

LEARNING
CONTENTMENT

*A Study for Ladies
of Every Age*

NANCY WILSON

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❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

Imagine how comfortable our lives would be if we learned to keep our spirits in order in all circumstances. Unruffled. Undisturbed. Calm. Not reacting. Not chafing. Cheerful. Not churned up with the daily dramas. What a huge spiritual, emotional, and physical benefit that would be.

But we live in a world where it is easy (and acceptable) to be “stressed out” by circumstances and events, and we even plan for, excuse, and accommodate “stressed-outness.” After all, it *is* the mother of the bride, or the new wife, or the new mother. And how could we expect anything else during finals week, or the first week on the new job, or when the bills are overdue, or when the baby is overdue? Funny when you think about it: we had to coin the term “stressed out”

to describe this common condition of a disordered heart. We even use being “stressed out” as an excuse for anger, unkindness, rudeness, worry, or flaking out on our duties. It can even cause us to get sick. But “stressed out” is not a neutral behavior; it is a sinful manifestation of an unquiet heart. And it often brings a host of other sins with it.

Contentment maintains control over the spirit and does not allow ungoverned passions and unrestrained emotions to bring discomposure right at the moment when the greatest composure is called for. Contentment calms the heart and leads the heart to act and speak wisely, even when under great provocation. In fact, *especially* when under great provocation. Just because a situation is stress-full doesn't mean we have to become “stressed out.” Our daily lives are fraught with many provocations. Are we going to let them have power over us? We get sick, we are stuck in traffic, we miss our flight, someone lets us down, someone is unkind or rude, we forgot an appointment, someone was late. Do we allow these things to arouse our hearts to anger, impatience, annoyance, or general irritation? If we do, then we need to enroll in a class to learn contentment.

We often think contentment is something that happens to us, rather than something that we take pains to learn. We assume that if we are not naturally disposed to be that way,

then it's fine to have a fiery temper or a sharp tongue. We make excuses for our behavior. After all, we tell ourselves, our parents had anger issues. So we accept the fact that we will have them too. And it's easier to just go with our natural impulses and get "stressed out" by all the drama in our lives. But this is false: Each of us can learn contentment, and each of us *should* learn contentment. It is an important part of our Christian life. It is not optional.

This requires work. We are going to have to give ourselves to our lessons and study contentment. We have to pay attention. Otherwise, there's not much hope of gaining contentment. We can learn it, but not without spiritual and mental attentiveness. Even the apostle Paul said he *learned* contentment, so there's no reason to suppose that we can get it without any learning.

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:11-13, NKJV)

Paul doesn't say he was born a naturally contented person. Rather, God gave him many opportunities to learn it.



THE FATHER'S CONTENTMENT

As we open up this topic of contentment, we should look first at the example that God Himself sets for us of contentment, both in His own character and in the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. In later chapters we will consider how we can imitate Him in this.

When God created the world, He pronounced each day's work as good. After the creation of light on the first day, Genesis 1:4 records, "And God saw the light, that it was good." At the end of each subsequent day's work, the text says, "And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:10, 13, 18, 21, 25). Finally, in verse 31, "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good." God was satisfied with His work and *content* with His labor. So He rested. From

this we can deduce that contentment leads to rest. We will come back to this aspect of contentment shortly.

We all remember the great exception to this when God said, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). So He remedied this problem by creating woman. But woman was *not* content, and she succumbed to the temptation of the serpent. Had she been content with all God had given her, she would not have taken the forbidden fruit and eaten it. Discontent is fertile ground for planting unlawful desires.

Consider all that Eve had. She lived in Paradise. She had the perfect husband. She had unbroken fellowship with her Creator. If anyone had perfect circumstances, it was Eve. And yet the temptation to be discontent was too great, and she distanced herself from God and from her husband, choosing up sides with the Tempter and following his advice to disobey God. But, marvel of marvels, God overturned that when He put enmity between the woman and the serpent. Even though Eve chose to follow the Serpent in her disobedience, God pulled her back to His side, separating her from her foolish choice. And of course God finally overturns this for good in the Gospel of Grace. As my husband is fond of saying, “God draws straight with crooked lines.”

The creation account exhibits another aspect of God’s contentment. God is perfect and all His works are perfect.

“He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are Justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He” (Deut. 32:4). Being perfect, He could have wanted more perfection. One more animal. One more mountain range. One more ocean or one more color. But He was satisfied with His creation. He did not need anything more. He rested.

We sometimes flatter ourselves into thinking that it is a good character trait to be a “perfectionist.” But this label brings much trouble and temptation with it. A so-called perfectionist is never satisfied with his work (or anyone else’s work). It could always be better, so that means it is never enough. It always falls short. Or, because the work is never up to the standards of the perfectionist, he may give up entirely and use his so-called standard of perfection as an excuse for laziness and failure. “I am such a perfectionist, that it will take too long to get it done to my high standards, so I don’t have time to try.” This is self-deception. On the occasion when the perfectionist thinks he has achieved or accomplished something perfectly, he may be temporarily satisfied. But this is self-satisfaction and pride.

All these reactions are ungodly forms of discontent. As creatures, we must learn to find our true satisfaction in our Creator God. Then we can be satisfied with our imperfect

work. Then we can offer our imperfect work to Him and be thankful that He is satisfied with us in Christ. Then we can rest. Only God is perfect. When we think we can be perfect, we are stumbling blindly.

God was also well content with Jesus, His beloved Son. The gospels record two instances of God speaking aloud about His Son. The first was at Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"(Matt. 3:17). Three gospels record a voice coming out of a cloud at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35), and they all record the voice saying, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" Matthew includes "in whom I am well pleased." This reveals God's identification and satisfaction with Jesus, as well as His pleasure in His Son. He is *well pleased* with Him. The Son is beloved of the Father, and the Father speaks aloud of His satisfaction and pleasure in His Son. What a wonderful glimpse given us of the Father's contentment with His Son!

Jesus Himself offers us another perfect example of contentment. When He was facing His imminent arrest and crucifixion, He struggled in the garden in Gethsemane, He was "sorrowful and deeply distressed" (Mt. 26:37). From this we learn that sorrow and distress are not contradictory to contentment. Jesus wrestled in prayer and asked God if

there was any other possible way. But He concluded His time in prayer with “Your will be done” (Mt. 26:42). From this point on in the story, Jesus was in complete control of Himself and in control of the entire situation. When he was arrested, He did not resist. When He was slandered, He didn’t answer. When He was mocked, He stayed in control of Himself. He went to the cross content and determined, satisfied with God’s will.

Paul uses this example of Christ’s suffering to admonish us in Philippians 2:3-8. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

Christ found contentment by means of humility and obedience. He submitted to God and went freely to the cross for us. His resulting glorification and exaltation are our salvation. So at the heart of the gospel is a contented