be content. How often have we agonized

and wrestled in the Christian life only to be frustrated, not because we were not seeking God but because we were seeking Him in the wrong way. Your efforts may be pure and legitimate. Your heart may be in the right place. You may be heading in the right direction but you are doing so in the flesh. This sort of striving is difficult to discern. The heart and actions can be right but we are not drawing our strength from the right source. You can discipline yourself to read the Bible and pray. You can commit yourself to go to church or witness for the Lord. You can do all these things in human effort. Even an unbeliever can do these things.

Sometime ago I was speaking with a sister in the Lord who told me how she never taught a Sunday school class without spending hours in preparation. As we spoke, I commended her for her discipline but warned her of the danger of depending on her preparation more than the Spirit of God. I have often fallen into that trap myself.

We can push ourselves in the flesh to do the things of God. We can run ahead of the Spirit not waiting for His direction and leading. I say these things because I believe that there are many people striving in ministry to make things happen by their own wisdom and effort. They are not being led and empowered by the Spirit of God. True contentment is only found in partnership with God and the work of His Spirit in us.

There is a godly striving that leads to contentment. True contentment can only come when we walk in tune with God's Spirit. When we allow the Spirit of God to minister in us and through us, He will lead us into the heat of the battle. It is here that we can experience our deepest joy and satisfaction. In these times, the Holy Spirit draws close to

us. Here, in the heat of the battle, we experience His presence, power and fellowship. Countless saints have attested to the wonderful satisfaction of agonizing with Christ for the cause of the gospel. Paul was stoned and beaten more than any other apostle but experienced wonderful contentment in life. His heart overflowed with joy and satisfaction in God. Outwardly his body showed all the marks of persecution but his heart was fully content. He was satisfied because he was walking in fellowship with Christ and His Spirit.

Like the apostles we too can find true contentment in the midst of hard labour and fighting for the kingdom. If we are to find this contentment, however we must walk with the Spirit of God and in fellowship with Him. We must surrender to His purpose and will. We must cast off any attempt to do the work in our own effort, wisdom and strength. Contentment will only be found in submission and surrender to the leading and empowering of God through His Spirit.

For Consideration:

- Why is the concept of struggle and hard work not always acceptable to Christians?
- Can we find contentment in striving and agonizing for the cause of the kingdom?
- What does it mean to strive against God? Have you ever been guilty of this?
- Why is it hard to discern whether a person is serving in the flesh apart from God? Is it possible to have the right heart and actions but not walk in the Spirit? What is the difference between ministering in the flesh and ministering in the power of the Spirit?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you grace and strength to persevere and strive hard with Him.
- Ask God to teach you to walk in the Spirit and in His power and leading. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you tried to serve Him by your own effort and wisdom.
- Thank the Lord that there is great contentment in working hard in the Spirit. Thank Him for the contentment we have in walking in fellowship with Him.

4

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

There is a deep connection between contentment and the sovereignty of God. When we speak about the sovereignty of God we speak about His absolute right, authority and control over the universe and all that happens. Only when we truly understand and submit to this truth can we experience true contentment. Let's consider this in greater detail.

God has Absolute Right

How often have we grumbled and complained about our lot in life? Somehow we feel that God is not fair when He allows one person to experience blessing and another to suffer trials in life. Paul challenged this attitude in Romans 9:20-21:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Do you see what Paul is telling the Romans? He reminded them that God, as the Creator and Sustainer of all, had the right to do as He pleased with His creation. He could create a jar to use for common purposes and another to use in a very special way. It is the right of the potter to make pots for whatever purpose he desires. The same carpenter may build a simple shed or an expensive mansion. God, as our Creator, has the right to form us with different purposes in mind.

Paul took this a step further when he told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 that when they came to know the Lord Jesus and surrendered their lives and hearts to Him, they no longer belonged to themselves but to the Lord Jesus:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

The Lord God has the right over us not only because He created us but also because He bought us by the death of his Son. We can only experience contentment if we recognize and submit to this truth. There will be conflict between us and God as long as we believe that we have a right to our own destiny. This matter of control and ownership must be settled if we are to experience true contentment.

Listen to what Job said in Job 1:20-22 when he lost his family, his possessions and his health:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD

has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

How could Job be content when everything seemed to be going against him? He was content because he had accepted that the Lord his God had the right to do as He pleased with him and his possessions. He had no battle with God.

All too often we hold on to the things of this world as if they were ours to keep. None of us knows for how long God has given us our lives, our loved ones or our possessions. Instead of complaining because these things are taken from us, we should be praising God for the time He has loaned them to us. As a sovereign God He has the right over all we own.

You cannot experience contentment until you understand and fully surrender to the fact that God, as a sovereign God, has right to do what He pleases with all that belongs to Him. You do not belong to yourself. Everything you have first belongs to God. Surrender to Him and trust Him in this. We cannot fight God over ownership rights and experience true contentment. Until we have made peace with Him in this matter, true contentment will elude us.

God has Absolute Authority

There is another important aspect to the sovereignty of God. God also has absolute authority. As the one who has absolute authority, God has the final say in what happens. There is no authority over the Lord God. Isaiah put it this way in Isaiah 14:27:

For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out.

Jesus demonstrated this authority over sickness and the demons of hell. Demons fled at the sound of His voice. Sickness was healed when Jesus spoke. In the book of Genesis we read how God spoke and the earth came into existence. The word of God carries authority. What He speaks must be carried out. Satan himself must bow to the absolute authority of that word spoken from God.

A man came to Jesus one day whose servant was sick. That servant was very valuable to him and he did not want him to die. He came to Jesus and asked Jesus to heal this servant. As he came, the man felt unworthy that Jesus should come to his house so he said to Jesus in Luke 7:7:

That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.

This man understood the authority of the word of Jesus. He knew that whatever Jesus spoke would be done. He knew that Jesus did not need to come to his house to heal his servant. He could simply speak the word from where He was and it would be done. There is no force of hell, no sickness, no problem or trial that can stand against the authoritative word of God. All must bow to His authority. What He purposes to do cannot be changed or thwarted.

What is the connection between contentment and this aspect of God's sovereignty? Consider for a moment what we have just said about the absolute authority of God. Satan may unleash his evil spirits. Like Job we may lose all we have. We may be buffeted like Paul, stoned like Stephen or ridiculed for our faith but one simple word from

God and all this opposition will flee. What comfort we need to take from this. The enemy wants us to believe that our situation is hopeless. He wants us to believe that we are locked up forever in the prison cells of depression, bitterness and oppression. One simple word from our God, however, and those prison doors swing wide open.

We can rest in this wonderful truth of God's absolute authority. Like Joseph we may find ourselves in a prison for a time but we know that we are not defeated. When He speaks, nothing can keep us bound. The chains will fall off and we will be freed. When we live with the understanding of this authority we can be at peace. We can live with a smile in our heart because we understand how weak and powerless the enemy really is. We can be content in any circumstance because we know that victory is only one word away.

God has Absolute Control

There is one final aspect to God's sovereignty that I want to touch on here in this context. As a sovereign God, our God has absolute control over situations and people. One day the prophet Jeremiah was asked to buy a field from his cousin. This was just prior to the invasion of the Babylonians. Jeremiah wondered why God would ask him to buy a field that the enemy was just about to take from him. God reminded him, however, that the day would come when his people would return to the land he had purchased from his cousin. Listen to what God told the prophet in Jeremiah 32:27:

I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?

God was able to do the impossible. God was going to work out the circumstances of life so that the land Jeremiah bought would be returned to His people.

Throughout the Scripture the Lord demonstrates His power and control. He set His people free from the hands of the Egyptians. He opened the sea to let them cross on dry land. He gave them water from a rock. He caused the sun to stand still so that His people could have victory. He provided them with manna each day and sustained them for forty years in the wilderness. His hand was busy moving nature, influencing leaders and deciding the course of history in favour of His people.

That power and control was demonstrated in the Lord Jesus who healed the sick and rescued them from the evil one. The apostles experienced the power of God through wonderful miracles in the early church. The apostle Paul reminded the Philippians in Philippians 4:13: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." He developed that thought further in Romans 8:31-32:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.

It is true that we will, for a time, have to face the trials and tribulations of this life. The fact of the matter, however, is that victory is ours in Christ. Our God is in control. He will use everything that happens to us to accomplish His perfect will. God promises that everything that happens will work for our good. He can promise this because He is a sovereign God who is in absolute control of life's circumstances. Paul wrote in Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Contentment rests solidly in this wonderful reality of God's sovereignty. God has absolute right, authority, control and power. When we understand this, we can rest in Him and trust His ways. You cannot trust a God who might fail. You cannot trust a God who is not in absolute control. Our God cannot fail. His love for us is as absolute as his sovereign purposes. He will not abandon us. Isaiah 49:15-16 says:

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

The sovereign God of the universe promises not to forget you. He has written your name on the palm of His hand. Your name and your struggle are always before Him. His love for you is greater than the love of any mother for her newborn child. He will come to you in your time of need. He will not allow you to bear more than you can handle. You may not understand what He is doing but you can be sure that as a sovereign and loving God He knows what He is doing and is in absolute control of your situation. This is the basis for all contentment. I can be content in whatever situation I find myself because I have a God who is sovereign and loving. I can trust His purpose. He will do what is right.

Let me conclude with this final statement from the apostle Paul in Romans 8:37-39:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let the enemy throw at me whatever he wants. In Christ I am able to overcome. Because of Christ, everything that comes my way is a means for me to grow and mature in my relationship with God. As long as God is sovereign, I can be confident. As long as I am resting in that sovereignty I can be content.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself wrestling with God over things that ultimately belong to Him? Why is it so difficult for us to accept the lordship of Christ over all we have?
- How does surrendering everything to Christ help us to be content?
- What comfort and assurance does knowing that God has absolute power and authority give you? Is there any problem that He cannot deal with?
- What are the feelings of this sovereign God toward us as His children? What comfort do you take from this?

For Prayer

- Take a moment to recognize God's sovereign ownership of all that you have. Surrender any sense of ownership you have of these things.
- Thank the Lord that He is in control of your present circumstance and will use it to accomplish good.
- Take a moment to ask God to forgive you for doubting that He is fully able to deal with whatever situation that has come your way.
- Ask God to help you to rest in His sovereign plan and purpose. Ask Him to help you to be content in that purpose for your life.

5

CONTENTMENT IN SILENCE

Someone once said that the Christian dreads the silence of God more than anything else in life. When we were serving as missionaries on the islands of Mauritius and Reunion in the Indian Ocean, there were times when we faced significant challenges in our ministry and personal life. Sometimes we wondered how we would be able to keep going. Our strength to carry on came from a deep sense of God's call on our lives. God had made it clear to us before we left Canada that this was His purpose for us at that time. When we hear from God and are assured of His purpose and presence, we find strength to face the obstacles that come our way.

We do not always hear from God. We have all gone through times of silence in our spiritual lives. Though we cry out to God, we do not seem to get an answer. We feel alone and unable to sense His presence. Listen to the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 22:2:

O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.

In 1 Samuel 13, King Saul waited for Samuel the prophet to offer a sacrifice before going into battle. As he waited, the enemy grew stronger. The silence and waiting was a fearful thing for Saul's soldiers. In time of battle they would have bravely faced the foe. This silence however, was more than they could handle. In the silence, doubt and fears were given full opportunity to reveal themselves.

In World War II one of the tactics used to confuse the enemy was to deploy a smoke screen. When the smoke screen was deployed, the enemy was blinded. This caused great confusion. The silence of God is like that smoke screen. It seems to hide God's face from us. We can't see Him anymore. We can't hear Him. We are left with a sense of confusion, fear, and sometimes even panic. It is not easy to sit still in the confusion and darkness of silence. We have all faced these terrifying and confusing periods of silence. Is contentment possible in these times?

The Providence of God in the Silence

The apostle Paul told the Philippians in Philippians 4:12 that he had learned to be content in all situations of life. This includes those periods of silence. The apostle spent many years of his life behind the bars of a Roman jail. Can you imagine what it would have been like for someone with the energy of Paul to sit alone behind those bars day after day? Every nerve in his body wanted to reach the world for Christ. Instead, he was restrained and isolated. His freedom was taken from him. How difficult this would have been. Paul understood, however, that God was a sovereign God. In His providence, God works everything out for

the good of His children. Listen to what Paul told the Romans in Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Paul knew this to be true in his experience in a Roman prison. He told the believer in Philippians 1:12-14:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Paul's confinement had a purpose in the providence of God. God was using this confinement to reach the palace guard. He was using it to help other believers to become bolder in their proclamation of the gospel. They had seen Paul's example and were encouraged to give themselves more fully to the work of the Lord. Paul's imprisonment was used of God for a very special purpose.

In his imprisonment and isolation, Paul was given opportunity to write. He may not have realized that what he wrote from his prison cell would one day be read by people all over the world. God reached more people through the silence of Paul's prison cell than He did through the rest of his ministry.

What we need to understand here is that God uses these times of silence, isolation and confusion to accomplish His purpose. I have grown more in the silence than at any other time in my life. In the silence, God has shown me many things about myself. In those times my faith has been stretched and my heart tested. God is still God in the silence. Though things may be confusing and we don't know what is happening, we can be confident that He is still in control. God will use the silence to accomplish His purpose. In this thought we can find contentment.

The Presence of God in the Silence

As a child, I remember how, in the darkness and silence of the night, I could image all sorts of monsters and terrible things. In these periods of dark silence, Satan will exaggerate our fears and concerns in an attempt to strip away our contentment. Fear and contentment are natural enemies. No one can be truly content if they are overcome with fear.

In Daniel 3 we read how Daniel's three friends refused to listen to the command of the king to bow down to the idol he had erected. As a result, they were thrown into a fiery furnace. In that time of trial, the Lord opened their eyes to see the presence of a fourth person in the flames with them. That person was the Lord God Himself. He followed them right into that furnace. He allowed them to face the trial but chose to go through it with them.

Elisha's servant woke up one morning and looked around him. The enemy had come during the night and surrounded the city. He was afraid. He didn't know what to do. He felt for sure that the city was about to be swallowed up by this powerful army. Elisha, his master, prayed that the Lord would open his servant's eyes to see what was really

happening around him. We read the following account in 2 Kings 6:15-17:

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked. 'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

The servant had not been able to see the angels of God surrounding the city. It is easy to see the problems and obstacles on the path but not so easy to see the presence of God and His angels. If we are to experience contentment in the midst of silence, we must remind ourselves that while we may not always see God, He promises never to leave us. He surrounds and protects us in the silence.

The Promise of God for the Silence

There is one other thing we need to mention here about the silence of God. Listen to the promise of God through Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 40:31:

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

In Isaiah 64:4 the prophet went on to say:

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

God promises to act on behalf of those who wait on Him. Are you in a place right now where you cannot see God? Has it been a while since you really had any clear direction from Him? Do you cry out day and night to the Lord but hear only cold silence? Do these promises not bring us hope? God promises to act on behalf of those who wait for Him. His timing may not be the same as ours but He will act on our behalf. We have His promise.

Can we be content in the silence when we can't see or hear God? Is it possible to be content when we are confused and have no clear sense of what God is doing? Can we know true contentment when everything around us is dark? The answer is a definite "yes." We can experience this contentment when we understand God's providence. He is a sovereign God who will work out every detail for His glory and our good. We can experience contentment when we accept by faith His presence. He has not left us. He surrounds us with His angels. We can experience contentment when we believe the promises that if we wait on Him, He will act on our behalf.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself in a place of confusion and silence? How did you feel at that time?
- What comfort can we take from the promises of God to provide for us and use every situation for our good?

- Has God ever used what appeared to be a bad situation in your life for good? Explain.
- Does the fact that we cannot see evidence of God or hear Him mean that He has abandoned us?
- What are the promises of God for those who wait on Him in silence?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that while we may not always see evidence of His presence, we can know that He never leaves us.
- Thank the Lord that He uses all of life's situations to accomplish good in our lives.
- Are you going through a difficult time in your life right now? Ask God to encourage you with His promises. Accept those promises and walk in the confidence of His provision and presence.

6

SIMPLICITY

As we look at this question of contentment it is important that we take time to speak about its relationship to simplicity. There are times when we do not experience contentment because we have not been living in this Biblical principle of simplicity.

Letting God Figure out the Details

There is a very important verse in Mark 10:15 that speaks to this issue of simplicity.

I tell you the truth; anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Jesus told His disciples that unless they accepted what He told them like a child they would not inherit the kingdom of God. What Jesus is telling us is that we need to develop the childlike attitudes of humility and trust. Consider this for a moment. Children have absolute confidence in their parents. With their father and mother beside them, they have no reason for fear. Children coming to the table do not concern themselves about where the money is going

to come from to pay for the food they eat. They trust their parents to care for these issues. They simply enjoy what has been provided.

How difficult we have made things in life. Unlike the child described above, we worry and fret over life. We do not have the trust and confidence of a child in our heavenly Father. We take on things that are too big for us to handle. Imagine your young children trying to take on matters that were beyond their years. Instead of enjoying their childhood they spend their days worrying and fretting over adult matters. Would you not be concerned? Would you not reassure them that, as their parent, you were taking care of these matters for them?

I have often found myself taking on matters that were too big for me to handle. Personally, I have a nature that wants to figure everything out and see how it all fits together. This has served me well in the ministry of teaching and writing but there are things we were never meant to figure out in this life. We worry instead of enjoying the good things God has given us. We are not content because we have not been living with childlike simplicity and trust in our heavenly Father. We complicate our lives with thoughts that are beyond us instead of trusting our Father to provide and work out the details. The result is a stress filled and discontented life.

God reminds us in Isaiah 55:9 that His ways and thoughts are higher than ours:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Do we really believe that we could ever understand the purposes of God? His plans and purposes are beyond us. Even the most brilliant mind could never grasp what God is doing in this world.

Paul reminded the church in 1 Corinthians 2:9 of how impossible it was for them grasp what God was preparing for them in the age to come.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

Paul is telling us that no one has ever seen anything like what God is preparing for us. He is telling us that we have never heard nor has it ever entered our minds the wonders that await us. It is not possible for us to even imagine the wonders of heaven. These things are too big for us to understand.

Moses understood this when he reminded his people in Deuteronomy 29:29 that the secret things belonged to God.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.

What God has not revealed clearly to us is not for us to understand. Yet how often have we tried to understand the secret things of God? Don't worry about details that God has chosen to hide from you. At this point in time, they are beyond your ability to bear or understand. Instead, just trust Him with childlike faith. Your heavenly Father knows what He is doing.

What I am trying to say here is that we need to accept that God's ways are impossible for our human mind to completely understand. There are things about God and His ways that we will never be able to figure out. Some time ago I was speaking to an individual about the doctrine of the Trinity. He told me that he could not understand how God could be three persons and one person at the same time. I reminded him that I was glad that there were things about God that were impossible to figure out. You see, if I could figure out how God worked and knew all there was to know about Him, than He wouldn't be very big. In fact, if I could figure God out, He wouldn't be any bigger than my mind. The reality of the matter is that God is bigger than this. He is bigger than my imagination. He is bigger than my ability to understand. I am thankful for this because it means that he is bigger than me. I find great satisfaction in this.

We need to stop trying to figure out all that God is doing and learn to trust Him with childlike simplicity. There are matters that are too big for us. In these matters we need to rest and trust. Could it be that we are not experiencing contentment because we are so busy being worried about things that are too hard for us to understand? Until we learn to live in simple childlike confidence and trust, we will never know true contentment.

Letting God Lead

There is another aspect to this simplicity. We have spoken of simplicity in terms of trusting God in the things we don't understand. Not all of us are thinkers. Some of my closest friends are action people. They are not so concerned about figuring things out as they are with getting things done. It is possible to complicate our lives by actions as well.

Martha, in the Gospel of Luke, is an example of this. In her attempt to serve and honour the Lord, she busied herself with the responsibility of offering hospitality to Him and His disciples. The responsibilities she took on that day seemed to be more than she could handle. She became agitated. There were so many things to do and so little time and help to get them done. Mary, her sister was no help to her. She sat at Jesus' feet listening to His teaching. In frustration, Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Listen to Jesus' response in Luke 10:41-42:

‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’

Jesus saw how Martha's life was cluttered with obligations and responsibilities. She was not content. She was agitated. She needed to slow down and get her priorities right. Her busy and complicated lifestyle stripped her of joy and contentment.

The enemy will not hesitate to complicate our lives with needs and responsibilities. The reality of that matter is that there is no way you can ever meet all the needs around you. I was powerfully reminded of this some time ago on a trip to Haiti. Everywhere I went the need was striking. People reached out their hands asking for money or food. There was no way I could minister to all those needs. How often have we found ourselves taking on the problems of the world? We soon find ourselves overwhelmed.

The apostles in the book of Acts found themselves in a similar situation. The physical needs of that day were tremendous. The need for help in the daily distribution of bread became obvious. The apostle refused to take it on

because it was not the purpose and leading of God in their lives. God had called them to a ministry of prayer and preaching. To get involved in the distribution of bread would have distracted them from the call of God on their lives. That day, the apostles made what appeared to be a very harsh decision. Listen to what they decided in Acts 6:2:

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.'

For an action person, it is very difficult to see a need and not do anything about it. The problem however, is that there are too many needs in this world for one person. If we are not wise and discerning we will soon find ourselves overwhelmed, burnt out and distracted from God's purpose for our lives.

When I first felt the call of God on my life to overseas missions, I remember people saying: "Wayne, why are you going overseas? There are so many needs right here in our own country." I wrestled with this for some time until the Lord showed me that I was not going to the mission field because of the need, I was going because God was calling me. When I understood this, things became so much simpler. I didn't have to figure out how to divide myself up so that I could minister to all the needs in the world, I just had to obey God and do what He was telling me to do.

Samuel the prophet gave King Saul some wise advice in 1 Samuel 15:22 when he told him: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams." In this context, Samuel had taken on responsibilities that God

had not given him. The fact of the matter is that when we take on responsibilities that God has not given us we too are living in disobedience. We cannot be controlled by need. We must be led by God's Spirit.

Like Martha, we can so easily complicate our lives trying to change the world when this is not God's purpose for us. We take the care of the world on our shoulders and feel responsible for every need that comes our way instead of trusting God to show us what He wants us to do. This will only leads to frustration.

God alone is big enough to care for the needs of the world. He only expects us to do what He leads us to do. He will never give us more than we can handle in His strength. We can weary ourselves with responsibilities that were never given to us. If we want to experience contentment, we must learn to trust God to care for the needs around us. We must learn to follow His leading and not take on what He has not directed us to take on. If we are to learn to be content, we need to walk in simple obedience.

Freeing Myself from the Things of the World

There is one more thing we need to say in this area of contentment and simplicity. Listen to the advice Jesus gave to the soldiers of his day in Luke 3:14:

Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay.'

The writer to the Hebrews warned his readers in Hebrews 13:5 of the danger of money and possessions:

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.'

There is an important lesson for us to learn here in these passages. Instead of complicating our lives with the pursuit of money and possessions, we are to learn to be content with what God has already given. All too often we believe that money and possessions will give us contentment. This is simply not the case. The more we have, the more we want. We complicate our lives with the pursuit of things and wonder why we do not find contentment.

Listen to what the apostle Paul told the Philippians in Philippians 4:11-12:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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.

Notice that Paul's contentment had nothing to do with how much or how little he had. He had discovered contentment in poverty as well as in riches. His contentment was not based on worldly possessions. How easy it is for us to believe the lie that says that we can never be happy until we have more than we presently have. The unhealthy pursuit of money and worldly possessions will never bring true satisfaction and contentment in life. Countless lives have attested to this fact.

The Scriptures make it clear that we cannot serve God and money (see Matthew 6:24). Contentment can only be found in surrender to God and His perfect plan for our lives. Anything that comes between God and me will hinder my contentment. Sometimes we are not experiencing contentment because our lives have become cluttered with the pursuit of the wrong things. We seek contentment in the things of this world and not in God. We clutter our lives with worldly goods that were never designed to fill the void of our hearts.

Do you want to experience true contentment? Remove the clutter that stands in the way. With childlike faith learn to trust God with those things that are too difficult for you to understand. Don't rush out to fix everything, listen instead for the leading of God's Spirit and step out in those things. Strip away the love of money and possessions and learn to be thankful for what God has already given.

For Consideration:

- Why do we often feel the need to understand everything before we step out in obedience?
- Do you have a childlike faith or have you been trying to take on matters that are too big for you? Why is it difficult at times for us to admit that there are matters that are too big for us?
- What is the difference between being motivated by need and being led by God's Spirit?
- Have you found yourself looking to possessions and material things for contentment? Will these things ultimately bring contentment?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to learn how to trust Him with things that are too big for you to understand.
- Take a moment to ask the Lord if you are where He wants you to be in your ministry or personal life. Surrender to His leading in this.
- Ask God to set you free from the pull of possessions and material goods. Ask Him to teach you how to be content with what He has already given.

LEARNING CONTENTMENT

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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 4:11-12)

Notice what the apostle Paul told the Philippians in the above passage. Twice in these two verses he told them that he had learned to be content in every situation. This tells us that contentment is something we need to learn. It is not something that comes naturally to us. If we want to be content, we must work at it. In this final chapter I want to take some time to examine how we can learn to be content.

Let me underline this truth once more. Paul makes it clear that he had to learn to be content. There are times when we are of the opinion that contentment is something that is given to us without effort. We are either content or we are not content. Sometimes, however, contentment only comes through hard work and discipline.

When the children of Israel wandered through the wilderness they grumbled and complained about their lot in life. Admittedly, the wilderness was not a nice place to be. What is important for us to understand here, however, is what happened to them because they grumbled and complained. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:9-10:

We should not test the Lord, as some of them did--and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did--and were killed by the destroying angel.

Notice that the Lord sent a destroying angel to punish the children of Israel for their grumbling and complaining in the wilderness. This is a fearful thought. What is your reaction to the wilderness in your own life? Do you grumble about your job, your health or your situations? Do you realize that when we do not accept what God has sent our way we are grumbling against what a sovereign and holy God has allowed for our good? If God sent His destroying angel to punish His people in the wilderness, should we not take heed lest we too fall into the same sin?

If you find yourself in a situation where you are not content you need to go to the Lord about this and confess it as sin. You need to come before Him and ask Him to teach you how to be content in the circumstances He is sending your way.

By way of summarizing what we have already seen, let's examine how we can learn to be content in all circumstances.

Recognize the Battle

The first thing we need to understand is that the enemy delights to take away our contentment. Consider what happened in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had everything their hearts desired. The one thing God did not want them to have, however, was the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve lived in contentment and joy in what God had provided for them. Satan knew that if he could strip away their contentment he would be able to turn them from God. This is exactly what Satan did. He showed Eve the forbidden tree and promised even greater things than God gave her if she would eat from it. Eve saw the tree, heard the promises of Satan and opened her heart for seeds of discontent to be sown. She allowed those seeds to take root and we all know the result. She disobeyed God and sin entered the world. It entered because Satan was able to sow seeds of discontent in Eve's heart.

Satan continues to attack in this way. He knows that discontent is fertile soil for all kinds of disobedience. Greed, envy, strife and anger all thrive in the soil of discontent. When these sins take root in fertile soil there is no telling what kind of fruit they will produce. How important it is for us to realize the danger of discontent in our lives. The person who is discontent is a prime target for the enemy. Understanding this battle is the first step to learning how to be content.

Trust the Sovereignty of God

The second thing we need to accept if we are to learn how to be content is the sovereignty of God. We have already examined this in some detail. When we say that God is sovereign we mean that He has absolute right, authority

and control over the affairs of my life and the events of this world. Contentment is solidly rooted in a deep understanding of God's sovereignty.

How could I ever be content if I did not understand that God was in control of the events of my life? How could I ever learn contentment if somehow I believed that the enemy might win the battle? I can only be content because I have a God who is in control of the events of my life. He promises to work out all details for my good and His glory. There is great comfort in this. This does not mean that there will never be difficulties in life. It does mean, however, that even the most tragic circumstance is in God's hand. He will somehow use whatever happens to me to draw me closer to Him and extend His kingdom.

To grumble and complain like the children of Israel in the wilderness is to doubt what God tells us about Himself. He tells us that He will work out all things for our good. When we grumble and complain we simply prove to everyone around us that we are living in disbelief. This is why God dealt with grumbling in the Old Testament so severely. If we want to learn to be content we need to accept that God is a sovereign God who is working out His purposes in our lives. Contentment and sovereignty are intimately linked.

Accept the Priorities and Purposes of God

Accepting that God is a sovereign God has another implication in my life. If He is the sovereign Lord, then I need to live in obedience to Him and trust Him with the events and circumstances of my life. Very often we are not content because we do not accept God's purpose. We have our own ideas and plans. These plans are sometimes contrary

to the purposes of God. Until we are willing to lay everything down and accept God's plan and purpose for our lives, we will never be content.

Open Your Eyes to the Provision and Presence of God

God not only wants us to accept His purpose and plan for our lives but also to know that He will be with us and provide all that we need in that purpose. The children of Israel grumbled and complained in the wilderness because their eyes were blinded to God's presence with them. They complained and worried because they doubted His wonderful provision for them in that wilderness. The enemy will do all he can to blind us to the provision and presence of God. Satan does not worry so much if you accept God's purpose as long as he can keep you from seeing God and trusting His provision in that purpose.

Sometimes God reveals Himself in very small ways. If we are not careful we will miss seeing him. The church I was working with on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean had been the centre of the evangelical work on the island for many years. God had been doing a wonderful thing through the church. Satan had succeeded, however, in causing great division among believers. This had devastating consequences on the ministry and believers in the church. Very shortly after arriving on the island, the Lord showed me a picture of a battlefield. I remember seeing myself walk around that battlefield. I was amazed at the devastation I saw. All around me, on the ground, were the bodies of church members. They looked lifeless and dead. I felt grief in my heart as I looked at the scene and wondered what could possibly be done. Was there any hope for this church? As I looked at the bodies around me, my eyes caught sight of one body in particular. My attention was drawn to the hand of this individual lying lifeless on

the ground. As I looked at his hand, I noticed a small twitch of the finger. My hope sprang up. I felt joy in my heart. That little twitch of the finger told me that there was life and that all was not hopeless.

As I ministered over the next few years, God showed me many little things that gave me a sense of His presence and provision. Someone would not respond with as much anger in a given situation. Someone was willing to meet with us in order to talk about the conflicts they had been having with each other. I can't say that radical things happened all at once but little things constantly reassured us that God was working.

How easy it is to overlook those little things. We have our own idea of what we want to see and are blinded to any other indication of the presence and provision of God. If you want to learn contentment, you will have to open your eyes. God is demonstrating His presence and provision all the time but we are not seeing it. If we would open our eyes we would see that God has never left us nor have His blessings stopped. To be content we must learn to watch for indications of the presence and provision of God. We need to see Him in the little things He sends our way.

Make it your priority every day to find something for which you can thank the Lord. Maybe it is something small and insignificant but it is evidence of His presence and provision. Learn how to recognize and thank God for these little things.

Confess any Striving Against God

In this study we have looked at the life of Moses. When he arrived in Egypt and saw that things were not going the

way he wanted, he complained to God. In Exodus 5:22-23 we read:

Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.'

Moses was not content in this ministry because things were not going as he had planned. He knew he was called but he still had his own ideas of how quickly things needed to happen. He was not trusting God's purposes.

The prophet Jeremiah found himself in a similar situation in Jeremiah 15:15-18. Here in these verses he complained to God because of how people were treating him. He told God that he did not like the lifestyle he had been called to live as a prophet. Listen to what he told God in Jeremiah 15:18:

Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?

Jeremiah wrestled with God over his ministry and life. He struggled to accept God's purposes.

Who among us has not struggled with God's purposes for their life? If we want to learn contentment we must stop fighting God. God does not do things the way we do them. His ways are different from ours. There will be times when He will use what appears to be tragedy to accomplish great good. We need to let Him be God. We need to die to our

own ideas, preferences and desires and trust Him to do what He wants to do in us.

There are many things we will not be able to understand. None of us will ever be able to grasp the mind of God and His purposes. Don't let your lack of understanding keep you from trusting Him. Don't try to figure out the details yourself. Learn to trust God's leading. He has all the details worked out. Stop looking at things through human eyes. Ask God to help you to look to Him and see things from His perspective. We can only experience contentment as we surrender completely to God's purpose, accept what we do not understand, and walk in obedience to His leading.

Contentment can only be learned as we choose to live in absolute surrender to the Lord God and His purposes. The believer will never find contentment in anything short of God's purpose. If we want to experience the contentment God promises, we will need to learn to accept God's ways and trust what He is doing. We may not understand His purposes but we can trust His promises and leading.

When you find discontent and anxiety welling up inside you, take a moment to consider the God you serve. Line yourself up with His purposes, confess any disbelief or disobedience and wait on Him and His leading. The path to contentment in the Christian life is really the path to God for when we find Him and accept His purposes then we are truly content.

For Consideration:

- What did Paul mean when he said that contentment is learned? Are there situations in life where you need to learn how to be content? What are they?
- Why is discontent such a powerful tool in the hands of the enemy?
- "The path to contentment is really the path to God for when we find Him and accept His purpose then we are truly content." Do you agree with this statement? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to teach you to be content in all situations He sends your way.
- Ask God to help you to know and accept Him and His purposes for your life.
- Thank Him that when we find Him and His purpose we are truly content.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely or at cost price to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

To date tens of thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

For more information about Light To My Path visit our website at <http://ltmp-homepage.blogspot.ca>