



CHASING

C~~X~~ONTENTMENT

TRUSTING GOD IN A DISCONTENTED AGE

Erik Raymond

“Contentment may not be as elusive as we think it is. Erik Raymond’s enthusiasm in explaining the biblical text regarding contentment really shines in this book. Whether you’ve been wearied by trying to squeeze contentment out of the world or you’re happy right where you are, *Chasing Contentment* will refresh your perspective as you marvel at the sovereign joy of Jesus.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *Alive in Him*

“Too often our search for contentment leads us to sources unable to bear the weight of our desires. We trust in money, relationships, and circumstances, only to find ourselves increasingly dissatisfied. This book helps to clarify our understanding of contentment, as well as redirect our hopes to the One who is able to provide lasting joy. Raymond combines wisdom from church fathers with modern insights and examples that make this book readable, applicable, and needed.”

Melissa Kruger, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Uptown Church, Charlotte, North Carolina; author, *The Envy of Eve*

“Just about every day, I wake up and read Erik Raymond’s insights on pastoral ministry, discipleship, and everyday living as a Christian. He always challenges me to love Jesus as I trust in the sufficiency of his work on the cross. As someone who struggles with contentment, I need his wise counsel to walk with Christ in freedom and joy.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Blind Spots*

“In this book, my friend Erik Raymond isn’t saying anything new—he’s reminding us of some very old wisdom that has gone unheeded and unheralded in our discontented age. Drawing from the prophets, the Puritans, and his own personal experience, he puts his finger on our malaise and offers us gospel medicine. I need the truth in this book—and I’m betting you do too.”

Robert H. Thune, Lead Pastor, Coram Deo Church, Omaha, Nebraska

“Erik Raymond is the right man to write the book *Chasing Contentment*. I was immensely blessed and challenged by this fine work. You will be too as you read and apply it.”

Jason Allen, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and College

“Does any word better define our culture than ‘chasing’? Does any word better describe what’s missing in our culture than ‘contentment’? By pairing these seemingly contradictory words, Erik calls us to end our pursuit of more and to begin our pursuit of enough. Read this engaging and enjoyable exploration of Christian contentment and decide, as I did, that this chase is well worth the effort.”

David Murray, Professor of Old Testament, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Grand Rapids Free Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan; author, *Jesus on Every Page* and *The Happy Christian*

“Erik Raymond is one of my favorite writers. Discontentment is one of my deepest struggles. What a joy, then, to have this author speak wisely, biblically, and pastorally about the value, the importance, and the pursuit of contentment. If you struggle as I do, you’ll find help and hope in the pages of this book and, ultimately, in the Book of books it points to.”

Tim Challies, blogger, Challies.com

“For decades, when asked for a book recommendation on Christian contentment, I always had to reference books by Puritans like Burroughs and Watson. I knew of no solid modern book on the matter—until now. Erik Raymond’s *Chasing Contentment* is that modern work I have longed to see and use. This book contains the wisdom and insights of the timeless Puritan works, yet brings a culturally relevant pastoral sensitivity that will make this the go-to book on this subject—thoroughly biblical, immensely practical. I highly commend this book and the faithful man who wrote it.”

Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church; Founder, Practical Shepherding; Senior Fellow, Church Revitalization Center, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Chasing Contentment

CHASING CONTENTMENT

TRUSTING GOD IN A DISCONTENTED AGE

Erik Raymond

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To the Lord Jesus Christ,
who brings us back to God (1 Pet. 3:18)

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Preface

There's a story behind every book. The story behind this book is painfully sweet. A couple of years ago I was enduring a particularly difficult season. It seemed as though God had allowed affliction to hover like a rain cloud over my life. Pastoral ministry was especially trying even as I encountered a number of new health problems. This, along with the regular stiff headwind of living in a fallen world, had me weary.

But I was more than weary. I was restless. And, upon further review, I was discontent. In God's providence I was preaching through the book of Hebrews at the time. The thick, dark rain clouds of affliction cast a shadow over my studies and even, I regret, some of my preaching. Looking back, I am reminded of William Cowper's hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." He writes:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take!
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.¹

1. William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," 1774.

One day as I opened my Bible to study, the clouds burst with blessings on my head. I read in chapter 13 of Hebrews:

Be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say,

“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?” (Heb. 13:5–6)

Through these verses God began to remind me afresh that despite anything, I can (and must) be content in God. He is the source of my contentment, not my circumstances. Furthermore, my contentment will be fed by God’s Word.

This led to me scribbling down questions, thoughts, confessions, and fresh discoveries of grace. Over the next several weeks, I marinated in this text and the subject of contentment. I preached, wrote, and talked with members of our congregation. God was teaching us about contentment. He was teaching us about who he is and how our contentment ultimately is in him. Indeed, behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. Seeing this face, through the eyes of faith, serves to create and sustain contentment.

This book explains what contentment is and several ways to learn it. It is pivotal to understand that contentment is anchored in the God who is content in himself. What better gift can God give to hungry, hurting people like us than himself? He welcomes us to his banquet hall to find our souls satisfied in him. Contentment is the abiding “Amen” of our joy. But we need to know more than what contentment is; we need to know how to learn it and practice it. In Philippians 4:11, Paul remarks that he learned how to be content. How then do we learn this? In the second part of this book I lay out some practical ways we can learn to be content.

I am thankful that over the course of time in writing this book God answered prayers to help make me content in him. As you might expect, he did this by means of various trials. I had the privi-

lege of applying what I was writing to my life in real time. I also applied what I was living to what I was writing. In other words, we don't graduate from the school of contentment; we're career students. Whether you are writing or reading a book on the subject, God will faithfully and graciously provide areas where you can learn contentment. It's in this sense that we are all continually chasing contentment even while we know something about it and what its footprints look like in our lives. I pray that this book will further your study at the school of contentment.

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I am grateful for so many helping hands in this project. Thank you, everyone at Crossway, for your joyful service in publishing books that serve the church. In particular, thank you, Justin Taylor, Dave DeWit, Thom Notaro, Amy Kruis, Lauren Harvey, and Josh Dennis.

Thank you to my former boss and pastor, Pat Abendroth, for encouraging me early on to consider writing. It seemed strange at the time, but in God's providence you have blessed me deeply by shepherding me in that direction, brother. Thank you, Emmaus Bible Church, the church where I am privileged to serve as pastor. Your prayers, feedback, and encouragement served me more than you will know.

Thank you to Matt Fudge, a dear friend and fellow elder, for your thoughtful conversations about the Trinity and contentment. Thank you, Luke Gorsett, for so many helpful discussions about this subject while working out at the gym.

Thank you to my children—Bryce, Luke, Alaynah, Alexis, Zoë, and Bo; you are such a bouquet of grace to me. And my loving wife, Christie, thank you for your persistent reminders to keep seeking the things above, where Christ is (Col. 3:1–4), and for your encouragement to write this book in the first place. You are truly an excellent wife, my best friend, and my dear sister. What a privilege it is to walk to Immanuel's land while holding your hand.

Introduction

If you drive through rural New England towns, you'll notice an abundance of stone walls. These walls initially served as property markers hundreds of years ago; and because they were well built, many remain to this day. But the art of building stone walls has nearly faded away. The craftsmen who make them, though plentiful in a previous age, are now few.

Some years ago my dad (who lives in New England) wanted to have a wall built on his property that reflected some of this old-world craftsmanship. As he inquired as to who could do it, he found the list of prospects to be remarkably small. When the selected mason came, it was like he had just stepped out of a time machine. His tools, his work ethic, and even the way he spoke about the wall seemed to be from another time. He represented something of the lost art of masonry.

I wonder if you've experienced something like this when you've read Christian biographies or older theological works. They reflect a level of depth and devotion that seems uncommon today. I've run into this when I've read some of the Puritan writers. One topic they talk about regularly and thoroughly is contentment. Reading their sermons and books, I sometimes feel like I am hearing voices from another world.

Is contentment a lost art? Is it simply a product of yesterday's Christianity? Are there only a few "craftsmen" left who practice it? And if so, is this okay with God?

I don't think it is. In fact, I'm certain it's not. Hebrews 13:5 commands us, "Be content with what you have." And the apostle Paul demonstrates his own personal contentment in his letter to the Philippian church: "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (Phil. 4:11–12). We should remember that the writer of Hebrews was addressing a church when he gave his command, and Paul was likewise writing to a local church when he discussed his priority and practice of contentment. In other words, contentment is for the church, and that includes us today. Instead of being something from a bygone age, contentment is to be a priority for all Christians.

You may find yourself convicted and perhaps even discouraged by thinking about contentment. Let me encourage you not to stay there. Did you happen to see that hopeful phrase in Philippians 4:12, "I have learned"? The apostle Paul himself had to learn contentment. It was no more natural for him than it is for you. Learning contentment is a process for all believers. Furthermore, it should encourage you that he did in fact learn it. In other words, it is attainable. He could look at his life, while in prison, and say that he learned the art of being content. In any and every situation, he knew that he had found the secret of contentment. While you may feel discouraged when you sense your discontentment, you should be encouraged to see that contentment is something attainable. Even more than this, contentment is something that God commands and provides the grace to experience.

In this book I want to help you to pursue contentment. I am not writing as someone who has been particularly successful at it. Like many other Christians, I have seasons when I feel like I am doing better than at other times. I continue to learn just like everyone else. In fact, it was a season in life a couple of years ago that God especially used to teach me how to be content in him.

At the time, I was preaching through Hebrews. When I reached chapter 13, I was captivated by what I found:

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say,

“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?” (Heb. 13:5–6)

Here the writer commands believers to be content, reminds them of God’s providence, restates God’s promises, and looks ahead to the end of the age. And all this is found in a book that gloriously exalts the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Add to this my own personal burden and struggles with contentment at the time, and you have some well-tilled soil ready for the divine gardener to work. And he did work. I studied, read, prayed, talked, and preached. I went into a contentment bubble for weeks. Much of what I taught in our church found its way into this book. The entire process was helpful to me. But even while looking back, I can see that I’m still learning to be content along with the rest of our congregation.

While studying this topic, I found a couple of friends to be very helpful. Think of them as craftsmen from the old world. The first was the English Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646). A pastor and author, Burroughs wrote the classic *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*.¹ The second was Thomas Watson (1620–1686), also an English Puritan, pastor, and author. His book *The Art of Divine Contentment*² is an apologetic for biblical contentment. Often striking the same chords as Burroughs, Watson layers his teaching in word pictures and imagery to make the case that

1. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979).

2. Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment: An Exposition of Philippians 4:11*, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/TW/tw-contentment.htm>.

we as Christians must pursue contentment in Christ. Both Burroughs and Watson faced adversity in ministry, including poverty, rejection, and (in the case of Watson) imprisonment. These were tough times for both men, but through such adversity their writings were forged. Their hearts and souls are in their books. And through their pens the enduring testimony of God's sufficiency extends to our day as well.

Throughout this book I will rely on both authors. Often I will quote them, interact with them, and update their language. But their imprint extends beyond quotations, and much of what I write here is born of lengthy time reading and contemplating what they wrote. I am grateful to God for their inescapable influence.

It is my prayer that as you read this book and consider the topic of contentment, you will find yourself drawn to God as the source and sustainer of your contentment.

Review Questions

1. Before reading this introduction, did you think of contentment as something that was realistic or idealistic? Why?
2. Does the prospect of learning contentment appeal to you? Or does it unsettle you? Explain.
3. In the past, how has the example of godly saints from church history influenced your Christian life?

Part 1

DEFINING CONTENTMENT

Understanding Contentment

Tom Brady is one of my favorite athletes of all time. He is an ardent competitor, a practical joker, and a flat-out sensational quarterback for my hometown team. One of the things I appreciate about Brady is his candor. In a 2005 interview with *60 Minutes* the quarterback said:

Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, "Hey man, this is what is [important]." I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think, "God, it's got to be more than this." I means this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be.¹

Brady is absolutely not satisfied. Prior to the 2015 season and coming off of a 2014 Super Bowl championship (his fourth), he released a video² in which he said, "You know what my favorite ring is? The next one." Let's remember that he says these things

1. Daniel Schorn, "Tom Brady: The Winner," *CBSNews*, November 3, 2005, updated December 20, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/tom-brady-the-winner>.

2. "Tom Brady, Patriots on to 'The Next One' in QB'S Facebook Hype Video," *NESN*, September 10, 2015, <http://nesn.com/2015/09/tom-brady-patriots-on-to-the-next-one-in-pump-up-facebook-video>.

from the top of a social mountaintop. From an achievement standpoint, he has it all. He has plenty of money, fame, success, and respect from his peers. He is married to a supermodel, has healthy and happy children, and lives in a mansion. But when you listen to him, he sounds like a guy who just watched an overhyped movie. He's never satisfied.

Some might interpret his words as showing how driven he is. I'm sure that's part of it. But there's more. He is restlessly searching. He is scratching his head with his hand adorned with four championship rings and asking, Is there more than this?

Many of Tom Brady's experiences are unique to an All-Pro NFL quarterback, but discontentment is common to us all. We relativize and minimize our impatience. We laugh and joke about big splurge purchases that "we just had to have." Complaining is second nature for us. Instead of running to the Lord in prayer or being content to be wronged, we often grumble and complain.

Have you ever noticed that people say they're very busy, yet everywhere they go they're on their phones scrolling through social media? When you post something online, have you noticed how many people ask you about it? Often these are the same people who are so busy!

Some cultural observers have noted a growing phenomenon called fear of missing out (FOMO). With so much information at our fingertips we become restless wondering what our friends are doing, whether we have any emails, what is happening in politics—anything other than what we are doing at the moment. FOMO may explain our constant connectedness, but discontentment explains FOMO. Discontent comes because we are restless, unhappy, unsatisfied, and curious. It seems that within a few decades of technological development, many can scarcely engage in the menial tasks of life for very long without checking their phones. It's as if we're saying, "I have learned in whatever situation I am in to be discontent."

Contrast this with the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 4:11: "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content."

The cry of the hearts of all people, whether rich or poor, is for more. They are discontent. The heartbeat of Paul in this text is that whether he has a lot or not very much, he has what he needs. He is content. We all naturally fall into the first group. We thirst for and pursue more. But as Christians we are called to live in the company of the apostle, to say we've tasted and are satisfied—we have what we need. We are to be after the elusive but ever-prized jewel of contentment.

Before going further, we need a clear definition of contentment. After all, we want to know where we are going and when we arrive there. So, what exactly is contentment? Leaning heavily upon others,³ I offer this definition: contentment is the inward, gracious, quiet spirit that joyfully rests in God's providence.

Have you been to an orchestral performance and witnessed the tuning process? It almost seems like part of the performance itself as the musicians allow each other to go ahead and tune their instruments prior to beginning. As I sit in the audience, I am fascinated by the carefulness and patience exhibited by the musicians to ensure that they are on the same page. This is what this chapter aims to do. It is a “sync up” or tuning, if you will, to a biblical understanding of contentment. As we walk through the definition, we will certainly identify some areas that are out of tune. That's okay. The goal is to build the foundation and then learn this art of contentment.

Contentment Comes from the Inside Out

Think with me about Paul and Silas sitting in a Philippian jail. The authorities had ordered them to be bound in the “inner prison” or dungeon, as we might say. Their feet were fastened in the stocks. These were the same stocks often used to torture prisoners in the ancient world. But to get an accurate picture we must remember how Paul and Silas got there.

3. Especially Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979).

The book of Acts tells us that earlier in the day, they were preaching the gospel in the town of Philippi and seeing fruit. In fact, the impact of their preaching was such that the local industry of fortune-tellers feared for their business. Feeling desperate, they attacked Paul and Silas and dragged them into court. Soon a mob of people began physically attacking them, and the rulers tore the evangelists' clothes, stripped them naked, and ordered that they be beaten with rods. After Paul and Silas had been sufficiently beaten, the magistrates ordered that they be thrown into the dungeon and locked in the stocks (Acts 16:19–24).

By all accounts this was a rough day. If there was ever a day when we would expect Paul to complain or at least grumble a bit, this was it. But we don't see that at all. In fact, we see quite the opposite. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25).

What we read in verse 25 is astounding in light of what we read in verse 24. Paul and Silas, after being stripped and publicly beaten with rods, were hauled off to prison and thrown into the dark, musty basement where they were fastened in the stocks. If this were a movie, the camera would zoom in on the missionaries and then fade out. They would look pitiable. These are horrible circumstances. The film would let us know that a few hours have passed when guards come in to check on the poor, beleaguered evangelists. Expecting to find them either dead or groaning, we'd discover them praying and singing hymns to God!

These guys not only had enough strength to live, but they had the will, the desire to sing and pray to God. When we read of them together like this, we can almost see the narrator's smile as he includes this nugget: "and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:24). I bet they were.

Here's the million-dollar question: How could people who had been through what they'd been through and then endured the circumstances they were enduring find it in themselves to

lead a prayer meeting and a hymn sing? Here's the simple answer: they were content. Paul says as much in a letter to the church he planted in this same town, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (Phil. 4:11–12).

Contentment is not based upon circumstances. It can't be. Paul and Silas were content in some of the worst circumstances imaginable. Their singing in the midst of terrible circumstances shows that contentment works inside out. But doesn't this seem counterintuitive? So often we think that if we could just change our circumstances, we could be happy. We are restless because of what we perceive as difficult circumstances. We focus our attention on our jobs, health, relationships, children's behavior, problems at church, physical appearance, and so on. "If this would just change, then my life would be so much better."

This is where we see that contentment is far more powerful than a change of circumstances. Instead of being sourced on the outside and subject to changing circumstances, biblical contentment comes from within and endures through the spectrum of circumstances. How else can we explain the singing that filled the Philippian dungeon?

This is part of the tuning process that we need to undergo. If at the very outset we misunderstand contentment, then we can't possibly come to fully enjoy its immense blessing. On the other hand, if we realize that at its heart contentment is not primarily about what's outside us but about what's inside of us, we will be well on our way toward learning this lost art.

Contentment Is Quiet

Just as we can learn a lot about people by listening to them talk, we can learn a lot about ourselves by doing the same thing. When

you talk about other people, are you generally charitable or complaining? When you discuss your job or church, are you prone to grumble or to emphasize what is good? If you are comfortable enough to cut through the fog of superficial politeness with people and answer the question “How are you doing?” do you tend to be negative? Jesus taught us that what we say comes from our heart (Matt. 12:34). What is in the well comes up in the bucket. If your heart were a body of water, would it be a peaceful lake or a stormy sea? A contented heart showcases itself by not grumbling or complaining (Phil. 2:14).

I should nuance this a bit, because there is a type of biblical complaining that is healthy. I am not saying that we should be numb or insensitive to the difficulties of life. Contentment does not mean ignoring problems or pretending they don’t exist. Quite the opposite! A contented spirit is one that realizes the difficulty but can nevertheless rest in God in the midst of it.

Second, contentment does not mean that we don’t voice our complaints to God. The Scriptures are full of prayers from godly people who cry out and complain to God (e.g., Pss. 3:4; 34:6; 55:16–17; 77:1; 142:1–3). In fact, we are commanded to cast our cares upon the Lord (1 Pet. 5:7). The motive for this is that he cares for us. But mark the contrast; there is a difference between complaining to God (“How long, O LORD?”) and complaining about God. The first is supported by an enduring trust that God hears and loves. The second is betrayed by an eroding trust that God hears and loves. It is a privilege for Christians to bring their burdened hearts to their Father for soul medicine.

Finally, contentment is not opposed to seeking help from others for deliverance out of present afflictions by lawful means. Jeremiah Burroughs makes this point clearly when he shows that contentment is not at odds with using God’s means to find relief from affliction: “And so far as he leads me I may follow his providence.” We seek help in such a way that we are submissive to God’s will and how God wills. In this, says Burroughs, “our

wills are melted into the will of God. This is not opposed to the quietness which God requires in a contented spirit.”⁴

The complaining of discontentment includes grumbling. The grumbling is a distrust of God, an anxious concern that the future won't work out the way we want it to. Discontentment can also be characterized by bitterness. This is a frustration that the past has not gone the way we'd like. Further, discontentment can be characterized by distraction in the present. Unable to focus on what should be prized and prioritized today, the discontented heart rages amid its busyness and worldliness (1 John 2:16–17). Whether explicitly or implicitly, this type of grumbling is directed at the One who is sovereign over such things. Grumbling and complaining, then, are a theological issue that casts God as incompetent, unfair, or irrelevant. We can see why discontentment is considered unchristian.

It may be helpful, when thinking about contentment, to ask those close to you if they think you often complain. Consider what you talk about. Inventory what you think about. Are you consistently embracing God's goodness in the valleys as well as on the mountaintops? Contentment knows how to sing in the stocks as well as at the banquet feast.

Contentment Is a Work of Grace

Earlier we saw that contentment works from the inside out. Now I want to push that a bit further along. The inward working of God upon the heart is the work of grace. How else can we explain such strange behavior?

If we are honest, at first blush this discourages us. “You mean I can't do this? I can't gin up the effort to get it done?” It's true—you can't. In fact, if you try to, you will fail miserably and even fuel further discontentment. But as we begin to think about this inability, it's actually quite encouraging. The fact that Paul (and

4. *Ibid.*, 22.

so many others) lived with contentment can give us hope. In other words, God has a track record of making people like you and me content in him. As we will see in the next chapter in more detail, one of the functions of the gospel is to fix our hearts upon God. We move from restless to resting, from hurting to healed, and from hungry to satisfied. God makes otherwise restless people content in him (Ps. 73:26). This is a work of grace.

When the Philippian Christians first got the apostle Paul's letter, they would have recognized Paul's call to contentment as revolutionary. In their culture, contentment was a key topic of ethical discussion from the time of Socrates.

In Stoic philosophy it [contentment] denotes the one who "becomes an independent man sufficient to himself and in need of none else." The goal for the Stoic was that "a man should be sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his own will, to resist the force of circumstances." . . . By the exercise of reason over emotions, the Stoic learns to be content. For the Stoic, emotional detachment is essential in order to be content.⁵

What a stark difference for the Christian. Instead of achieving contentment through being strong in reason, the Christian learns contentment by being weak enough to be strengthened by grace.

At this point you might be saying, "I'm not much of a complainer; I'm involved in my church, and I think overall I'm fairly content." The challenge is to look honestly at the evidence in our lives. Can we be sure we've learned contentment by grace? Has this worked inside out? Or are we simply consoled by having the things we want? This is an important question.

5. G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 310; Hansen quotes Gerhard Kittel, "αὐτάρκεια, αὐτάρκης," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 1:466, and Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (New York: Scribner's, 1897), 143n11; he also cites Abraham J. Malherbe, "Paul's Self-Sufficiency," in *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 126, and G. W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136.

Think about a crying baby who finds consolation when given a toy. Is she content from the inside out? Of course not. Take away the toy and you'll discover soon enough the source of her contentment! The same is true for grown men and women. We have a smile and a peace when work is going well, the bills are being paid, and the kids are minding. But what happens when something goes awry? Has this contentment been worked inside out by means of grace? Or is this happiness similar to a baby's with a toy? The source of our quietness is revealed by how we respond when God brings a trial.

Contentment Joyfully Rests in God's Providence

Embracing the doctrine of providence is vital for learning the art of contentment. In chapter 7 we will look into this further, but for now we should at least set the table a bit. Providence teaches us that God is not disconnected from what is happening in the world today. There is no such thing as chance, luck, or fate. Rather, an all-wise, loving, powerful God is upholding, governing, and ordering all things as if they come from his very hand. The Heidelberg Catechism says it very well in its section for Lord's Day 10:

God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

A biblical example of where this doctrine reveals contentment is the story of Joseph. He was one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Joseph's older brothers became jealous of him because of their father's favored treatment of him. Jacob had made him a special coat that Joseph no doubt proudly wore before his brothers. What's more, Joseph had a dream in which his brothers were all bowing down before him. And to make matters worse, he told his

brothers about the dream. This led to their plotting to kill him. When cooler heads prevailed, they decided instead to sell him into slavery and tell their father that Joseph was tragically killed by an animal.

After all of this plotting, Joseph ended up in Egypt, where he was promoted through the ranks and became the lead guy for Potiphar. Things were looking up for Joseph until the king's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape after her failed efforts to seduce him. As a result, he was thrown into prison. While there, he interpreted dreams for some other prisoners and made a name for having wisdom. Later, Pharaoh called on him for this same purpose. Joseph shined in the moment and was given great honor in Egypt.

Meanwhile there was a famine in the land, and Joseph's brothers all felt its impact. So they made their way down to Egypt to ask for food. Through a series of events Joseph, while keeping his identity veiled to his brothers, provided for them and persuaded them all to come to Egypt. At last he revealed his true identity to his brothers, and they were gripped with fear of his revenge. But Joseph spoke something profound in reply: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

Do you see the chord of the doctrine of providence empowering this verse? God used all of the trouble that Joseph endured, even the malevolence of his brothers, for God's glory and the people's good. Joseph was strengthened by this truth from the inside out.

Now, think back to the baby playing with the toy or the adult with the good job. What if God were to take away what currently makes you happy, like he took away Joseph's fancy coat and seat of honor? What if providence brought you to a pit?

One thing is for sure; it would reveal whether your contentment were an inward work of grace or an external consoling by created things. Burroughs shows this contrast with an illustration. He says that to be content as a result of something external is like

warming a man's clothes by the fire. But to be content through an inward work of grace in the soul is like the warmth that a man's clothes have from the natural heat of the body. If he is in good health, he puts on his clothes and perhaps at first on a cold morning they feel cold, but after a little while they are warm. How do they get warm? They haven't been next to the fire or on the heater. Instead, the warmth comes from the natural heat of the man's body. On the other hand, when a man is sick, he often has difficulty staying warm as his natural body heat has deteriorated. When this man puts on his clothes, they won't get warm. He has to go and sit by the fire or next to the heater to get warm. Even so, after a little while they will again be cold.

This illustrates our spiritual health. Suppose someone loses his job or gets some very difficult medical news; his first reaction is probably going to be shock. His spirit will feel the chill of the matter, like the chill of cold clothes. But after a time, the healthy believer who is fueled by grace will begin to make the affliction more bearable. Grace will heat him up, so to speak. On the other hand, to someone who does not have the inward glow of the gospel, such news is cold not only initially but continually. Friends may help him reason through it and surround him with loving support, but like the heat from the fire, this warmth will soon fade. Only what comes from a gracious spirit will endure.

I remember when an older brother in the church tactfully pointed out to me the need and practicality of resting in God's providence. Early in our marriage, Christie and I bought our first home. It was in a sketchy part of town, but it was all we could afford and we made it work. Over the years we saw a lot of things that made us say, "We should really move." After having our first daughter—our third child—we prayerfully pursued a move. Our house sold in three days, and we quickly found a home in another neighborhood that had fewer police helicopters overhead.

Upon moving in we had an open house, and dozens of friends came over. Amid the celebration I was on my deck with this same

brother in Christ, who was about fifteen years my senior. There I stood smiling and reveling in God’s goodness under the dark sky and bright decorative outside lights. My friend smiled wryly and surprised me by asking, “And he would still be good if he took it all away, right?” I almost dropped my drink. My startled look mimicked a Labrador upon hearing a dog whistle. “Yes he would,” I replied slowly, yet I remember thinking, *What’s with this guy? What a wet blanket!* But he wasn’t a wet blanket at all. He was a man who had walked through affliction and had come out trusting. Perhaps he sensed that I was sounding a bit too much like a baby with a rattle instead of a Christian content in God. He made his point that night, and more than a dozen years later he is still making his point to me.

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The danger of an oft-neglected word like *contentment* is that we may not have a firm grasp on what it actually means. If we are going to learn the art of contentment, then we’ll need to know what it is and what it is not. Here, early in our journey, we have considered that contentment is inward as opposed to external. It is quiet rather than complaining. It is a work of grace rather than a result of human effort. It rests in God’s providence rather than complaining against him. With this we have the instruments of our minds tuned by grace.

Review Questions

1. What does the testimony of rich, successful celebrities teach us about the elusive nature of contentment?
2. How could Paul and Silas sing and pray while in such a miserable place as a first-century Roman dungeon?
3. Why is it important to understand that contentment is not based on circumstances?

4. From what you've read in this chapter, do you think that your heart is quiet (resting) or noisy (complaining)?
5. Consider again Burroughs's illustration of warming one's clothes by the fire versus by the health and heat of the body. Identify experiences where the work of God's grace has warmed your soul amid the cold temperature of affliction.

RECOVERING THE LOST ART OF CONTENTMENT

The biblical practice of contentment can seem like a lost art—something reserved for spiritual giants but out of reach for the rest of us. In our discontented age—characterized by impatience, overspending, grumbling, and unhappiness—it’s hard to imagine what true contentment actually looks (and feels) like. But even the apostle Paul said that he *learned* to be content in any and every circumstance. Paul’s remarkable contentment was something *grown* and *developed* over time.

In *Chasing Contentment*, Erik Raymond helps us understand what biblical contentment is—the inward gracious spirit that joyfully rests in God’s providence—and then how we learn it. Giving us practical guidance for growing in contentment in various areas of our lives, this book will encourage us to see contentment as a priority for all believers. By God’s grace, it is possible to pursue the high calling of contentment and anchor our joy in God himself rather than our changing circumstances.

“Whether you’ve been wearied by trying to squeeze contentment out of the world or you’re happy right where you are, *Chasing Contentment* will refresh your perspective as you marvel at the sovereign joy of Jesus.”

Gloria Furman, author, *The Pastor’s Wife*, *Missional Motherhood*, and *Alive in Him*

“As someone who struggles with contentment, I need Erik’s wise counsel to walk with Christ in freedom and joy.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Blind Spots*

“If you struggle with discontentment as I do, you’ll find help and hope in the pages of this book and, ultimately, in the Book of books it points to.”

Tim Challies, blogger, Challies.com

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CHRISTIAN LIVING

