

“If you live long enough, you will be confronted with the crushing disappointment that life in a broken world brings. Jennie Pollock understands disappointment and longing, and lovingly shows us where lasting peace can be found when life is not what you expected it to be.”

COURTNEY REISSIG, Author, *Teach Me to Feel*

“This is a timely message for our generation, filled with the wisdom that comes from living something rather than merely talking about it. Jennie’s meditations on contentment will strengthen anyone wrestling with an ‘if only’ in their Christian life.”

ANDREW WILSON, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“This book is for anyone who has ever wondered why God is withholding the very thing their heart desires. I found myself nodding in agreement on every page. Biblical, insightful and immensely helpful.”

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“This is a beautiful, brave book. Jennie is not afraid to probe our doubts and fears. But in so doing, she shares deep truth which not only consoles but becomes the bedrock of life. This book is to be read, treasured and given away!”

WENDY VIRGO, Speaker; Author

“*If Only* invites the reader to take an honest look at the God who loves us, even when things aren’t going the way we dreamed. Practical, Scripture-filled and a wonderful gift to the church.”

CATHERINE PARKS, Author, *Real*

“This is going to become one of my go-to books. I loved it. Jennie writes with such reality and warmth, and the truths will sparkle from the pages even in the midst of dark times.”

CAROLYN ASH, Former Ministry Wives Conference Organiser,
The Proclamation Trust

“In *If Only*, Jennie Pollock allows her readers to be honest and then invites us to learn how true and joyful contentment is possible in Christ. This book is an encouragement to refocus our gaze on our Saviour.”

CAROLYN LACEY, Author, *Extraordinary Hospitality*
(*For Ordinary People*)

“Refreshingly honest. I found a richness and challenge in Jennie’s writing, and came away pondering much in my own life. I heartily recommend this book.”

CLAIRE MUSTERS, Author, *Taking Off the Mask*

“Are you missing something in your life? This book is for you. Jennie Pollock acts as a friend and guide, sharing her hard-earned wisdom in finding contentment, through heart-rending stories and the rich wisdom of the Bible.”

AMY BOUCHER PYE, Author; Speaker and Retreat Leader

“A warm, compassionate and encouraging book for anyone struggling to find contentment in the face of painful realities.”

JO SWINNEY, Author; Speaker

“If God were an ocean, we would have barely dipped our feet at the shore. In *If Only*, Jennie invites us to come deeper into the water, and see if he isn’t the ultimate source of contentment we need.”

SHERIDAN VOYSEY, Broadcaster; Author, *Resurrection Year*

“Here’s a book that draws you in and helps you feel like you’re enjoying a chat over a coffee with a friend. Thoughtful, evocative and warmly practical.”

ANTONY BILLINGTON, Senior Pastor, Beacon Church;
Theology Advisor, London Institute for Contemporary
Christianity

JENNIE POLLOCK

IF
ONLY

Finding joyful contentment in the
face of lack and longing

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INTRODUCTION

I'm not sure when I started wanting to get married. It was just something I expected would happen naturally. My parents met and married young, and I always assumed that by my mid-twenties I would be married with at least a couple of kids. I know that long before I hit 30 I was already longing for it.

As I write these words, I'm 47 and still single.

I spent years praying for a husband—sometimes diligently, sometimes desperately, sometimes despondently. But the desire was always there—the hope that *this* wedding, *this* party, *this* event would be the place where we would meet; the extra alertness when meeting new people; the tendency to check the left hand of any vaguely passable or interesting man... and the disappointment when, yet again, it wasn't to be.

MIND THE GAP

If you're reading this, I'm guessing that you're living with an "if only" too: an area of life where things aren't working, a circumstance you wish were different, a lack or

longing that you're reminded of daily. Whether it's a big thing or a little thing, there's a gap between expectation and reality that you can no longer avoid.

I'm also starting from the premise that you're a Christian. That means that by definition you have at some point said, "God, I trust you. I've tried it my way and it didn't work. Please forgive me, on the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection. I acknowledge that you know what is best for me, and I choose to submit to your will." In fact, to be a Christian is to continue saying that to God, day by day. Yet it can be hard to keep going when life doesn't pan out the way we expected—and it's certainly hard to keep going *joyfully*.

As I have listened to many people's stories over the last few years, and as I reflect on my own, it seems to me that there is a "contentment gap", that sits between our expectation of what the Christian life should be like and our experience of it. This gap may have started as a tiny crack, a fissure between the overflowing joy of our love for Christ and that one little circumstance that still nagged on the edges of our consciousness. Over time, the crack widened until it formed a crevice, a canyon, a yawning chasm, filled with our doubts, fears and questions about this God who was supposed to give us "fullness of joy" (Psalm 16 v 11, ESV). Just as water can, with time and persistence, carve channels out of solid rock, so our unmet expectations or unaddressed desires can erode our joy—the spouse who we no longer "click" with, the job that

doesn't fulfil us, or the budget that constantly constricts us. From the bottom of the valley we can see the sun, but we can't feel its warmth, and we wish we could find a way to the surface to enjoy it again.

Or maybe the canyon was created overnight. When COVID-19 swept the world in 2020 many people lost jobs, homes and security—not to mention loved ones. Maybe the earth was ripped from beneath your feet in a catastrophe like that and you found yourself, dazed and confused, in a landscape that was barely recognisable.

How do we climb out of this canyon? Is it even possible?

THE SECRET

One man who had experienced life in the canyon was the apostle Paul. When he wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, he was being held captive in Rome because of his Christian faith—in a house rather than a jail, but still in chains and under guard (see Acts 28 v 16, Philippians 1 v 12-14). He was unable to work or to travel around preaching, as he had loved to do, and he had rivals on the outside who were now taking advantage of his imprisonment (Philippians 1 v 15-18). Not to mention that becoming a Christian in the first place had meant a significant loss of face, loss of reputation, loss of status, in fact, loss of everything Paul had been working for his entire life. He had given it all up for Jesus... and look where it had got him! If anyone had the right to feel he'd got a raw deal from God, Paul certainly did.

And yet his letter to the Philippians is just bubbling over with joy and delight. He had “learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4 v 12).

When Paul talks about the secret of being content, he doesn't mean finding a peaceful life. He's not picturing the kind of contentment exhibited by a well-fed cat, curled up by the fire purring. Or by an old farmer, leaning on a gate, gazing across fields of waving wheat and healthy herds. Or by a baby burbling happily in her cot, unaware of the storms of life raging outside her window. These are wonderful visions of peace and security, moments of calm in a difficult and stressful world, but we know that they'll only ever be short-lived.

The contentment that Paul speaks of and exhibits is much more lively and active than that. It didn't cause him to sit back and let life wash over him. No, it motivated him more than ever to speak and write and sing about Jesus and his wonderful, life-changing power. It drove him to live well in the midst of his circumstances and encourage others to do the same.

Contentment isn't a denial of our problems, a lack of ambition or an end of hope. It is not about looking on the bright side or finding what the title of one book memorably calls the “splashes of joy in the cesspools of life”. (“I'm single, but I get sole control of the remote”/“We're childless, but we get to go on holiday in term time”/“I'm bedridden, but hey, I never have to do laundry!”) Even when our “bright sides” are altruistic—

“My lack of a family gives me the freedom to minister to the needy in my community”—they will eventually leave us burned out or wanting more if they are solely our human efforts to distract ourselves from our pain, or make the best of a bad job.

Christian contentment is much more hopeful than this. It is the fruit of the joyous discovery that whatever our circumstances, Jesus is better by far. It is boundless riches (Ephesians 3 v 8), overflowing thankfulness (Colossians 2 v 7), “exceeding great joy” (Matthew 2 v 10, KJV).

I know that sounds like an impossible dream right now. You can’t imagine how it could ever be true, not for you, not really. I hope, in the following pages, to convince you that it can, and to point you to the hand- and footholds on the wall of the canyon with which you can climb back up to find it. While I’ll be drawing on my experience of singleness, the way out is essentially the same whatever our “if only” is.

Contentment doesn’t usually appear overnight. Paul said it was something to be learned; the 17th-century puritan writer Jeremiah Burroughs described it as something we can and should become “well skilled in” (*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, p 19). Before we turn to some practical tips for how to train our hearts and minds in this skill, though, we need to start by addressing the big, core questions that our hearts start to ask when we can’t see God’s hand at work. These are questions that seem to underpin the writings of many of those who have fought the battle of discontentment and won:

Is God good—can I trust him that his way is best?

Is he enough—can he really meet all my needs as he claims?

Is he worth it—is living his way a sacrifice worth making?

I know you know the “right” answers to those questions, the Sunday school answers, the answers we sing in church services and know in our heads to be true. But what about our hearts? That can be a whole different matter—and that is the matter that matters.

CONTENTMENT FOR YOUR EVERYDAY

This isn't just a book for the disappointed. Reading it isn't about resigning yourself to not getting the one big thing you really want and working out how to live with the “if onlys”. It's about finding joyful contentment on a regular Tuesday, when there's nothing really wrong, but you suspect there must be more to life than this; or when Christmas and family holidays just aren't the fairy tale that Instagram says they should be.

Jesus said he came that we might have life in all its fullness. Is that really achievable? Here and now? On this grey Tuesday/wet Wednesday/muggy Thursday? Yes, it is. Ironically, it might be easier for those of us living with broken dreams to take hold of that promise, because we've got no one but God to look to for our strength, hope and joy. But the offer is there for everyone who puts their trust in Jesus. Come and see.

Chapter 1

WHO BEFORE WHAT

We are a culture that loves to take action. Glossy magazines and click-bait websites make their living from this impulse, offering endless lists of five ways to improve your sex life, six tricks to reduce stress instantly, or three simple steps to a healthy lifestyle. Any time a problem pops up, we want to know what to do about it.

It's all too easy for us to approach contentment in the same way. The day-to-day pressures on us are real and urgent. We're consumed by the things we're missing in life, whether that's a nicer home, a fulfilling job or a longed-for baby. And so our problem-solving mindset goes to work on finding a way to get what we lack—we save more diligently, scour more job adverts, or push for an appointment with a different fertility specialist.

None of these things are wrong in themselves. But they won't deliver the lasting contentment we think they will. At best they will be temporary or partial fixes, before we start to notice another lack that we need to fix. Nor is contentment achieved by mastering a set of helpful

spiritual practices or healthy Christian habits. True contentment is always found in a “who”, not a “what”. It’s about God—our heavenly Father, our risen Saviour and our indwelling Spirit. That was the secret that the apostle Paul said he had learned, in his letter to the church in Philippi (see Philippians 4 v 11-13). He was focused on God, not his circumstances—the “who”, not the “what”.

Of course, that’s a truth which is easy to write, but not so easy to live. Sometimes we long for things so deeply that it’s hard to imagine that a world where we don’t have that desire fulfilled or issue resolved could ever really be the life in all its fullness that Jesus promised (John 10 v 10). And if over time neither our desperate prayers nor our diligent work seem to be producing the desired result, we can begin to doubt the “who” that we’ve been calling on for our “what”. Is God really good? Is he able to meet our needs? Is he worth sticking with if he’s not going to come through for us? We’ll look at these questions in detail in the following chapters, but first let’s stand back and spend some time looking at this God in whom Paul found such joyful contentment. Who is he? What is he like?

THE GOD OF WONDERS

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”
(Genesis 1 v 1).

Wow. That’s quite an opening line, isn’t it? The first thing the Bible wants us to know about God is that he created everything. Absolutely everything.

Sun, moon, stars. Earth, wind, sky. Land and sea. Animals, vegetables and minerals. Everything.

I find that all too big to comprehend. For some people, looking up at the stars is a sure-fire way to remind themselves of the glory and majesty of God. For me, it's just too big and distant. (Plus, I live in a city, so it's hard to see more than a few stars on even the clearest nights.) So try this instead. Look at an object near you—it could be this book, or the electronic device you're reading it on, or maybe the chair you're sitting in.

God made that object; he made all the materials that go into it. He gave them their properties: hard, soft, solid, liquid, rigid, flexible, cold, warm. He made the tools that harvested, mined, collected or manufactured the materials. He made the hands of all the people whose work went into taking those materials and forming them into that object. He made the minds of those who invented it, and of those who crafted it. He made your eyes to see it, your fingers to touch it, the complex system of nerve endings and brain synapses that enables you to look at or touch something and know whether it is hard or soft, hot or cold, wet or dry. Without him, none of that would be possible. Amazing.

Here's another incredible thing he invented: the water cycle. Think about that for a moment. Not only did God come up with the idea of water, but he gave it important properties. In its liquid state, water flows downhill and finds its way to the lowest point possible. Most things, once they reach the bottom of a hill, will stay there until

moved by some external force. But God designed water's molecular structure so that it also evaporates—rising up into the sky, floating around for a while, and falling down somewhere new. If God hadn't designed water to act like that, we would be living in a world of desert mountains rising out of stagnant swamps. Instead, H₂O keeps flowing round and round, up and down, bringing freshness and life instead of the stale reek of death.

And because water is his creation and he can do what he likes with it, sometimes God plays with its properties: he can turn water into wine (John 2 v 1-11) or blood (Exodus 7 v 14-24). He can make it stand up in a heap (Joshua 3 v 9-16) or lie down and be still (Mark 4 v 35-41). He can make it solid enough to walk on (Matthew 14 v 22-33) or cause it to pour out of a rock (Exodus 17 v 1-6). So whatever you feel that you're missing in life, know this: it is not because God is powerless to act for you.

Yet as amazing as anything in God's creation is, it is as nothing to the wonder of who he is. It was after one of these water miracles, the calming of the storm, that Jesus' disciples first began to get a sense of who they had been travelling around with all that time:

That day when evening came, [Jesus] said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a

cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4 v 35-41)

Notice that last verse; it was *after* Jesus calmed the storm that the disciples got really scared. This was power beyond anything they had ever imagined. Before, the worst outcome they were expecting was death. Now they discovered they were sharing an enclosed space with a power far greater. They were standing feet away from a man who could control the most untameable forces of the universe with a quiet word. And their lives were in his hands. No wonder they were terrified.

WHEN FEAR MEETS LOVE

Fear is an appropriate response to seeing who God is. In Revelation 1 v 9-18 the apostle John saw a vision of Christ in all his holiness and might, and it caused him to fall to his knees. Centuries earlier, when Isaiah saw a vision of God's throne room, it caused him to tremble with fear as he recognised his sinfulness (Isaiah 6 v 1-5). When we begin to see God for who he is, we start to understand

more about who we are—and to realise we don't come out so well. As the psalmist put it:

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8 v 3-4)*

When we see God as *he* is, it enables us to see ourselves as *we* are—which is to say, pretty small. We find that we don't quite hold the exalted, central position in our lives that we thought we did. Like John, we are struck down by our own insignificance. But it gets worse. When we contemplate God's total purity, then, like Isaiah, we become aware of our sinfulness, acutely conscious of all our faults and failings.

And yet, miraculously, wonderfully, amazingly, in the next instant we discover God's overwhelming love for us. After asking, "What is mankind that you are mindful of them?"—*Who are we that you would even notice us?*—the psalmist marvels:

*You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet. (Psalm 8 v 5-6)*

This isn't just someone noticing us and caring for us; this is the God of the universe endowing us with lavish,

abundant dignity and worth. He has chosen human beings to bear his image. He has crowned us—though so unworthy—with glory and honour. He has entrusted us with ruling his creation. All the molecules in that object you were thinking about earlier—they are under your authority in your privileged position as a human being.

God has allowed us to split atoms and to temper steel. He has given us the power to cut down forests and to plant vineyards. He has permitted us to touch the moon and explore the depths of the ocean. We can't (yet) make a hurricane die down at will, but we can harness the wind's energy to light our homes, heat our food and power our entertainment. Nor can we yet turn water into wine or blood. But God has given us the freedom to keep trying, and the brains to work out how we might do these things.

And yet, in a way, it is this very act of endowing us with power and authority that can cause God to be diminished in our eyes. We so easily forget the source of our abilities and think it's all down to us. It's only when things go wrong and we don't get the outcomes we long for that we realise the limits of our humanity: when we can't make someone fall in love with us; when, even with all the scientific advances of fertility treatment, we can't create the child we long for; when we can't cure every disease or prevent every tragedy. When we reach the limits of our power, we turn to God for his.

And when he says no, or does nothing? It's devastating.

If he *can* do it, why doesn't he? Doesn't he care?

That's why we need to know that God isn't just powerful; he is love. We see it throughout the Old Testament:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exodus 34 v 6-7)

*I have loved you with an everlasting love;
I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.*
(Jeremiah 31 v 3)

*From everlasting to everlasting
the LORD's love is with those who fear him.*
(Psalm 103 v 17)

And this is not some abstract, distant, generalised love. This is personal. He doesn't just love from afar; he came down and lived among us and loved us with his whole being in the person of Christ.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3 v 16)

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. (Matthew 9 v 36)

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5 v 8)

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.
(Ephesians 5 v 2)

This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

(1 John 4 v 9-10)

He loves you, he loves you, he loves you. I can't state that strongly enough. He loves you. Not just as his image-bearer (although that would be more than enough). If you're a Christian, God loves you as his child.

And that love cost him. The God of heaven took on flesh and humbled himself to rescue you from the jaws of hell. God the Son—"through [whom] all things were made; without [whom] nothing was made that has been made" (John 1 v 3)—stepped into his creation to save it.

The hands that formed humanity submitted themselves to the hands of his creatures. A tree that he grew was cut down and formed into his instrument of execution. Iron that he had threaded into the depths of the earth was dug up and formed into nails which were pounded through his hands and feet. Thorns that he had invented were woven into a mocking crown and forced onto his head. The nerve endings he had designed cried out in anguish. His created ones lifted him high, but only to humiliate the one they should have worshipped. And yet, in love, he cried out, "Father, forgive" (Luke 23:34).

Before you loved him, before you even knew him, he gave up his life for you. Never doubt that this powerful, mighty,

holy, awesome God loves you. He may not have given you your “what” yet, but he has given you his “who”—himself.

THE GOD WHO IS

And yet, if we’re honest, the questions still remain. If he can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3 v 20) and he *does* love us, how do we process that when it seems he is withholding good things from us?

It’s ok to ask those questions, and even to ask them of God. That’s what Mary and Martha did when their brother Lazarus died. In John 11 we read that the sisters sent for Jesus when Lazarus was sick, but Jesus delayed in coming. When he got there, Lazarus was already dead. Both of the grieving sisters greeted Jesus with the same words: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11 v 21, 32). In other words, *You’ve let us down. You had the power to fix this and you didn’t.*

Jesus didn’t rebuke them for their honest, hurt responses. Nor did he explain himself. Instead, he revealed something of himself to each of them. With Martha he engaged intellectually and theologically. He told her that her brother would rise again. And when Martha affirmed that she believed in the resurrection of believers at the end of time (v 24), Jesus declared, “*I am* the resurrection and the life ... Do you believe this?” (v 25-26). It was a big claim! Yet with great faith and deep insight, Martha answered, “Yes, Lord ... I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (v 27). Had

she ever really thought that through before? It's entirely possible that she hadn't until she was pushed to dig deep and decide who she thought Jesus was.

With Mary, on the other hand, Jesus engaged emotionally: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled ... Jesus wept" (v 33, 35).

To Martha the answer to the question *Why didn't you help?* was "I am". To Mary it was *I care*.

Very often, these are the only answers we get, too. Yet throughout Scripture we see that those answers are enough. When Job asked why God had taken his family, his home and his livestock from him, God's answer was effectively, *I am amazing*.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set,

or who laid its cornerstone—

while the morning stars sang together

and all the angels shouted for joy? ...

Do you give the horse its strength

or clothe its neck with a flowing mane?

Do you make it leap like a locust,

striking terror with its proud snorting?

(Job 38 v 4-7; 39 v 19-20)

God goes on to spend the whole of chapter 41—a total of 34 verses—talking about how wonderful a sea creature called the Leviathan is! The point is to remind Job of God’s incredible power, authority and creativity—and this, ultimately, is the answer Job gets. It’s not the answer he expects, but it is the answer he needs.

God’s response to our “why” questions is rarely a direct explanation; it’s more often a revelation or reminder of his character and capability. And that is because the source of our happiness, joy and contentment can only be found in relationship with him.

That’s what the apostle Paul had discovered. For much of his ministry he was imprisoned, often chained night and day to Roman soldiers. He was beaten many times, was separated from his family and friends, and owned little but the clothes on his back... yet the book of Philippians is overflowing with praise and thanksgiving. No matter how bad his circumstances, these could not shake his joyful contentment.

How was this possible? Was Paul some super-Christian, blessed with a double dose of optimism? I don’t think so. In Philippians 4 v 12 he says, “I have *learned* the secret of being content in any and every situation” (my emphasis). This wasn’t simply his natural demeanour; it was a capacity he had learned, and we can learn it too.

The first step is learning to put the almighty “who” before our pressing “whats”. He is always powerful, loving, holy

and worthy of our praise. Next time you notice yourself getting caught up in chewing over the “whats” of life—what you want, what you need, what you wish was different—catch that thought. Press the pause button on it, and spend some time focusing on the “who”—on who God is, and who he has made you to be.