



ON-THE-GO
DEVOTIONALS

Content- ment

*a godly woman's
adornment*

LYDIA BROWNBACK

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Contentment

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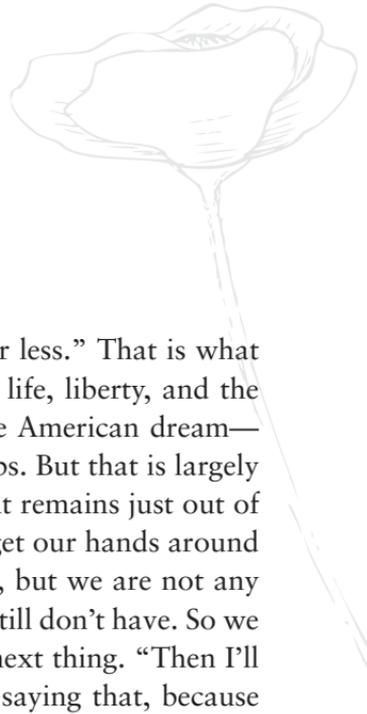
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Introduction



*y*ou can have it all, so don't settle for less." That is what we are told. So we spend ourselves on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Realization of the American dream—the Western dream—lies at our fingertips. But that is largely the problem—so much of what we want remains just out of reach. We can touch it, but we cannot get our hands around it. And sometimes we do get hold of it, but we are not any happier. There is always something we still don't have. So we pour our lives into acquiring that one next thing. "Then I'll be happy," we say. But we are always saying that, because there is always just one more thing.

Our unhappiness does not spring from what we lack. It springs from our *desire* for what we lack. We crave love, beauty, and comfort. We crave independence and peaceful surroundings. We crave self-esteem. We crave the smooth rhythm of a balanced life—a little of this, a bit of that, but not too much of either. We are unhappy because we have come to expect such things, living as we do in a society that advocates personal rights, autonomy, and prosperity above all else.

We refuse to accept that our prosperity isn't going to make us happy, and for all of our rights, autonomy is just an illusion. Consider how we react when a storm comes and the electricity goes out. We cannot curl our hair or micro-

wave our Lean Cuisines or click through the channels of DIRECTV. How happy are we then? But people in underdeveloped countries—those without rights or prosperity—are not unhappy when the power goes out, largely because they have spent much of their lives functioning with no electricity at all. They don't fret about limp hair. They don't sit around bored for lack of Lifetime TV. And they enjoy the little food they have with no hang-ups about high fructose levels and excessive carbohydrates.

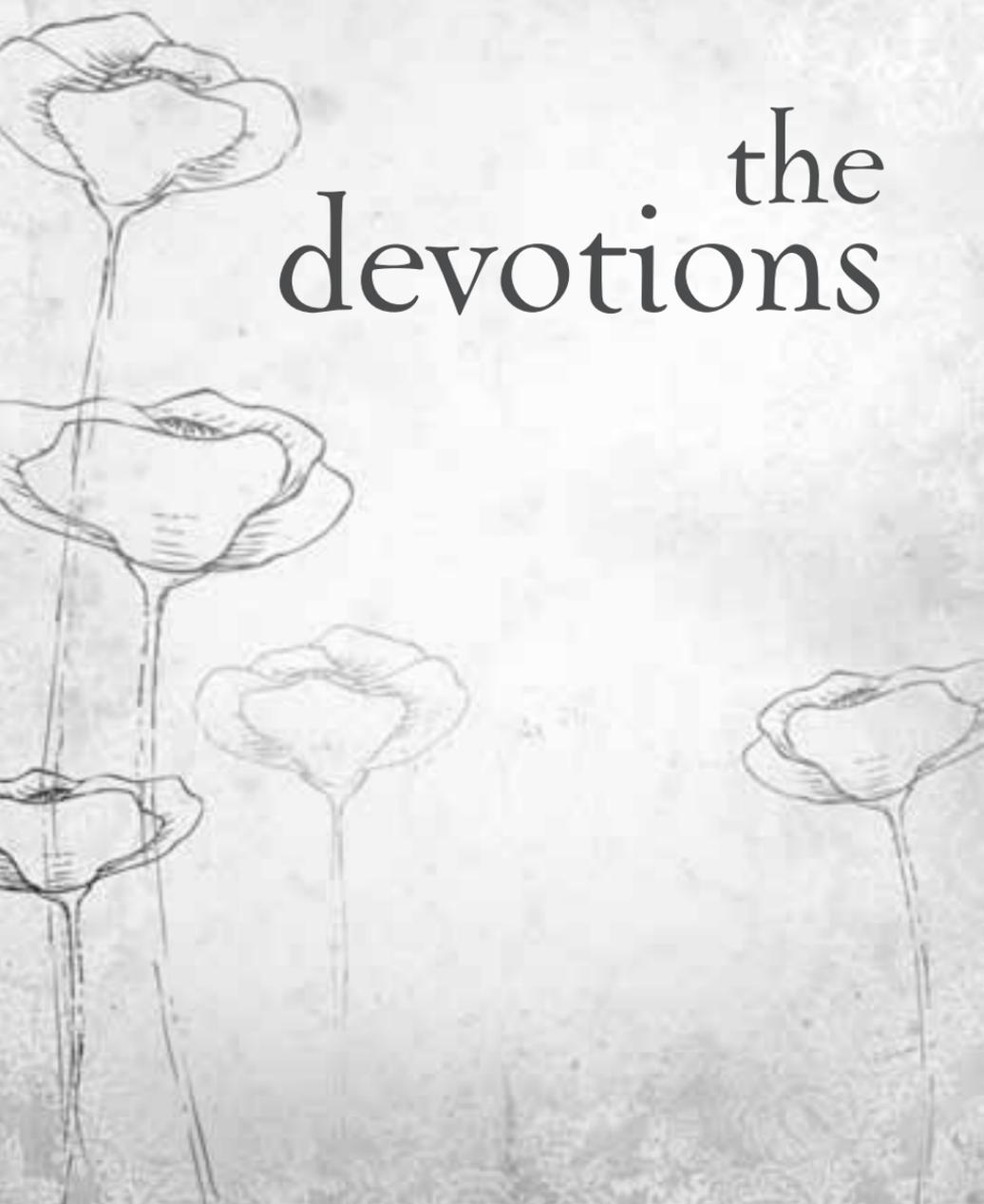
But just as prosperity does not lock in happiness, awful circumstances don't have to lock it out. Do we believe that? Most of us don't when we are faced with unwanted single-ness, an unhappy marriage, infertility, financial hardship, broken relationships, terminal illness, or regret. In such circumstances we can't imagine anything but unhappiness. What choice do we have? We do have a choice, actually. We can be happy, not necessarily in the American way, but in the biblical way. It is all a matter of what we live for. If we live for the good times, even those given to us by God, we will never find happiness because seasons of wilderness, waiting, and withholding are just as much, if not more, a part of life on this earth as seasons of ease and peace.

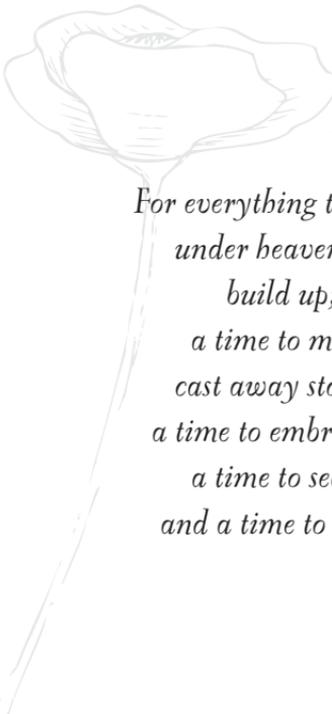
Happiness, or contentment, comes from where we look and what we believe, not from what we have. In determining how to think and feel about our lives, we tend to create separate categories for happiness and contentment. In our mental hierarchy we put happiness at the top. Happiness, to our way of thinking, is the pinnacle. Happiness is when we get the things we have dreamed of and when life goes our way. Contentment, so we think, is secondary. We see it as the consolation emotion we must settle for when actual happi-

ness is lacking. “I’m not really happy with the way things are, but I’m content for now.” Yet contentment and happiness are one and the same if we understand these words from a biblical perspective and orient our lives there.

That is what we will do as we work through God’s Word together. As we look at what he says to us, we’ll discover that he wants our contentment—our happiness—even more than we do, even in the hard times. He is not withholding it from us; we do that to ourselves. Happiness really is at our fingertips.

the
devotions





Living in the Valley

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; . . . a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; . . . a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

Laughter and tears, love and loss, work and play—such words sum up the rhythm of life. Most of us will pass through each of these seasons at one point or another, perhaps repeatedly, because they are God's ordering for the human race in every age and time. But as we pass through some of these purposes, we do not feel much like singing about it as the Byrds did in 1965. We fight against the weeping, the mourning, the casting away, and the losing while striving to keep our lives entrenched in the laughter, the dancing, the embracing, and the peace.

The fight is quite natural, of course. We all prefer the mountaintops to the valleys. But the God who has ordered

life to flow in and out of such seasons is the same God who has provided for our contentment in *every* season. Contentment is possible not only on the mountaintops but in the valleys as well. How can we mourn or lose or weep with contentment? That seems totally contradictory. And indeed we cannot if our contentment hinges on getting out of the valley, because we have no control over the beginning or ending of the seasons that God appoints for each of us.

Contentment in the valleys comes when we stop fighting so hard to climb out. God is the one who leads us into the valleys, and he will lead us back out in his time. God ordains valleys for our good; why else would a good and kind God allow them? Trusting God in our hard times is the way to contentment—not just trusting him to get us out, but trusting his goodness while we are still in them. If we will not trust him in the bad times, we are not going to trust him in the good times either. A friend of mine enjoyed a financially prosperous season a few years back, and she bought a beautiful home. Yet she wasn't able to enjoy it, she said, because "life is so good right now, but I know it can't last. I'm always waiting for the axe to fall."

Do we live like that, fighting so hard to stay on the peaks and to avoid the valleys? If so, we will never be happy in either place. However, if we will trust God in whichever place we find ourselves, we will know contentment whether the season is easy or hard. We will find peace in the hard times because a good Father is controlling them, and we will not be anxious in the good times because our happiness is not bound up in having to maintain them. Good times are designed to come and go, but contentment is designed to be constant for all who are in Christ.

Could It Be Sin?

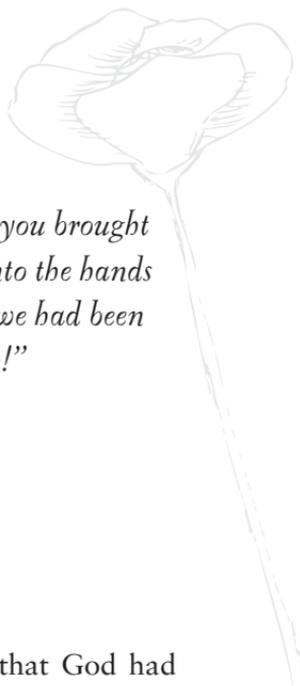
Joshua said, “Alas, O Lord GOD, why have you brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan!”

JOSHUA 7:7

*J*oshua knew better, of course. He knew that God had brought the Israelites into the Promised Land to bless them, not to destroy them. But he was frustrated because they had just lost what should have been an easy-to-win battle against the Amorites. What was God doing?

We find ourselves in similar situations from time to time, and when we do, we, too, are baffled about what God is up to. We are careful to follow God’s ways, and we believe his promises, and yet our circumstances are just not working out. In the midst of his discouragement, Joshua wished he had never taken his preceding steps of risky faith. How much easier life was before! In the moment he forgets that life beyond the Jordan had been nothing but wilderness; his trust in God’s faithfulness and his joy in the Promised Land are obliterated by one defeat.

Our contentment evaporates just as quickly when things go wrong in our lives. We begin to think back on an easier



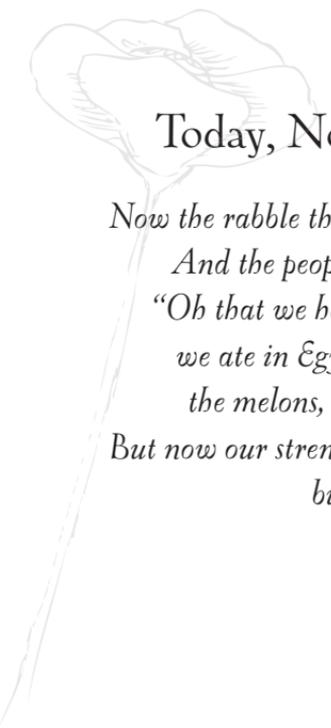
time, a time that, while perhaps not perfect, held a lot less pressure.

For Joshua, the Promised Land was surely much nicer than the wilderness, but at least in the wilderness someone else—Moses—had been in charge. Now Joshua was leading the Israelites, and the weight of the Amorite defeat fell squarely on his shoulders. But God had a reason for the defeat, and rather than allowing Joshua to wallow in misery, he answered his cry. “Get up!” the Lord said. “Why have you fallen on your face? Israel has sinned. . . . There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you” (Josh. 7:10, 13). Unbeknownst to Joshua, an Israelite named Achan had failed to follow God’s express orders to destroy all the treasures, the “devoted things,” taken from their enemies in battle. Achan kept back a little of these riches for himself, and his secretive act was what had brought great trouble on the entire Israelite army.

Could our present trial be the result of sin? If so, we won’t have to look far to find it. We don’t have to engage in endless speculation about what our sin might be; God is always willing to show us our sin. Sometimes, though, we refuse to see it, or we minimize it. “Well, I am still struggling to give up that bad habit, but it’s such a little thing. How could that have anything to do with my difficulty?” But God does not ask us to connect all the dots. He just asks us to be obedient. If there is a connection, God will make it, just like he did with Joshua. Maybe there is a connection between our unrepentant sin and our difficulty, and maybe not. The point isn’t to figure out if there is a connection and then to obey—it is simply to obey. We cannot rightly ask for or expect to be restored to a

place of peace and to see God's blessings on our lives if we are treating sin lightly.

Are you finding your circumstances frustrating right now? If so, God has a good reason. Perhaps it is his way of getting you to deal with your sin. Rather than turning back to an easier time in your life, turn to God and examine your heart. He will gladly show you sin that you may be harboring. He showed Joshua, and Joshua purged out the wrong with no delay. Afterward victory against the Amorites came easily.



Today, Not Tomorrow or Yesterday

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving.

*And the people of Israel also wept again and said,
“Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish
we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers,
the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.*

*But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all
but this manna to look at.”*

NUMBERS 11:4-6

Strong cravings—we all have them. The single who longs for marriage, the wife who longs for a baby, the terminated employee who longs for new work. Many of the things we crave are good things, and therefore our desire for them is also good. But when we focus almost exclusively on our desires and unmet needs, what is good becomes bad. It becomes obsessive. It becomes a craving, and we aren't content to live without the thing we want or need.

We find ourselves baffled with God. After all, why does he even allow us to experience such intense desire only to leave us unfulfilled? Why would a good God do that? There are many reasons why God does that, all of them for our benefit. Not only does he strengthen us through the process, but he

also teaches us to depend solely on him and to enjoy what he provides. He provides for the single woman by giving her friends, fellowship, and meaningful work. He provides for the childless woman by giving her opportunities to mother in other ways. And he provides, often miraculously, ways for the unemployed woman to meet her expenses. Whatever we long for but lack is an area in which God will reveal himself to be adequate for us.

Since that is true, the source of our misery is not that we lack the thing we long for; our misery comes from wanting that thing so much that we are not open to recognizing or receiving any alternative. Contentment comes as we wait on God's timetable and as we trust that what he provides in the midst of our lack is really all we need until he provides something else.

Obsessing on something we want skews our perspective not only on the present but also on the past. In the midst of their craving, the Israelites remembered the fish they had eaten in Egypt "that cost nothing" but in reality had cost them everything. They had been slaves in Egypt when they ate that fish, slaves who were horribly treated. "Maybe I should have been more open to Tom," Ginny reflected when her marriage to Ben failed to turn out as she had hoped. "After all, he had great earning potential." But Ginny is forgetting that she stopped considering Tom as a marriage partner because he was lacking in fervor for Christ. Single or married, rich or poor, focusing on what we do not have warps our memory.

Obsessing on an unmet desire also takes away our joy and delight in all that God has provided for us today. The Israelites had manna in abundance—tasty food that simply

fell from the sky. Yet their enjoyment of it was completely lost. If we focus our thoughts on looking only at what we hope tomorrow will bring, we will miss all the pleasure of today. Life is made up of todays, not tomorrows. What do we have today? Whatever it may be—a good friend, a hug, a freshly baked bagel, sunshine, a place to call home—can bring us joy because it is God’s gift for our enjoyment. Taking joy in the little things is contentment.

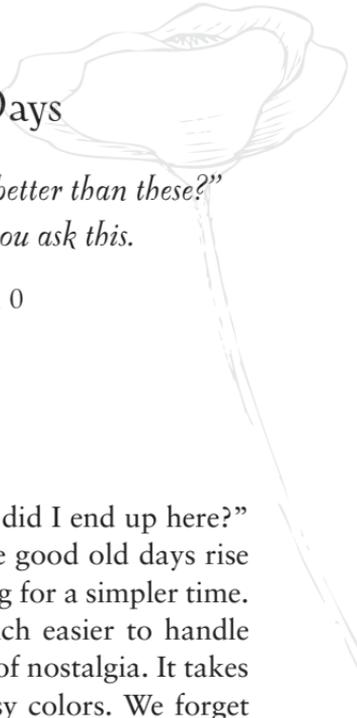
The Good Old Days

*Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?”
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*

ECCLESIASTES 7:10

*L*ife was so good back then. How did I end up here?” When pressures mount, memories of the good old days rise up in our minds more frequently. We long for a simpler time. The problems of yesterday were so much easier to handle than those we face today. That is the lie of nostalgia. It takes our memories and paints them with rosy colors. We forget that we left much of yesterday behind for good reason.

That being said, the good old days really were better for some of us—the time before we got sick, lost our child, our job, our spouse. We lament like Naomi who said, “The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty” (Ruth 1:20–21). How can we not long to recapture the time when life worked? We would do anything to go back. But no matter how fond the memories—real or rose-colored—we cannot go back. Anyone who has tried knows that just doesn’t work. But that does not leave us with nothing. We do have options, which is what the preacher was getting at in Ecclesiastes. We may not be able to change our circumstances, but we can change the way we think about them.



The unwise option, as the preacher points out, is to make mental comparisons between then and now. Yesterday will always have an unfair advantage because we remember selectively. Plus comparing in this way is really nothing more than mental grumbling. While remembering fondly is good, remembering with lament is not, springing, as it does, from the same outlook Naomi had—“the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.”

We have another option, however. We can look upward instead of backward, and when we do, we will find hope. Hope always lies ahead of us, never behind. Naomi found it. Her path back began with a return to her people, the Lord’s people. His blessings and provision for us during hard times will always be found among his people. It is there that we see his hand at work and his character revealed.

Sometimes we are cut off from God’s people for one reason or another, but even then we are not shut off from God himself. We have his Word in front of us and his Spirit within us, and they work together to show us who God is in the midst of present difficulties.

When we look at God—among his people, in his Word, and by his Spirit—we are going to realize that the present is actually better than the past. It is better because God is the one who brought us where we are today. And the God who led us here is good, kind, and, let’s not forget, purposeful. Everything he does in our lives, everywhere he leads us, is designed to fulfill his primary intention for us, which is to know him better. Contentment does not lie around the next corner. It is not waiting for us on the other side of today’s difficulty, nor is it lost with yesterday. Contentment is where God is, and God is with us today.