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The Glory and the Dream

Nurturing Godly Aspiration and Grateful Contentment

"A Biblical Case for Contentment"

Philippians 4:11-13

Take a first look.

I. Where Has All the Contentment Gone?

I cannot remember the last time someone with influence was urging people to be content in their present life and circumstances. We certainly are not hearing it from the political realm. It feeds on discontent. The Prosperity Gospel peddlers certainly do not encourage contentment.¹ They are all about having more—more of everything—including but not limited to health status, bank accounts, large houses, new cars, positions of power in business and whatever else Americans tend to see as symbols of success. They seem to see God more as a Genie-in-a-bottle than the Infinite-Personal God revealed in Scripture. They are all about creating discontent, so that those who follow their teachings will buy what they are selling to improve their lives. I secretly wonder if they have some stake in current marketing for big business, because their teaching is powerful motivation for the devotees of their brand of faith to buy more stuff. Invoking God to increase sales is the envy of Madison Avenue Mad Men. They certainly sell books.

II. So, there's the problem. We have plenty of (over) emphasis on human aspiration. The problem with human aspiration is that, without the proper companion virtue of *grateful contentment*, ambition becomes all-consuming and loses its spiritual center and moral balance. We are taught every time we tune into network or cable TV that we cannot possibly be satisfied with things as they are right now. We must have more stuff, the right stuff, to be really happy and fulfilled. Folks who listen to those Prosperity Preachers get just about the same message. There is no balancing emphasis on being grateful and contented. Do we have a good enough view of God and grace to make room for contentment? Let's see.

Take a closer look at a Biblical Case for Contentment.

I. The Casting of Lots Promoted Contentment. Numbers 26:51-56; Acts 1:21-26

As my lovely wife and I are listening to the reading of the Scriptures each year as we go to bed in the evening, I have been struck multiple times with the genius of the plan for settling into the Promised Land.² The tribal inheritances were mapped out by God, and then those parameters were delivered to the people by Moses and the tribal leaders.

¹ I recommend Ross Douthat's provocative book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, 2012). Douthat weighs the purveyors of the Prosperity Gospel, by name and by history and by repeated teaching, according to the standard of historic Christian (and Biblical) teaching and finds them wanting.

² If you are one of those who has misgivings about the whole idea of the Promised Land, of God's people displacing the cultures that were currently living there, I would recommend the works of Paul Copan, notably, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Baker Books, 2011), especially the chapter on the allegation that God commanded "ethnic cleansing." Also, Copan teamed up

1. The tribal inheritances of Israel were apportioned by the drawing of lots.³ [Read]

Numbers 26:52-57; Proverbs 16:33. Note 2 things about the tribal inheritances: (a) They were apportioned by the size of the tribe. More land was given to the tribes with more people. (b) Their location in the land was decided by the drawing of lots. The drawing/casting of lots is something akin to rolling dice. We might consider that the tribal locations were then decided “by chance” if we do not have the perspective that the people of faith had at that time. That perspective is given expression in this proverb:

“The lot is cast into the lap

But its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33, ESV).

They did not consider this merely a “roll of the dice,” as in a game of chance. Rather, they considered it a matter of turning the decision over to a God Who was both personal and sovereign. They believed that He would reveal His decision to their spiritual leaders through this sacred ceremony that took the choice out of their hands. When the lot was cast, the decision left their hands and was turned over to God.

2. The Twelfth Apostle was chosen by lot, as well. Acts 1:21-26. It appears that the early disciples of Jesus followed this example when they were seeking the guidance of God for the replacement of Judas Iscariot as one of The Twelve Apostles. Luke records in Acts, chapter 1, that they identified 2 candidates they considered qualified for the role: Joseph (with a couple of other nicknames) and Matthias. The lot fell to Matthias, and he joined The Twelve.⁴ Note that in this account, there is both an element of practical wisdom and there is an element of faith. First, they identified what the qualifications were for even being a member of The Twelve. The man must be a witness of all that Jesus said and did from His baptism forward, and also must be a witness of Jesus’ resurrection. This was a matter of practical wisdom. And then, casting the lot determined which of the 2 qualified men were to be added to the apostolic number. They recognized by wisdom who was qualified from the human perspective, and then they asked God to take it from there.

Now I realize that some believe that the Eleven jumped the gun and that Paul should have been considered the Twelfth Apostle. Luke does not present this as a departure from the plan of God. He just describes it as an act of devotion that was supported by prayer offered in faith.

II. The year of Jubilee promoted contentment. Leviticus 25, especially v. 23.

Back to the land of ancient Israel. Once the land was apportioned to the tribes, the land was further divided up according to clans and then families.

with Matthew Flannagan on a fuller treatment of this question in *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Baker Books, 2014). The key to understanding the conquest of Canaan by the descendants of Israel is found in Genesis 15:16. When the Lord reminded Abraham of his original promise that He would give Abraham’s descendants the Promised Land, He said also that there would be a 400-plus-year wait before it would be realized. Why? “Because the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete” (ESV). In other words, the conquest of Canaan by the people of Israel brought two streams together at one time and place: (1) The promise made to Abraham, and (2) The judgment of God on the inhabitants of the land. God would not allow Abraham’s descendants arbitrarily to take over the land of Canaan until the people who lived there had become so wicked that God’s judgment was ready to be exacted on them. This fits also with Leviticus 18:24-25, where the Lord said this through Moses: “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these *the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean*, and the land became unclean, so that *I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants*” (ESV, my emphasis).

³ See Numbers 26:52-57.

⁴ Acts 1:12-26 reports this event.

1. Once a piece of land was given to a family, according to the law, it could not be permanently sold or transferred to anyone else. Even if a family fell into hard times and had to sell their land to survive, every fiftieth year the ownership of the land would return to the original family. That happened in what was called the year of Jubilee. Leviticus 25 recounts the rules, given directly from the LORD, for the year of Jubilee. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Leviticus 25:23, ESV). As a result, the family ownership of cultivated land could not be transferred permanently. If the land was being sold, the price would vary according to how many years remained until the Jubilee. The price would be higher for more years and lower for fewer years. They were selling, not the land itself, but the number of crops that would be harvested from the land (Leviticus 25:16). The only exception to this rule was for a house that was built inside a walled city. In that case, the seller of the house would only have 1 full year in which to redeem the house before it became the permanent possession of the buyer and of that buyer’s descendants (Leviticus 25:29-30).

2. This plan set an automatic curb on human greed. If that law was obeyed by the people (a big “if,” I admit), no one could become a land baron who had commanding wealth and power over his neighbors. He might have prospered for a few decades, but his ownership of the land that he had purchased from other family clans would end in the Jubilee. On the other hand, a family might suffer hard times for half a century, which is truly a long time, but they could not leave poverty as an inheritance to their children or grandchildren. In the Jubilee, the family would have a chance to start over on their original family land and would be able to create a better inheritance for their children. God seems to have been encouraging a spirit of contentment on the land of one’s ancestors. He was surely establishing a deterrent to a spirit of greedy acquisition.

III. John the Baptist Rode a Harley, and He Promoted Contentment. Luke 3:1-14, especially vv. 10-14

1. The preaching of John the Baptist echoes this Old Testament theme of redeemed aspirations. When John pulled up fresh from the outback on his Harley-Davidson Camel to engage civil society and begin preaching, he made quite a stir. He was the consummate countercultural dropout: leather belt fastened around a camel-hair coat, and a diet of locusts and wild honey—long before the modern rediscovery of eating bugs. He held nothing back as he addressed his hearers as a “brood of snakes!” (Luke 3:7, FJV). He clearly had not read Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He was preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3, FJV). He wanted to make sure they were sincere and were bearing “fruit worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8, FJV). He anticipated the defense of the people: “But we are children of Abraham!” they protested. He roared in reply—doubtless as he gestured to the rocky land around them near the Jordan—“God is able out of these stones to raise up children to Abraham!” (Luke 3:8b, FJV). They should not think they were so special simply because of the history of their people, and they should receive the offer of forgiveness with humility and gratefulness. Then, the inevitable questions of “What comes next?” began. “And the crowds began asking him, ‘What then shall we do?’” (Luke 3:10a, FJV).

2. John called the people to nurture contentment. Luke 3:11-14

¹¹ Now answering he began to say to them, “Let the one who has two tunics share with the one who does not have [one], and let the one having food keep on doing likewise.” ¹² Now even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ Now he said to them, “Stop doing anything more than what has been ordered

to you^p.”¹⁴ And also men serving in the army were asking him, saying, “And what shall we also do?” And he said to them, “Let no one extort or blackmail, and let your^p wages be enough” (Luke 3:10-14, FJV).

There is a lot to think about in those statements. *To the people in general*, he counseled a spirit of giving to others. *To tax collectors* (We might ask, “What were those guys doing at the Johnny B crusade?”), he had a golden opportunity to make some snidely remark about Roman occupation of the land of Israel, or about corrupt government in general, or even about how they were traitors to their own people for collecting taxes from their people and giving them to those nasty Romans. But rather, he told them to be honest public servants: “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” And then *soldiers* also showed up. If tax collectors coming to the crusade was amazing, soldiers coming to be baptized would have been incredible. And essentially, he told them not to throw their weight around. Those guys represented the power of Imperial Rome, whose Pax Romana had been established and was enforced at the bloody end of the sword. He told them not to extort money by force or false accusation and “*be content with your wages*.” Truly remarkable. Again, he could have made some statements about Roman power in general or even whether military service was legitimate. But rather, he called them to personal and professional *contentment*.

IV. Jesus Calls His Disciples to Contentment. Luke 6:24-31

It is no surprise that Luke also records Jesus’ teaching on self-limitation, a spirit and practice of giving, and on generally being content. When he repeated the teaching that Matthew records in what is usually called the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Luke includes Jesus giving similar exhortations. Jesus pronounced “woes” on the rich and the well-fed (Luke 6:24-25) and encouraged His followers to be open-handed to beggars (Luke 6:30). In short, “*And just as you^p desire that people should do for you^p, keep doing likewise for them*” (*The Golden Rule*, Luke 6:31, FJV). Later, right after recounting the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), Luke presents Jesus’ teaching on worry. He concludes that teaching with this reminder (Luke 12:34, FJV): “... Where your^p treasure is, there also your^p heart will be.”

In other words, we must curb our enthusiasm for gathering more temporary stuff and get the kind of treasure that lasts into eternity.

V. The Thirteenth Apostle Makes It Personal. Philippians 4:11-13

When we come back to where our theme for this study began in Philippians 4, we see a personalization of this cumulative teaching. Paul thanks the church in ancient Philippi for reviving their support for his missionary endeavors. However, he does not want to seem like he was whining or even begging. He wrote this (Philippians 4:11-13, FJV):

“¹¹ Not that I am speaking according to need, for I have learned in what ways I am to be content. ¹² I know both how to be made to do with little, and I know how to abound; in any and in all circumstances I have been taught the secret, both to be well-fed and to be hungry, both to abound and to have need: ¹³ I have strength for all things in the One Who keeps giving me strength.”

“I have *learned* in what ways I am to *be content*.”

Paul knew by good theology and by personal experience that he really could do everything he was required to do with the strength that he drew from God. What was the secret of true contentment? Faith! He was trusting in our Lord to provide all he needed to do all God had called him to do. He was grateful to the church in Philippi for sharing with him, even though they were rather dirt-poor themselves (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). And remember that Paul wrote this cheerful, encouraging, and joyful letter while he was *in prison* in Rome.

Take it home (applications).

I. We must avoid being driven only for what will immediately benefit us. When we do earnestly cooperate with the Holy Spirit on learning to be grateful and contented, we will not buy—intellectually, emotionally, or actually—the idea that more is always better. We will recognize that God is providing for our needs and often much more.

II. We must allow the flame of the Holy Spirit to fire our souls and shape our values.
Hebrews 4:11; Matthew 11:25-30

The writer to the Hebrews makes a paradoxical exhortation in chapter 4. In a lengthy passage, he argues that the people of God in Christ have finally entered their rest. He compares this rest with the seventh day of creation. He argues that the “rest” that he is writing about, which the people of God must enter, is the life of obedient faith. Joshua could not lead the people of Israel fully into that kind of rest, and so, “... a Sabbath rest remains for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9, FJV). He then states the paradox, “let us *make every effort*⁵ to enter into that *rest*, in order that no one may fall after the same example of disobedience/unbelief” (Hebrews 4:11a, FJV, my emphasis. Presumably, the writer is referring to the bad example of the people of God during the period of the Judges). The “Sabbath rest” he writes about is a goal worth *pursuing*, something akin to the “rest for your souls” that Jesus promised to those who would yoke themselves to Him (cf. Matthew 11:25-30).

III. We must shift our focus to be free from worry, as well. Matthew 6:33-34 Worry is surely a robber of peace. Worry is trying to live tomorrow today. If we are contented and grateful in the present, this helps us overcome anxiety. *Could it be that anxiety is simply aspiration without contentment?* We want a desired condition of life and are striving to attain it. We do not think we will be happy without it. Yet, we are not sure that we can bring that condition about. Anxiety is the result. I surely do not want to minimize the clinical aspects of anxiety⁶, but I do want to emphasize that every clinical treatment includes the changing of one’s patterns of thought. Pausing regularly and often to give thanks to God and to others for our present blessings, and to release our goals, dreams, and hopes to God certainly helps. Jesus addresses worry in the Sermon on the Mount (see chapter 6), and He draws the application: “But keep on seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you^p. Therefore, you^p shall not worry for tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry for itself; sufficient for the day is its evil” (Matthew 6:33-34, FJV). *Aspire for more of God and be content with what He provides, because He knows what we really need.*

IV. We must find our strength and delight in the Lord to become grateful and contented.
Philippians 2:12-13; Psalm 37:3-4

We must keep this paradox in our minds (Philippians 2:12-13, FJV): “Therefore, my beloved, just as you^p have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence, work out your^p own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the One Who keeps working in you^p both to keep on desiring and to keep on working on behalf of the good pleasure [of God].”

⁵ BDAG gives the following suggested translations for this term, *Σπουδάσωμεν* (*Spoudasomen*), in this passage: “to be especially conscientious in discharging an obligation, *be zealous/eager, take pains, make every effort, be conscientious*.”

⁶ You might consider the recent personal account given by J. P. Moreland on his struggle against clinical anxiety in *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices that Brought Peace* (Zondervan, 2019).

As followers of Jesus, we are called to “work out our own salvation,” but we are told that the very desire and power to do so comes from God. We work it *out* while He works it *in*. We earnestly cooperate with what God alone can motivate and empower in our souls.

I remind you that King David figured this out, but alas, he did have some trouble trying to apply it fully in his own life. Psalm 37 is a meditation written by David on the apparent prosperity of the wicked. How do we respond to what seems to be the success of people who are doing evil things? Why are they getting away with such behavior? Is there no justice? The simple answer is that God will certainly bring evil on the heads of those who continue to do evil, but in His time and way not ours. What should be our attitude, then? Part of what he counsels is this:

³ Trust in the LORD, and do good;

Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD,

And he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:3-45, ESV).

We must trust God and do what is right. But more than that, we must “delight [ourselves] in the LORD,” and then, “He will give [us] the desires of [our] heart[s].” I think this must be understood something like this: If we really make the LORD and His purposes our delight, our joy, then our very desires will be shaped by Him. He will answer our prayers because our prayers will be aligned with His loving purposes. We will *want* what *He* wants. This fits rather well with Philippians 2:13, does it not? “*God is the One Who keeps working in you^P both to keep on desiring and to keep on working on behalf of the good pleasure [of God]*” (FJV, my emphasis).