

True Contentment
 Psalm 131
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A Song of Ascents. Of David.

¹ O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
 my eyes are not raised too high;
 I do not occupy myself with things
 too great and too marvelous for me.
² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
 like a weaned child with its mother;
 like a weaned child is my soul within me.
³ O Israel, hope in the LORD
 from this time forth and forevermore.

Introduction: A Culture Against Contentment

Over 200 billion dollars is spent on advertising every year in the United States. Meanwhile, Americans spend \$38 billion per year on self-storage units, places to keep all the stuff we've bought that doesn't fit into our homes, which average over 2,000 sq. feet, among the largest homes of any culture in the history of the world. We live in a consumer-driven economy, and consumerism is driven by felt need, perceived need, or, in other words, by discontent.

But we shouldn't think that America is entirely unique. Almost 400 years ago, the Puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a great book, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. We human beings tend to be a rather discontented lot. Adam and Eve were given paradise and the whole world to govern under God's hand, and they fell because they coveted the one thing in all the world which had been forbidden them, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Proverbs 30:15-16 says,

*The leech has two daughters:
 Give and Give.
 Three things are never satisfied;
 four never say, "Enough":
¹⁶ Sheol, the barren womb,
 the land never satisfied with water,
 and the fire that never says, "Enough."*

Those last two – the land never satisfied with water and the fire that never says "Enough" – can sometimes feel like apt descriptions of our souls. 1600 years ago, Augustine of Hippo said in his *Confessions*, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in You."

So, what do we do as restless souls living in a consumer culture? Do we just keep chasing the materialistic dream that somehow more stuff will satisfy us, or is there a better way? Can we find true contentment?

In Psalm 131, David shows us how he found contentment in the LORD. In three short verses, David gives us a master class in true contentment. What he writes here fleshes out what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:11-13: *“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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* (ESV)

Just as Paul said, “I have learned,” indicating that contentment is something learned in a process, and likely a long and painful process, so also Psalm 131 reflects the fruit of a mature faith that has been taught to put off the things that hinder contentment and to grow instead in a simple, childlike faith. Charles Spurgeon said of Psalm 131, “It is one of the shortest psalms to read, but it is one of the longest to learn.” Once he has learned to find satisfaction and contentment in the LORD, David calls his fellow believers to find in the LORD the same solid hope he himself has found.

I. What True Contentment is NOT (v. 1)

*‘ O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.*

David begins in verse 1 with a three-fold description of what true contentment is not; in other words, the things he had to put off to find his soul’s satisfaction in the LORD. These are the poisonous aspects of our human nature that short-circuit contentment.

a. Proud (Heart)

The first thing David says he has put off is a proud heart: *“O LORD, my heart is not lifted up.”* A lifted up heart is a heart that thinks too highly of itself, a heart puffed up with pride. Pride is the chief and root sin, and humility is the chief and root Christian virtue.

In Ephesians 4, when Paul turns from Gospel declaration to Gospel application, he begins by saying, *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness”* - Note that humility is the first fruit of the Gospel mentioned, the first virtue of the outworking of the grace of God in the heart and life of the believer.

In Philippians 2, when Paul is pleading with the Philippian church to live out the Gospel more consistently in their lives with one another, he says: *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full*

accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Phil. 2:1-3, ESV)

We will not grow in satisfaction and contentment with the LORD until we begin with a realistic view of ourselves and a heart that is not lifted up.

b. Selfishly Ambitious (Eyes)

The second thing David says he has put off follows closely from the first: *“my eyes are not raised too high.”* A heart that is lifted up in pride will produce eyes that are raised too high, in arrogance and selfish ambition. In other words, because I think I am better than I am, I will look around me and begin to think that I deserve more than I have been given and I will look down on others as lesser than I am.

The New American Standard translates these opening lines as *“O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty.”* Haughty eyes captures well the sense of what David is saying here. Eyes that are raised too high are haughty, looking down on others, and also feeling entitled. In America, we love to talk about what we “deserve.” This entitlement feeling creates a deep dissatisfaction when we don’t get the things or the respect that we think we deserve.

We heard Philippians 2 contrast selfish ambition and conceit with true humility. Haughty eyes, eyes that are lifted too high, are the eyes of selfish ambition and conceit. Listen to how James 3 describes this approach to life and how James contrasts such an outlook with true, heavenly wisdom:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. – James 3:13-18, ESV

How much better and wiser it is for us to realize that we don’t deserve anything but death and hell for our grievous sins against God and against others. We are not so good that we deserve to be treated with respect and to be given good things. The fact that we are treated with any kind of respect and are given many good things to enjoy is all of God’s grace and not of our own merit.

c. Speculative or Skeptical (Mind)

The third thing David has learned to put off also flows from pride and is only put off in humility: *“I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.”* Another way to translate this is that David says, *“I do not walk about in things too big or too far beyond me”*

Out of a prideful heart, we are tempted to think too highly of ourselves, look down on others, have a sense of entitlement in terms of how people treat us and what things we think we deserve to have. But also, out of a prideful heart, we tend to speculate about things that are just far too big for us to process, things that are far

beyond our ability to understand. We think we can figure things out that we just can't, and so we either engage in speculation or in skepticism about the really big questions, the mysteries of life God has not revealed.

David is not saying that he refuses to think about God and His ways, that he is opposed to good theology. We get some of our most beautiful theology from David's psalms.

God has revealed many true and wonderful things about Himself in His word. David delighted in meditating on God and worshiping God according to what God has revealed. But David refused to speculate about things God had not revealed, nor did he think it was his place to be skeptical about God's ways because he could not understand or explain them all. David honored the principle of Deuteronomy 29:29: *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."*

When we act out of pride while still believing in God, we can engage in speculation, thinking we have figured out all the mysteries of the faith and the Scriptures. This is how many cults have arisen, with egotistical men convinced they finally figured out all the answers everyone else has been too dumb or too unenlightened to figure out. Speculative theology is prideful theology, driven by a selfish ambition.

When we act out of pride while doubting or questioning God, we end up in skepticism, disbelieving God because we cannot figure out His ways. This is the spirit behind much modern atheism.

On Monday, we rented a great football movie from Redbox, called *Greater*. It tells the true story of Brandon Burlsworth, who may be the greatest walk-on player in the history of college football. In 1994, as a freshman, he was allowed to walk on to the Arkansas Razorbacks football team. He was overweight, weak, and not very effective. But he trusted in God, worked hard, got into great shape, practiced relentlessly, and earned a scholarship spot by his sophomore year. He later became a first-team All-American in his senior year in 1998. In 1999, he graduated from the University of Arkansas with a Bachelor's and a Master's degree, the first player in school history to earn a Master's Degree during his playing career. He graduated in 1999 and was drafted by the Indianapolis Colts. 11 days later, days before he was scheduled to sign his contract with the Colts, he was killed in a car accident, as his car hit a tractor-trailer head-on.

In the movie, Brandon's older brother, Marty, wrestles with faith in God after the sudden, tragic loss of his little brother, as he was on the verge of finally signing an NFL contract and being able to take care of his mom, who was a single mother deep in debt. As Brandon's funeral is beginning, Marty gets into a conversation with a local farmer who tries to convince him that there is no God. How could God be real and worth worshiping if Brandon died so suddenly and tragically, so pointlessly? Such a god would either have been powerless to stop the accident or not good enough to care about it in the first place. Either way, such a god would not be worthy of worship, so what's the point? Just admit that there is no God at all, just a howling void of nothing. Just scream your pain into the howling void and be brave.

Do you see the arrogance behind such reasoning? If I can't see a good reason why God would allow Brandon to die suddenly and tragically in a car accident, there must not be a good reason! Surely there is no truth beyond my brilliant mind's ability to understand, right? Wrong!

If God's ways are not so much higher and greater and more marvelous than our understanding could possibly reach, how could He be God? If He is the almighty Creator who named the stars and keeps track of the hairs on the heads of 7 billion people, His understanding and wisdom and goodness must be just so far beyond mine that I can't even begin to grasp it. If I could understand it all, I would be God. If God's understanding and wisdom were no greater than mine, He would not be God.

David knew this secret. He had learned it the hard way, in suffering and sin, in his utter failures and the evidence of God's persevering faithfulness. So, he would not try to walk around in the things too great or too far beyond his understanding.

2. What True Contentment IS (v. 2)

After telling what true contentment is NOT, David paints a beautiful picture of what true contentment IS in verse 2 –

*But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

David's true contentment consists of three things: stillness, silence and satisfaction in God's presence. David has rejected the call of pride and selfish ambition and vain speculation and has instead chosen the LORD.

a. Still – "I have calmed"

The word "calmed" means to set down or make smooth. It is to be still. In fact, these two works, "calmed and quieted" are similar to what happened to the raging Sea of Galilee when Jesus rose and spoke. Jesus spoke to the wind and waves and said, "Quiet! Hush!" and they became greatly calm.

In our lives, we need more stillness and silence. We need to learn the skill and discipline of waiting on the LORD. We are so often rushed from one activity to the next, from one noisy input to the next, we rarely have the time or opportunity to simply sit still.

This is the lesson of Mary and Martha, one many of us struggle to learn, Jesus came to Mary and Martha's house with the disciples, and Martha busied herself making a great meal for the Master and his students. Mary, meanwhile, sat still at Jesus' feet and listened. Martha asked Jesus to rebuke her sister and ask her to help Martha in the kitchen, but Jesus said, "*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.*" (Luke 10:41-42, ESV)

b. Silent

David has not only stilled his soul, but he has also silenced it. A "quieted" soul is a soul that's been hushed and is listening to Jesus. Mary was not only right to set aside the busyness of work and sit down at Jesus' feet, but she was right to be quiet and listen.

I struggle with this myself. When I get up in the morning and I spend time with the Lord in His Word, my mind is often noisy, even though my body is still. I can have thoughts racing about the cares of the day and read whole chapters of the Bible without really hearing what God is saying in His word. Sometimes I just have to stop, pray, and start again.

Throughout the day, my soul can be quite noisy, too. Do you ever just get tired of hearing your own voice within your head, telling you all sorts of nonsense? We need to replace that noise with silence and the voice of God in the Scriptures. Learning to sing or recite or meditate on God's word throughout the day is so helpful.

c. Satisfied

And then David gives us this beautiful picture of satisfaction:

*like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

Weaning a child is a process, and it can be one full of fussing and frustration, but children need to be weaned, to be moved from demand and supply to waiting and trusting. A weaned child with its mother is content, satisfied to be in the presence of Mom without demanding from Mom.

Are we satisfied with the Lord? Do we come to God only when we want something, only when we have demands that we want God to supply? Or do we come to Him just to be with Him, knowing truly that the Giver is greater than His gifts, and we can find more deep satisfaction and contentment in Him and in simply abiding in His presence than if He were to instantly give us all we were asking for in prayer.

I think here of Moses on Mount Sinai, as the Israelites were receiving the Law of God and waiting to go into the Promised Land. After Israel had sinned by making a golden calf, even as God was giving His Law against idolatry, God offered to send Moses into the Promised Land with the people and to give them the Promised Land and rest from the enemies, only without His presence. This was not good enough for Moses. What was the Promised Land without the presence of God with His people?

Many people want God's gifts and even want to go to heaven but don't want God. But God is the greatest gift of all, and without Him, we have nothing truly good or worth having anyway. Do we have a still and silent soul, satisfied with our Savior?

3. What True Contentment DOES (v. 3)

Once David has found true contentment in the LORD alone, he then calls his fellow Israelites to the hope he has found –

*O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.*

a. Calls others to hope in the LORD

Martha called Mary to come into the kitchen. In reality, Mary should have been calling Martha to come and sit at the feet of Jesus. If we have found our soul's satisfaction in the LORD, we should be eager to extend this good hope to others around us. What we truly cherish, we commend to others.

b. Proclaims a hope for now and for eternity

Notice the nature of the hope in the LORD that David proclaims: It is a hope "*from this time forth and forevermore.*" God is our soul's satisfaction now, and He will be our soul's satisfaction forever. He is the One who gives us contentment now, and we will be content in Him forever.

This is the opposite of some fire-insurance Christianity that says to God: I don't want to go to hell, so could you please forgive my sins and let me into heaven when I die? Until then, could you just leave me alone and let me live my life?

By faith, we trust in the LORD now and begin to enjoy Him now, in this life. We find contentment in His goodness to us, in His presence with us, as we worship Him, listen to Him, follow Him, and share His hope with others. Then, when this life is over and we pass into eternity, our satisfaction in Him deepens and becomes even richer and more abundant, as we are free from sin and distraction.