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The Grace of Contentment



Individual Topics - Steve Gregg

In this thought-provoking piece, Steve Gregg discusses the miraculous work of grace that is contentment, arguing that it is not a natural state for fallen man. He shares that the root of contentment is a high view of God's sovereignty and trust in His providences, involving a reduction of desires and a willingness to submit and delight in His wise fatherly disposition in every condition. Finally, Gregg emphasizes the importance of dying to self, trusting and desiring only God, and finding strength in His Glorious power.

Transcript

Would you turn, please, to Philippians 4.10. But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last your care for me has flourished again, though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 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. I don't believe that contentment is a natural state of natural man, of fallen man.

Contentment, such as Paul knew, and of which he speaks, I believe is a miraculous work of grace in the life, which is not known by those who have not known that grace. The Scripture indicates that man is generally speaking not a content creature in his fallen state. It says in Proverbs chapter 27 and verse 20, Hell and destruction are never full, so the eyes of man are never satisfied.

You know, there's a comparison I think Solomon means to make between hell and destruction on the one hand and the heart of man in his fallen state. As long as man is internally a child of hell, he will be like hell in that he will not be satisfied. Never full.

Never content. Always something essential missing that is felt. A felt missing piece.

Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 1.8, The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing. And what that means is, a man may think that what will satisfy him is something. Something, some development, some possession, the acquisition of

something that it does not yet have.

But once the thing is realized, once he has it in his hands, once he can see it, once he can hear it, once it is present, it is not satisfying. It does not fill that void that he seeks to fill. And therefore, he is by nature doomed to discontent.

Contentment is the only happiness that natural man can desire. Whatever a man may think he desires, what he really desires is contentment. He may think he desires a better job, a better wife, a better car, a better home, better circumstances.

But really what he wants is contentment. He is hoping that these things, if he would acquire them, would bring him contentment. And if he acquires these things and does not have contentment, he still is not happy.

It is contentment that makes a man, or a woman, or a child, happy. Being content. And Paul had learned the secret of what it means to be content.

I would like for us to learn it as well, if we do not already know. But although contentment is the one thing, the one happiness that the fallen man can desire, it is the one thing that I believe the devil is determined to withhold from man. And the reason for that is that the devil cannot persuade you to sin unless he can first make you discontented.

And the devil has all kinds of ways of doing that. We see that in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, before the fall, had been given the entire world without any restrictions but one.

They had all the animals, they had all the beauties of nature, they had all the food that God had created. Everything that you enjoy, they had. With the exception of animal food, they did not eat it yet, but they did later.

But when it came to fruit and plant foods and so forth, they certainly had no lack. They had almost infinite variety. But the serpent said to Eve, in Genesis 3.1, Has God said that you shall not eat of every tree of the garden? Now, why ask that question? Has God said that you shall not eat of every tree of the garden? It's a confusing wording of the question.

It's not entirely clear exactly how that is to be understood. But it obviously got the woman to think about, well, what has God said we can eat and what has He said we can't eat? And she said, well, of all the trees of the garden we can freely eat except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he turned her attention by that question upon the one thing God had withheld from her.

Now, if she had been reflecting on all the things that they could eat, she would never have sinned. If she had only been thankful and content with what God had granted. But

there was one thing withheld, only one, and that she could not be content without.

The devil turned her attention to the things of which she had been deprived rather than allowing her to reflect on the things which had been granted. And this is the essence of all temptation. The devil cannot tempt me to sin until he first makes me discontented with what God has already given me.

And for this he has to turn my attention away from the multitude of blessings that I've received and cast my eyes upon something, one of those few things that's been withheld from me. And then to make me think that is something that is worth having. In fact, that is really where happiness lies.

If I could obtain that, then I would truly be happy. And then, as soon as I've decided that, as soon as I've been convinced of that deception, then, of course, I cannot be content until I have it. And then I will, unless I am careful, unless I resist the temptation, I will sin because of the discontent.

Some have said that discontentment was the first sin, because Eve would not have committed the sin of eating the fruit if she had not first been discontented with what state she was already in. Discontentment is seen in the lives of many people who have great wealth given to them. We read in the book of Esther of Haman.

Haman was a Persian, and he was given all the authority under the king of Persia that a man could have. He had regal honors. He was wealthy.

He lived in a mansion. Everybody in the country had to bow down to him. But one didn't, and that was Mordecai, the relative of Esther.

And Haman could not rest until this man, too, bowed to him. He was not content that everybody else in the country bowed to him. One man was withheld from him, the bowing and the homage of one man.

And he could not be content until he had that. And that was actually Haman's downfall eventually, because he plotted to kill the Jews. He built a gallows to hang Mordecai on.

And as you know the story, Haman himself eventually was hanged on that gallows. He should have been content to have everybody but one bow down to him. To just have one thing withheld is often the thing that makes a man discontented and leads to his sin.

Ahab, the king of Israel, was also, of course, a man who lived in wealth and luxury and regal honors and power and glory and all of that. Comfort, luxury. But there was a vineyard nearby that belonged to a man named Naboth.

And King Ahab said, could I buy your vineyard from you, Naboth? And he said, no, this is the inheritance of my family. It's been in the family since the times of Joshua. I'm not

going to get rid of that.

No thanks. No amount of money will induce me to sell it. And we read that Ahab went home to his house sullen and displeased.

Why? He could have had as much real estate in Samaria as he would have liked. But that one vineyard was withheld from him. And so it was that his wife Jezebel plotted to kill Naboth and get that vineyard for Ahab because he was going to be sullen and displeased until he got everything he wanted.

As if he didn't have enough. And so we see examples of people who are led to sin. Murder.

Because of discontent. Because those who had so much that they couldn't probably spend it all in their lifetime were not content until they could get more. Solomon describes his own discontent as the richest, most famous man of his time.

Most powerful. Wisest. In Ecclesiastes, which book I won't have you turn to because the whole book is the description of this discontent.

He describes how that he had departed from God and he was seeking gratification everywhere else. In women, in money, in wine, in music, in horticulture, in learning. He tried it all, he said.

And by the way, I don't suppose there's been a man alive, at least not in his time and very possibly not since, who could gratify these desires more than Solomon could. He had the money, he had the opportunity, he had the power, he had no one to resist him. And yet he says in Ecclesiastes repeatedly, he went after it this way, he went after it that way, he went after it every which way, but every time he said the result was, it's emptiness.

It's like striving after the wind. The King James says, vexation of spirit, which can be translated from the Hebrew, like striving after the wind. It was, content was always just a little further away.

And so, he said, I might as well try and catch the wind, as be content in the natural state without the grace of God. Because man is lacking something essential to his happiness since the fall. That is because of separation from God, who is the fountain of all happiness and of all joy and of all contentedness.

And as long as man is separated from God, he cannot be content. In the Scriptures, the opposite of contentment is covetousness. Now, covetousness is the desire to acquire things.

And there are at least two passages in the New Testament where covetousness is

contrasted with contentment. One of those places is in Hebrews. Hebrews 13 and verse 5. The writer says, let your conduct be without covetousness and be content with such things as you have.

These are the two opposites. You either have covetousness or you have contentment. He says, let your life be without covetousness, rather be content with what you have.

Don't desire, don't crave, don't have this itch after more acquisition. Just be content with what you have. And don't be covetous.

In 1 Timothy chapter 6, Paul said in verse 5, To avoid useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. Now godliness with contentment is great gain.

For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare.

And into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. For which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

Now, those who desire to be rich are those who are not content. And so, Paul contrasts them. He says, we will be content having, well, if we have nothing more than food and clothing, we'll be content with that, he said.

But there are those who are not content with such and they desire to be rich. And this state of heart leads to temptation and a snare. And into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.

Elaborating on that, he says, for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. If you think about it, every kind of evil has been committed for the love of money. Now, that doesn't mean that every instance of evil was motivated by the love of money.

Certainly, there are other motivations for doing evil. But you can probably not think of one type of evil that men have not at one time or another done for no other motive than the love of money. When you think of the Ten Commandments, the tenth commandment is you shall not covet.

It's a command against covetousness. It's the only one of the commandments that addresses directly a heart issue that doesn't have anything to do with external behavior. But it is, in a sense, a summary of the first nine.

Because the first commandment is you shall have no other gods before me. Well, covetousness is idolatry, Paul said in Ephesians 5, 5 and Colossians 3, 5. So,

covetousness is having other gods before him. You shall not make any graven image, the second commandment says.

Well, money is a graven image. Love of money, covetousness, again, is idolatry. It says you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Which in the context principally means lying under oath when you've sworn to tell the truth in the name of God. Or when you swear by God that you'll do a thing, then you renege on that. You've taken His name in vain.

There have been many who've been false to their oaths. Who've made promises to God and didn't keep them because of the love of money. The violation of the Sabbath is the fourth commandment.

We read in Scripture of people violating the Sabbath because they wanted to make the profits of yet a seventh day as well as the first six of the week. And so they worked on the Sabbath for money, the love of money. Honor your father and your mother.

Jesus said that there were those who violated this commandment when they had something that they could have benefited their parents from, but they dedicated it to God because out of greediness they did not want to give it to their parents. Love of money. Murder.

You should not murder. Has anyone ever killed for money? Of course murder has been done for money. How about adultery? Ever heard of prostitution? The love of money has led to that too.

And pornography, that's adultery in the heart. What is it that fuels the pornography industry? Lust or love of money? I'll tell you, if there was no profit to be made off pornography, there wouldn't be any supply. It is the love of money.

How about thou shalt not steal? Anyone ever stolen because of the love of money? Or how about you shall not bear false witness? We read in Scripture of people who were paid to give false witness. Obviously the love of money has led to that. Every commandment in the Decalogue of the first nine has at one time or another been violated out of covetousness.

And the last commandment is don't covet. And so the love of money or covetousness or the lack of contentedness with what we have has become the root of every kind of evil historically. Every violation of every law of God has at one time or another been done because people were not content with what they had and rather they were covetous.

We can see easily how people have resented and envied other people. How they've stolen, how they've hated. Even murder and war.

James said, from whence come wars and fighting among you? Come they not hence of your lusts that war your members? Ye lust and desire to have and cannot obtain. You fight in war, yet you have not because you have not. Wars come from covetousness.

Wars come from desiring what someone else has. Wars, in other words, come from not being content with what one already has. Thus, discontentment, which is the natural state of fallen man, leads to all of the sins of fallen man.

And the devil cannot persuade a man to sin until he has made him discontent. Now, Paul was not a discontent man, as he tells us in the passage we read in Philippians. He said, I've learned whatever state I am in therewith to be content.

He's learned how to be full and he's learned how to be hungry. How to be abased and how to abound. This is something that people do not automatically know.

This is a learned behavior of the heart, said Paul. He has learned. That's the term he used.

If you look over at Proverbs chapter 30, we have the prayer of a man named Agur, who wrote the 30th chapter of Proverbs. In Proverbs 30, verses 7 through 9, this man writes, Two things I request of you, deprive me not before I die. Remove falsehood and lies far from me.

Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food allotted to me, lest I be full and deny you and say, Who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. Now, some people have presented this man as the model of modesty of desire.

This is a modest request. God, don't make me rich or poor, just give me what I need. I just want to be middle class.

But this is not a man who is to be emulated. Because what he is telling us is that he cannot handle being rich and he cannot handle being poor. He says, don't make me rich because then I might forget God.

And, you know, depart from Him. On the other, don't make me poor because I might be tempted to steal and then I'd really be in trouble. In other words, I can't handle things that aren't easy.

Having little or having much can be a spiritual challenge. He says, I can't handle either. Just give me the even road of middle class.

Just don't let me be poor or rich. Paul was the opposite of this. He said, I can be rich or I can be poor.

I can abound, I can be in want. I can be full, it won't affect me spiritually. I have learned

a secret that the natural man does not know.

And that is the secret of being content in whatever state I am in. I'd like to read you something. I just ran across this this morning in a little, this is a book of quotations from Puritan writers.

And a Puritan writer named John Trapp made this comment. He said, a ship may be overladen with silver, even unto sinking, and yet space enough be left to hold ten times more. So a covetous man, though he have enough to sink him, yet never hath he enough to satisfy him.

A circle cannot fill a triangle, so neither can the whole world fill the heart of man. A man may be as easily, he may as easily fill a chest with grace as the heart with gold. It is simply not possible for man in his natural state, apart from God, to be content.

And therefore, contentment is a grace that must be received. It must be cultivated. Other Puritan writers, who I'm not quoting from this book, have written whole book-length treatments on the subject of contentment.

An author named Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a book called *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. It is a rare jewel to find Christian contentment, even among Christians. Another Puritan author named Thomas Watson has a book called *The Art of Divine Contentment*.

It's an art, and Paul had learned that art. As a matter of fact, in *Philippians* chapter 4, which we read from, in verse 12 he says, I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound everywhere and in all things I have learned. The word I have learned there is a derivative of the Greek word for mystery, *mysterion*.

It actually means to be initiated. Paul uses the word in order to say this divine contentment that I have learned, I've been initiated into the mystery of it. And actually the Greek word he uses means to be initiated into a mystery.

Contentment is a mystery, since it goes against man's grain to be content. How can a man then be, as Paul, content in whatever state he is in? That it is a mystery that not all Christians have learned seems evident enough. Because we do meet Christians who don't appear at all to be content.

In fact, most of us, at one time or another, would have to admit that we have experienced discontent. And some experience it on a regular basis. And some act as if it's not a sin.

When the Bible commands that we be content. Let your life be free from covetousness, but be content. That's a command of God.

The Greek word for content in the New Testament means sufficient or enough. It is the same word that is used in a number of places where Paul talks about God providing all sufficiency for us. Or when the disciples said, show us the Father and it is sufficient for us.

Sufficiency or enough is what the word content means. The principal word for content means sufficient. But the word Paul uses in Philippians 4.11 is actually a derivative of that word.

It's the same Greek word with the word auto put in front of it, which means self. So that when Paul says, I have learned whatsoever state I am in, therewith to be self-sufficient. That's the literal meaning of his word content.

Now, we might revolt at the idea of self-sufficient. That sounds very ungodly. Isn't it the man who rejects God who is self-sufficient? Well, even Paul himself says in 2 Corinthians 3.5, not that we are sufficient of ourselves.

So as to think of anything as being of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God. 2 Corinthians 3.5. Paul in 2 Corinthians says that our sufficiency is not of ourselves, but the word he used in the Greek in Philippians 4.11 says, I have learned whatever state I am in, therewith to be self-sufficient. But in the term self-sufficient, he doesn't mean sufficient from himself, but sufficient within himself.

From the grace that God's given him, he has within him all the resources to be full, to have enough. Even if his external circumstances would not register as being enough. Most of us, if we had nothing but food and clothing, might think we don't have enough.

But inwardly, the contented man has the sense of having enough. Because he does not believe that he deserves more than he has. You see, discontent and covetousness arise from the sense that I really ought to have more than I have.

I deserve better. And we are continually fed this message from the media. I mean, television itself exists, commercial television exists for the purpose of creating discontent.

As I'm sure many of you know by reflecting upon it, that you might have thought television was there for your entertainment. No, the entertainment portions are there to hold your attention between the commercials. That's why it exists.

It exists because of commercials. The sponsors find somebody to entertain you between their commercial messages. And what are the commercial messages there to do? To create discontent in you.

So that you'll say, my toothpaste isn't the best toothpaste. My antiperspirant isn't the best antiperspirant. The car I'm driving isn't the best car I could be driving.

And so, that's what advertising is all about. To make you discontented with what you have so that you desire what they have to offer. And so, the whole institution of commercial television exists for one purpose.

And that's to make you discontented, which is exactly what God doesn't want you to be. And what God commands you not to be. Did I just say you shouldn't watch TV? Make up your own mind about that.

But I'd say, if you have trouble with discontent, I don't suggest that you watch commercial television. Because it's there to stir that up in you. But if you have trouble with contentment, I don't suggest that you watch commercial television.

Because contentment can be had. And what Paul describes as his contentment is a sufficiency that resided in himself. It is not of himself.

It is of God. Our sufficiency is of God, he said in 2 Corinthians 3.5. But, it is of God, but it's inside me. And that means that within myself, I'm self-contained as it were.

Because of God. Because God is there, because His grace is there, I contain within myself all that is necessary to make me happy and to make me contented. I mentioned that Jeremiah Burroughs, a Puritan writer, had written a book called *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*.

I pulled from that book a definition that he gave. This is not a dictionary definition. This is a scriptural definition.

He says, Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition. I'm going to read it again. He says, Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.

Obviously, this contentment presupposes a high view of God's sovereignty because whatever state I am in, I have to recognize as that is God's wise and fatherly disposition in my life. If I have doubts about God's sovereignty over His universe, then I will have some difficulty accepting certain things in my life as being God's wise and fatherly disposal. I might think, well, maybe God had nothing to do with this.

Maybe that was just, you know, this person over here's fault. Maybe they dished this out to me. Why should I see this as from the hand of God? But the Bible certainly encourages us to see all as from the hand of God.

Even Joseph's brothers selling him to slavery. He said, well, you intended evil against me, he says, but God meant it for good. There is the hand of God sovereignly working through all situations, even those that are delivered to you by the hands of hostile

parties.

Hostile parties who themselves are doing what God commands them not to do. Criminal actions against you are done by people who are doing things that God has told them not to do. So, how could it possibly be God's will that this happen to you if God commands them not to do that? God's a wise God.

God is a powerful and intelligent and sovereign God. And even though God does not want people sinning, if He doesn't want their sin to touch you, He can prevent that. People will sin contrary to the will of God for them.

But they will not sin against you contrary to God's will for you. Because they cannot. They cannot reach you if God does not remove that hedge.

If God does not call off the angel of the Lord who ordinarily camps around those who fear Him and delivers Him. There can be nothing before you but what God permits. And if God permits it and He is your Father, He is wise and fatherly, then whatever comes your way is His wise and fatherly disposal toward you.

And to submit to that, to delight in that, is what contentment does. What contentment is, is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit. That frame of mind that you adopt, which leads you to submit to and to delight in God's wise and fatherly disposal of every condition.

That's what Paul experienced. And that was what made all things seem sufficient to him even when he was in prison and had very little. Now, how is this state of contentment obtained? There are two parts to that answer, I believe, given in Scripture.

One part is something that we must choose to do ourselves. And the other part is that which we must trust God to do for us. That's true with most Christian things, most Christian duties and most Christian virtues.

There's usually a part that God does and a part that we must do. If we don't do our part, then although God is quite capable and willing to do His part, it just doesn't happen. Sort of like getting saved.

I believe God wants all men to be saved, but if I don't believe Him, well, it's not going to happen. Remember Hebrews 4, 2, The gospel is preached to us as well as unto them, but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith and them that hear it. If we don't trust God and do the thing that He lays out as the condition, then what He would like to do doesn't get done.

And so, there is part that we are to do and there's part that He will do and we must trust Him to do. The first part, therefore, is our part. And that is a reduction of our desires.

You see, the cure for discontent is the opposite direction from what the world normally thinks. The discontented person usually thinks that the way out is through addition. I must add more to what I have acquired.

I must bring about a circumstance that has not yet materialized. This thing, this reality has to be added to me and then I will be content. Of course, the person who pursues contentment in that way generally finds out that if they happen to be able to cause that reality to materialize, it usually, it's a great disappointment.

They realize, well, there's another, it's like a carrot on a stick. You know, you get to where the carrot used to be and the carrot's a little further out than it was. And it never really seems to come all the way in because that's how it is with the world and the heart of man.

It is not by addition of new things that discontentment is cured. It is by subtraction, by the reduction of my desires. For me to reason that if God is pleased for me to have such and so, then I shall be pleased to have such and so.

If God is pleased that I be content in this state, then I am pleased to be content in it. The desires that I have that I am not attaining are not those things that God wants me to have at this moment or else I would have them. Therefore, I will adjust my desires to agree with God's providences.

That is what I must do. I must adjust my desires downward. I have some scriptures I want to share on this.

Ecclesiastes 5.10 says, He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver, nor he who loves abundance with increase. This also is vanity or emptiness. It's interesting how often Solomon in this book says vanity.

All is vanity. All is vanity. This too is vanity.

And that too. And everything I tried turned out to be vanity. Do you know what the word vanity means in the Hebrew? It means emptiness.

This too is empty. This too is empty. And I tried that and that was empty too.

Everything is empty. Emptiness of emptiness. All is emptiness under the sun, Solomon said.

What a contrast that is to Paul saying sufficiency, enough, fullness. I have learned to be full. I have learned to have sufficiency in every state.

Paul was in prison and he felt full. Solomon was in a king's mansion and he felt empty. He had everything man thinks will satisfy and he says it doesn't satisfy.

As long as you love silver, you will not be satisfied with silver. As long as you love abundance, he said, you're not going to be satisfied with increase. Adding won't help.

Increasing doesn't help. The problem is what you love. He that loves silver can't be satisfied with silver.

He that loves abundance can't be satisfied with increase because he loves the wrong thing. His desires are misdirected. The Christian has set his love on God and therefore what God desires is what the Christian desires.

And the Christian can therefore choose to be content with whatever God's providence has disposed to him. Because he doesn't love silver. He doesn't love abundance.

He loves God. And therefore the desires of the Christian need to be reduced to agree only with what God has chosen to give. And so John the Baptist when he spoke to the soldiers, well when they spoke to him they said, what must we do? In Luke 3.14 John the Baptist said, be content with your wages.

That's the first step towards spiritual improvement. Be content with the wages you have. Boy, if we followed that advice, would anyone be in a labor union? Should a Christian ever be involved in a strike for better wages? That when John said be content with your wages, he didn't say if they are good.

If they are competitive. If your wages are as much as you think you deserve. If your wages are equal to those in other countries who are serving in the same role.

He just said be content with what they are. That's what you've got. That's what you need to learn to be content with.

What you have. Now, I don't say that Christians shouldn't ever participate in a just effort to improve work conditions or whatever. Or maybe even wages if they're really terrible.

But the Christians should not be motivated to do so in the way that worldly people are. And it's very hard to know how you participate without having that motivation. You must be content with what you have or else you are disobedient to God.

Now, it's possible to say I'm content. But I see this as a gross injustice and many people are suffering besides myself. And while I would be content with this, I'm going to throw in my lot with these people who are going to try to improve things and make justice more.

Realize more in our sphere or whatever. I cannot judge the motives of those who do such things. But I would say this.

John the Baptist said be content with your wages. And that was just the beginning of getting right with God. We read already in Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 5. Be content with such things as you have.

And Paul said in 1 Timothy 6, 8. Having food and clothing. We will with these things be content. Are you? How many of you don't have food or clothing today? See me out.

I've got more than I need. Everyone here I think is wearing clothing. And probably everyone here is either has eaten today or will or both.

So, all of us have the basic qualifications for contentment. Having food or clothing we will therewith be content. Now, he doesn't say you have to only have those things.

What he's suggesting is you need to be content with whatever you have even if it is that little. You may have much more and you should be content with that. However low it gets.

As long as you have the basic needs for survival, you ain't got nothing to complain about. God is meeting your needs. And that's all that he is required to do.

And he's only required to do that because he committed himself to it. He's not even required innately to do that. But he does that because he's promised to provide your needs.

If you have food, if you have clothing, your needs are there. You have reason to be content and a command to be. Now, to reduce my desires to the level of what God has provided.

Rather than to seek to increase my circumstances to that which I have coveted. To be content is my thing to do. The thing that I must do if I'm going to be content.

This involves, among other things, dying to self. Which is always part of the Christian's duty and always one of the hardest parts. Jesus said, if any man come after me, let him deny himself.

And take up his cross and follow me. If you are not content, you have not died to yourself. It's just that simple.

Because if you've died to yourself in the Christian sense. That you have taken up your cross to follow Christ. Then your attitude is this.

It is not my desire to be pleased. It is my desire that God be pleased with me. If I've died to myself, then my attitude is, it's not important for me to be pleased.

What's important to me is that God is pleased with me. God's pleasure is what counts, not mine. And if God is pleased, as it says of Jesus in Isaiah 53.

It pleased the Lord to bruise him. And bruising is a euphemism. That's putting it mildly.

It's talking about the crucifixion. Actually, it pleased the Lord to have him tortured and

executed brutally. It pleased the Lord, his Father.

And he said, well, then the cup that my Father has given me, shall I not drink it? He was content. It's not my will, he said, but yours. God, if this pleases you, then that's what I want to please me.

That's what contentment involves. Not that I be pleased, but that God be pleased with me. That's death to self.

Another part of contentment is that I desire nothing but God. Now this is, you might say, well, I thought there was at least food and rain guaranteed too. Well, not guaranteed.

Paul said, if we have only food and rain, we'll be content. But we really have to be of a mind that the day will come when we have neither because we'll be dead. And Paul said in that same passage, we brought nothing into this world.

And it is a sure thing we're not going to carry anything out with us. So the day will come when even food and rain is no longer given to us because we won't need it. We'll be gone.

And we'd better be happy to have only God because that's all we'll have then. And that's all we'll need. The writer of Hebrews, in the verse I've already looked at with you, in Hebrews 13, 5, said, Let your lifestyle be without covetousness, but be content with such things you have because... Now see, here's why.

For he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. That's why. Why can I be content with what I have even if it's much less than what I would like? I can because he has said to me, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

If I'm happy to have him alone, I can never be discontented with what little or much I have been given besides. I must confess, I've been given much more than I deserve. I have much more than food and rain.

But unless my attitude is that I desire nothing more than I desire God Himself. In fact, if I had only God and nothing else, that means I'd die and go to be with God. Because if I had only God, then I don't have food, don't have clothing and so forth.

But Jesus has said, if I seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, there will be other things there. All the things necessary will be added unto me. But I don't seek Him for that reason.

David said in Psalm 27, for one thing have I desired of the Lord, and that alone will I seek after. I'm not going to seek after this and this and this and this and God's just going to be first. He said, one thing have I desired, and that alone, the one thing I'm going to seek after is this, that I might behold the beauty of the Lord.

That I might meditate in His temple. In other words, that I might fellowship with God. That I might commune with God.

That's all that matters to me. That's the one thing that matters. Psalm 27, verse 4 says, desiring God alone is the secret of contentment.

That I am content to live or die as God prefers so long as I have Him. He will never leave me nor forsake me. Therefore, I can confidently say, the Lord is my helper.

I shall not fear what men shall do to me. I can be content with such things as I have, even if those things are rather unpleasant at the moment. Another aspect of the mystery of a contented heart that is somewhat up to me, that's part of my conditioning of heart that I'm responsible for, is I must have a clear conscience.

If I don't have a clear conscience, I have a very hard time being content. Because if I don't have a clear conscience, that means I feel there's a barrier between me and God. That's what it means to not have a clear conscience.

I feel that I've done something wrong, unresolved between me and God. And how then can I really feel that what I'm receiving from God is what He really wants me to have? How can I have the basic foundation of contentment, which requires that I believe all that is coming to me is what God wants me to have, if I believe that maybe I'm not really right with God? Seneca, who is of course not a Christian writer, but he recognized how hard things are to endure if you don't have a clean conscience, said, those things that I suffer will be incredibly heavy when I cannot bear myself. How can I bear the hardships in my circumstances if I can't bear myself because my conscience is not clear? I need to keep a conscience clear before God.

Paul said in 1 Timothy 6.6, godliness with contentment is great gain. Godliness means I keep my heart godly, I keep my conscience clear before God. In 2 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul also brings out how the conscience plays a major role in being content.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 12, Paul says, after he describes all the hardship he's been through and how that he's just trusted God through it and been content and all, he says, For our boasting is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we have conducted ourselves in the world by simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but with the grace of God. The boasting of our heart, the thing that strengthens our resolve to be content the way we are is that our conscience is clear. When things are going badly, a way that I would not like them to go, the way that would normally make me discontent, I have to check my heart and say, well, have I done it all that God wants me to do? Have I confessed everything I've done wrong? Is my conscience really clear before God? If it is, I can just accept whatever because a clear conscience means there's no barrier between me and God.

There's no unresolved problems there. There is that other part of contentment I mentioned, the part that we must trust God to do. We must do the one thing and he must do the other.

We must reduce our desires so that we want nothing more than what God wants for us, or for that matter, we want nothing more than God himself. We keep our conscience clear so that the barriers between us and God are absent. And we then just rejoice that God is with us and will never leave us or forsake us, even if we have little else.

But there's the other part, and Paul mentioned that in Philippians 4, verse 13. He says, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Now, we know that verse as a stand-alone verse, but actually in the context, he's talking about how he has managed to be able to be content, whether he's abased or whether he's balanced, whether he's full or empty.

He says, I can do all things. That is, I can be content in this situation, I can be content in that situation, in fact, in every situation, because it is through Christ who strengthens me. It is possible for people who are not Christians to work on this reduction of desire.

Buddhists do it all the time. Isn't that pretty much what the Buddha said anyway? I mean that, you know, the way you avoid pain and disappointment and so forth is that you simply bring yourself to a place where there's no desires left in you. If you don't have any desires, you won't ever be disappointed.

Well, that's a fleshly way. If we do only what we've said so far, if we just say, OK, I'm just going to put on this mindset of I don't want anything more than what I already have, then that is not enough. That is what I can do and must do.

But there's the part that God must do. It is through Christ who strengthens me that I can actually find true contentment. It is a work of God.

In Colossians chapter 1 and verse 11, as part of Paul's somewhat lengthy prayer for the Christians there, he includes a petition that we would be strengthened with all might according to His glorious power for all patience and longsuffering with joy. If you have patience and longsuffering and joy, you're contented. But for that, you must be strengthened with all might according to His glorious power.

It is supernatural. It is grace that is given. It is.

Contentment is a grace in the life and it is given by the grace of God. With reference to that scripture, Jeremiah Burroughs said this, quote, You must not therefore be content with a little strength so that you are able to bear what a man might bear by the strength of reason and nature. But you should be strengthened with all might according to the glorious power of God unto all patience and to all longsuffering.

You see, there are many people who have what looks like contentment because they have learned to not be petulant. They've learned to be realistic. You know, I can't have a higher standard of living than this, so I'll just get along.

I'll just get by. A lot of people have it worse than I do. I can live with this.

And they seem to be content. And they have the ability to bear what a natural man can bear by the strength of nature and reason. But Jeremiah Burroughs, I think, said correctly of this verse in Colossians, We should not be content to have only that strength.

We need to be able to bear what cannot be borne by nature and by reason. You know, there are times when circumstances are worse than can be borne naturally. In 2 Corinthians chapter 1, beginning of verse 8, Paul says, For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened beyond measure above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

What kind of troubles came on Paul in Asia? He doesn't tell us. He just says, I'll tell you what, it was a burden that was beyond what I could measure. I couldn't quantify this.

It's off the charts. And he said, beyond strength. That is, our burden was beyond our strength to bear.

Well, how can this be? How can God allow me to endure temptations that are more than I can bear? When he said he won't. Paul makes it very clear. He bore it by the grace of God.

It is a miracle of God. We must be prepared to bear that which nature and reason would not equip us to bear. We must be strengthened with all might by His glorious power.

Paul said, I can do all things through Christ, who strengtheneth me. Remember, the word sufficient is the same word as that word content that is used in the New Testament. And in 2 Corinthians 9.8, Paul said, And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you always, having all sufficiency in all things.

That word could be translated, all contentment, because it's the same Greek word. He makes His grace abound to you so that you'll have all inward sufficiency as well as outward things. You could have all contentment in all things so that you have an abundance for every good work.

Grace is the means of this sufficiency. Grace is the means of this contentedness. Later in 2 Corinthians 12.9, when Paul said he complained three times to God about his thorn in his flesh, God said, My grace is sufficient.

Again, the same word. My grace is sufficient for you. God's grace coming is sufficient.

If nothing else changes in my circumstances, if I have a thorn in the flesh that is so

vexing that I feel buffeted by a messenger of Satan, and I cry out to God three times to take it away, and He says, No, I'm not going to take it away. I'll tell you what, I'll make you contented instead. My grace will give you that inward sufficiency, that self-contained sufficiency that has nothing to do with the outward circumstances.

It's grace from God. Contentment is a miracle that, without changing the circumstances, changes the impact of the circumstances on me. You may remember that Moses brought the children of Israel to the waters of Marah.

They were bitter waters. But when God showed him a tree which He cast in the waters, the waters were made sweet. And Jesus, having had the servants of the wedding fill the six water pots with water to the brim, changed the water into wine.

So also, bitter afflictions can be turned sweet by the grace of God. Ordinary, unexceptional circumstances, like ordinary water, can be turned into joy and contentment by the hand of God. Jesus went through all the bitter and unexceptional circumstances that we do.

He lived an exceptional life in terms of spiritual power, but in terms of outward circumstances, His life was, well, one we probably wouldn't want to trade ours for. His going through those things sanctified those things to us. If He's poor, then my poverty is sanctified to me by His poverty.

He, therefore, delivers me from the curse of poverty. Not that I'm not poor, but that though I'm poor, it's not a curse. Because He bore poverty, and His grace is given to me.

Of His fullness we have all received, even grace upon grace. And so, the grace of God must be obtained. How do we obtain the grace to be content? Romans 5, 2 says, Through Him we have access into this grace by faith.

By faith we have access into this grace. It's trusting Him, it's looking to Him, it's receiving by faith from Him. You know very well, it is by grace you've been saved, through faith.

It is by grace you've been saved from sin, through faith. But it is also by grace you are saved from discontent, by faith. As you put your trust in God who has offered this grace, as you find the command of God to do what you cannot naturally do, you must then recognize that He is the one who will do it.

And it is through Christ strengthening you with all His glorious might, because you have put your trust in Him. If your eyes are on the circumstances, and if your trust is in some circumstances that either exist now, or that you hope may materialize to make you happy, you will not experience this grace. It is when your trust is in God, and all your desire is in God, that that grace comes, and you can be content in whatever circumstance.

Job had riches, he had good health, he had a large, happy family. A man like that might be expected to be content. But all those things were taken from him within a couple of days' time.

And he was still content. He said to his wife, Shall we receive only the good things from the hand of the Lord, not the evil also? The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

His trust and his desire was in God. And therefore, he was content. When, by the way, his wife wasn't, and probably others would not be.

But I hope we would be among those that would be like him and not like his wife. That we can say, well, the Lord has given this. The Lord gave and the Lord took away.

The devil didn't take away, the Lord took it away. This is from my Father. I will be content.

I will trust in Him. My desire is not that I be pleased, but that my Father be pleased with me. That is contentment.

And that is the mystery which can never be known but by those who trust in and love God.