

The Glory and the Dream

Nurturing Godly Aspiration and Grateful Contentment

“What Can Go Wrong with Contentment?”

Philippians 4:11-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; 2 Kings 20:19; Romans 12:9

Take a first look.

I. A Short-sighted Ruler. 2 Kings 20:19.

Here is a quotation that has always troubled me: “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?’” (2 Kings 20:19, ESV). This was spoken by King Hezekiah of Judah near the end of his life. Hezekiah is usually considered one of the good guys as king of ancient Judah. He ruled during the time that the nation was divided into the 10 tribes of the north, still called Israel, and the 2 tribes of the south, known by the largest tribe, Judah (Benjamin was the other tribe, and it had pretty much become absorbed into Judah). Hezekiah gets coverage in 3 chapters in the book of 2 Kings (2 Kings 18-20), and Isaiah’s book of prophecy allots him 4 chapters (Isaiah 36-39). This amount of coverage suggests that his story is significant. His rule was during an important period for the people descended from Israel. Hezekiah had been king over Israel for 14 years when Sennacherib, king of Assyria, attacked all the fortified cities in Judah and captured them. He was close to conquering the entire nation. Jerusalem, the capitol city of Judah, was all that was left. Assyria had already conquered the northern kingdom that still carried the name Israel. The king of Assyria had carried away into exile many of the people in the northern kingdom. Now his sights were set on Judah. Hezekiah had already paid him to withdraw by sending him all the gold and silver that were in both the temple and the king’s house. That was not enough for the greedy king of Assyria. He sent his commanders and a large army to lay siege Jerusalem.

When they arrived, the commander of Assyria’s army set out the challenge. He taunted the people of Jerusalem with the military power and prior conquests of Assyria. He chided the people of Judah for trusting in weak allies, notably Egypt, “that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it” (2 Kings 18:21, ESV). That was a vivid figure of speech, to be sure. This guy was eloquent, even though his message was like that of any persuasive politician—filled with plausible rhetoric that doesn’t stand up against objective fact-checking. He even claimed that the LORD had sent the armies of Assyria to destroy the land (cf. 2 Kings 18:25). This might be considered a half-truth, since the writer of 2 Kings had already written that the northern kingdom had fallen because of their repeated violation of the covenant with the LORD, spanning several centuries (cf. 2 Kings 18:12). And to make it worse, this blowhard spoke “in the language of Judah” (2 Kings 18:28, ESV). He wanted to make sure the impact of his blustering defiance would sink in and strike the people with the maximum fear. Things were not looking good for Hezekiah and the people of Judah. Yet, King Hezekiah and the people humbly called out to the LORD for help, and the LORD stepped in and worked on their behalf, striking down 185,000 soldiers in the camp of the Assyrians overnight. The survivors awoke to find dead bodies everywhere. Sennacherib and the remnant of his army slinked back home to Nineveh, where 2 of his sons assassinated him in “the house of Nisroch his god” (2 Kings 19:37, ESV). Clearly, Nisroch was no match for Yahweh, Creator of all else outside of Himself and God of Israel. This is like the stuff of a Louis Lamour novel—the Bad Guy is gunned down in the street, unloved and un-mourned by anyone who knew him.

Then, if the unprovoked attack by a powerful foreign enemy was not enough, to compound his afflictions, Hezekiah came down with a terminal illness. The LORD sent the prophet Isaiah to give the king the bad news: “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover” (2 Kings 20:1b, ESV). That blunt news sent the king reeling. We are told that he “wept bitterly” (2 Kings 20:3b, ESV). When he cried out to the LORD in prayer, Hezekiah reminded God of how faithfully and wholeheartedly he had served—you know, in case the LORD had forgotten. The implication was, “And now, this is what I get as my reward for earnest devotion? I get sick and die!?” The story continues that before Isaiah could even get out of the king’s mansion, the LORD stopped him, sent him back, and assured Hezekiah that he would have 15 more years of life. He confirmed it with a private miracle, turning the shadow on his stairs back by 10 steps, a symbol of “turning back the clock” to give him more years of life, I surmise.

And then, after all his acts of great devotion, the story of Hezekiah comes to its somewhat inglorious end. Envoys arrive from a distant land, the land of Babylon. Hezekiah is feeling confident and bold. He shows them everything they have now accumulated again after the hardship they had endured years before from Assyria. And the LORD sends Isaiah again, this time with an oracle of woe. “You did what!?” was basically the message. Isaiah foretells that in the future all that Hezekiah has collected will be carried away to Babylon, including some of his own descendants, born of his lineage. Some of his boys will “become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (2 Kings 20:18b, ESV), a particularly grim prospect.

II. What is so disturbing to me about this story is how Hezekiah responded to this news. Rather than being in mourning for his bad decision and the terrible outcome on his own grandchildren, rather than humbly crying out to God for mercy, he acted relieved. Perhaps with a sigh of resignation, he even said “to Isaiah, ‘The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?’” (2 Kings 20:19, ESV). Get that? He said, “At least this won’t happen to me or during my time as king. What a relief!” When I now read his words, I can’t get over feeling that this is a pathetic and short-sighted response. He was grateful and contented, yes. But in the wrong time and manner. It is right to be thankful to God for any act of mercy, but to be satisfied with God’s judgment being kicked down the road onto his descendants—not so sure that this is admirable.

III. In the story of Hezekiah, a basically good man is both grateful and contented with the justice of God. At a certain level, this must be applauded. But he was much too content with the way in which that justice would be visited on his descendants. This raises a simple question: without other virtues to balance it out, what are some of the ways in which grateful contentment can morph into something that we do not really want for our souls? Consider a sampling of possibilities.

Take a Closer look at What Can Go Wrong with Contentment.
Or, How Can Contentment Go Astray?

I. Sloth. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

1. Contentment without godly aspiration can turn into sloth. To be content with what God has supplied is a good thing. Contentment affirms and accepts the providence of God over one’s life and circumstances. However, to settle in and expect God to provide everything we need (and want) without our own earnest involvement is a bad thing. Let me illustrate.

I—Several years ago, we had a bit of regional news here in Washington State that corresponded with the national news on the housing crisis. A group of people had

moved into a Washington State Park and were not planning to leave. They overstayed the park's 2-week limit, and when the story hit the news, they had already been camping out there for about 2 months. From what I could tell from the regional news report, none of these people were working for a living. They were just hanging out, using public assistance for their food, and enjoying their free accommodations. When the reporter got there to survey the situation and prepare a story for the broadcast news, 1 or 2 of the people had emerged as the spokespeople of the group (they were badly chosen!). The reporter asked one of them what they were planning to do, and his reply went something like this: "We don't have good housing, and we are going to stay here *until they provide it for us*" (my emphasis)." This person did not specify who "they" might be, only that *they* owed the group a satisfactory place to live. It strikes me as I recall that incident, that this was an honest, albeit disappointing, representation of the spirit of entitlement. "*They owe us a good place to live. We don't care who the exact antecedent of 'they' might be, only that it is someone else rather than we.*"

2. Grateful contentment still requires us to work hard.

Several years ago, as my Greek study friends Larry Cory and Roger McCune and I translated and discussed 2 Thessalonians, we came to a passage that will help us today. The correspondence with the folks in Thessalonica is comprised of 2 of the earliest letters written by the Apostle Paul to a church he helped start. Apparently, the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were quite confused about The Day of the Lord and the End Times. Of course, all that confusion has now been cleared up and everyone in (post) modern times agrees on what will happen in the future. Wink, wink.

Someone had come along or risen within the church who taught that The Day of the Lord had already come and that somehow those among their number who had died had missed out. They also were hearing that since The Day had come already, The End was near. Some others among them thought that since The End was near, they should just quit working and hang out. (I used to hear jokes about having "rapture practice" on local hillsides—jumping up and down with hands raised to the sky). Paul wrote to correct these goofy ideas and to encourage the church with solid truth. We can be thankful both that they had misunderstandings and that Paul loved them enough to correct them. We have some great teaching as a result.

One of the conclusions of his teaching goes like this (**2 Thessalonians 3:6-12, FJV, my emphasis**):

⁶ Now, we are giving you^p this charge, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, for you^p to keep away from every brother or sister who is out of line and not walking according to the tradition which they received from us. ⁷ For you^p yourselves know how one ought to keep on emulating us, since we were not out of line among you^p ⁸ nor did we eat bread from anyone without paying for it, but rather in hard labor and toil we were working night and day so that we would not be a burden on any of you^p; ⁹ not that we do not have a right, but so that we ourselves might give you^p a pattern, in order to imitate us. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you^p, we were giving you^p this order: *if anyone is not willing to keep on working, neither let him keep on eating.* ¹¹ For we hear that some among you are walking out of line, not busy at work but busybodies; ¹² so to such people we are giving command and exhorting in the Lord Jesus Christ, that while working with quietness they shall eat their own bread.

In other words, "Quit slacking and go back to work. Earn a living but keep an eye on the horizon." Better to be interrupted by the coming of the Lord while doing an honest day's toil than to be camping out waiting for the time when *they* (or He) will provide our basic needs. Contentment without godly aspiration can lead to sloth. This is not good.

II. Apathy. Back to 2 Kings 20:19.

Grateful contentment without godly aspiration can lead to complacency or apathy.
2 Kings 20:19.

This could have been the problem with Hezekiah in his final years. He was relieved that God's judgment would be delayed. He didn't seem to care that it would be visited upon his grandchildren.

I—There was a rather infamous interchange a couple of decades ago between a reporter and a Man in the Street. It went something like this: Reporter: "What do you think about the claim that many of our current problems in America are caused by ignorance and apathy?" The Man in the Street replied, "I don't know, and I don't care!" Alas. That just about sums up "*ignorance* and *apathy*," eh? It is possible to be so comfortable with things as they are now that we become satisfied with our lack of knowledge and become self-absorbed. In his final years, Francis Schaeffer decried the American tendency to be content with individual "personal peace and affluence" and so to be unfazed by the pressing need of others beyond us. Whether the need of others is a ride to the grocery store, care during an unexpected pregnancy, or liberation from sexual slavery, all who are only out to get their own "personal peace and affluence" will be content to ignore those needs, as long as the needs are not their own. *Apathy is contentment without love, comfort without compassion, personal peace without social vision.*

I—Apathy is what kept ordinarily decent people in 1930s Germany from howling down what the Nazis were secretly and not so secretly doing to the Jews and others in Western Europe. German pastor Martin Niemoller's humble confession should be remembered in this context. Here is one version of that confession:

"In Germany they came first for the communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist.
Then they came for the Jews
and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for me,
and by that time no one was left to speak."¹

In Niemoller's speeches and sermons after the war, he had a growing unease at each step down this staircase of evil. Despite that unease, he still said nothing until it came to open on his very door, the door of the Church. Niemoller had been a decorated Navy officer in WWI, and in his political outlook, he was a conservative German nationalist. He was happy, at first, that Germany was taking back its rightful place in the balance of world power. Only as the Nazis began to target more groups in Germany and throughout Europe did his unease begin and

¹ The origin of this quotation is interesting and varied, since it or something like it was included in various forms in the speeches and sermons of Niemoller during the decade after the end of WWII. It is well documented that Niemoller, a German Navy veteran of WWI, was a patriotic German, who in 1939 petitioned to volunteer for the Navy and fight for Germany. He had already become a pastor in the early 1930s and was a leading light in the Confessing Church Movement of 1933-34 that strongly objected, at great personal cost, to Hitler's takeover of the Church in Germany. He was arrested in 1937 and remained in custody until the end of the war in 1945. In the latter of those years, he was held in concentration camps where hundreds of thousands died at the hands of the SS. His statement of apathy and guilt covers the years 1933-1937 during which he was aware but inactive regarding the roundup of Communists, the physically infirmed ("lives unworthy of life"), the Jews, and more. Harold Marcuse has traced the development of this poetic confession in his chapter, "The Origin and Reception of Martin Niemoller's Quotation, 'First they came for the communists ...,'" in the book *Remembering for the Future: Armenia, Auschwitz, and Beyond* (Paragon House, 2015), edited by Michael Berenbaum, Richard Libowitz, and Marcia Sachs Littell.

grow. Yet, looking back after it was all over, he realized that he and many others had waited too long to object.

Niemoller repeatedly recounted an incident in which he was driving with his wife near Dachau, the last concentration camp in which he had been interred. His wife asked him to stop and show her the cell where he had been kept. He did so. Once there, they walked to the gate into the crematoriums, through which he had never entered. They went in, and there attached to a tree was a white sign with black letters that read: "Here in the years 1933-1945, 238,756 people were cremated." He recounted that his wife fainted into his arms, presumably because of the sheer number of people murdered at the place. What struck him was not the number of people killed there—he already knew that—but the time period, 1933-1945. He took that placard as an indictment of his own soul:

"What ran through me hot and cold at that moment was something else. That was the other two numbers: '1933-1945.' I groped for my alibi and knew that the two numbers were the wanted poster of the living God for Pastor Niemoller. My alibi reached from July 1, 1937, to mid-1945. There stood: '1933-1945.' Adam, where are you? Mensch, where were you? Yes, I know, from mid-1937 until the end you have an alibi. Here you're being asked: 'Where were you from 1933 until July 1, 1937?' And I couldn't avoid this question any longer. In 1933 I was a free man. 1933—at that moment in the crematorium yard it occurred to me—yes 1933, that's right: Hermann Goring boasted publicly that he had gotten rid of the Communist danger."²

The Holocaust had begun, and Niemoller basically ignored it until it came to his door. What Schaeffer might say, if he were commenting on this today, decades after Schaeffer's passing, is that Niemoller came to confess that until the crying injustice against others threatened his own "personal peace and affluence," he was unmoved. He had no "alibi" for the years in which he ignored that injustice, mostly in the end against the Jews, but also others. *Apathy is contentment isolated from the fuller scope of godly character.*

III. Instability and Emotional Dependency. Romans 12:9. "Let love be without hypocrisy."

If we are grateful and contented but without the balancing character of godly aspiration, we can easily become untethered, like a leaf that becomes disconnected from its branch and flies about as the wind might carry it here and there. It is a short flight from apathy to something like emotional dependency. *We can become addicted to feelings of well-being*, whether they represent reality or not. Paul calls us to show love "without hypocrisy," meaning that we are not merely pretending (see Romans 12:9). We may be very contented with our present circumstances, but are things, even with us, as good as they *seem*, or as they *feel*?

I—It is quite too possible to be terminal with an aggressive cancer and not feel any pain—not until it is too late to counter the disease. We can have a serious and life-and-relationship-altering mental illness and yet *feel fine*. That is often the problem with mental illness. The person *feels* like everything is normal. **G. K. Chesterton** told of a walk with a prosperous publisher of his time when the man made a remark which had already become a cliché. Saying of somebody, "That man will get on; he believes in himself." At just that moment, Chesterton looked up and saw "**Hanwell**" written on an omnibus as it drove past them. Hanwell was the name of an institution in London, England for the mentally ill. Chesterton then replied to his companion, "Shall I tell you where the men are who believe most in themselves? For I can tell you. I know of men who believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon or Caesar. I know where flames the fixed star of certainty and success. I can guide you to the thrones of the Super-men. The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums." As they continued to talk, he said, "Believing in himself is one of the commonest signs of a rotter..." Finally, the publisher made a "very deep and effective reply": "Well, if a man is not to believe in

² From Harold Marcuse, op cit., p. 178. See note 2.

himself, in what is he to believe?" And so, Chesterton went home and wrote his book *Orthodoxy* to answer that question.³ Again, instability and emotional dependency are compatriots with apathy. If we become content with only our narrow view of self and the world, we are in trouble: "If a man is not to believe in himself, in what is he to believe?" Indeed.

We might be quite satisfied with our lives, but what about the lives of others? Do we care, for example, for what is happening in **Iran** right now as tens of thousands are being slaughtered by the Islamist regime to maintain their oppression over the people, or about our Nigerian brothers and sisters who are being ambushed and murdered by the thousands by similar Islamists? I often wonder how much has been lost to the world through **elective abortion** just in the United States over the years since the infamous *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions of the US Supreme Court in 1973. At this moment, the estimate is that in America over 67.5 million children have been deprived of life in this grisly practice.⁴ Down Syndrome babies are often routinely aborted. Little girls are aborted more often than little boys. What joy and enrichment of the human community has been lost from these potential neighbors and friends? What philosophical insight, what theological expression, what beauty and skill in graphic or musical arts have been sacrificed to an addiction to the sense of personal well-being? What joy for life and capacity for love has been lost in the killing of Down Syndrome individuals? What breakthroughs in medicine have been forfeited in the loss of 67 million potential researchers and physicians? What impact on the immigration crisis would it have if these little ones had been allowed to see the light of day and join the workforce? Ah, but these "potential persons" would threaten our own goals and aspirations. They might rob us of a standard of living to which we aspire. They may keep us from working long hours at our jobs, from rising to the top of our careers, from buying more stuff, from putting more money away—you know, from all the things that really make us *happy*. Hopefully, we are not characters in the living sequel to Jesus' story, now to be called, *The Return of the Rich Fool*.⁵ "This night your soul shall be required of you, and then who's will those things be that you have saved up for yourself?"

Take it home (applications).

I. We must not let aspiration become shortsighted and self-directed.

II. We must not allow contentment to become isolated and confining. This leads to an addiction to the feeling of well-being at the cost of anyone and anything.

In the end, both aspiration and contentment can be corrupted if not balanced with each other and with other aspects of godly character.

III. The formation of such character works over a lifetime both by the nurture of our most important human relationships and by the grace of God. This is why having a close and honest relationship with other followers of Jesus is essential (i.e., The Church), and why a life of personal devotion (that includes the powerful spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, and study) is also vital. Ultimately, *there is no pill for virtue*.

³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Kindle Edition), quotes from chapter II, "The Maniac."

⁴ <https://www.numberofabortions.com>.

⁵ See Luke 12:13-21.