

## Contentment

What brings genuine satisfaction in life? Strange to say, it is not the tremendous achievements, but the simple, ordinary things that bless us most.

It has been said, "Wise people are happy with trifles, but nothing pleases fools." When Admiral Richard Byrd believed that he was dying alone at the Ross Barrier in Antarctica, he thought about happiness in life, and wrote:

I realise that I have failed to see that the simple, homely, unpretentious things of life are the most important. When a man achieves a fair measure of harmony within himself and his family circle, he achieves peace. At the end only two things really matter to a man, regardless of who he is: the affection and understanding of his family.

Satisfaction in life can be equated with happiness. Unhappy people rarely blame themselves for their unhappiness. They blame their jobs, their family, their church, and their neighbourhood. Or they wait listlessly for some stroke of good luck, some gift from heaven to fall upon them and suddenly transform their lives. They always look for instant success, as though it were a powder to be mixed with hot water and immediately provide them with success and fortune.

This is true even in the religious world. There are many who wait for, or seek, some mighty gift from God. There are preachers who long for some charisma to recreate them from plodding speakers to flaming evangelists setting the world on fire. One day such a man was at a Gospel Compound in Centralia, Washington. He was discouraged by his lack of success at the altar. He was grieving because the fire from heaven had not fallen upon him. He sat morose, out among the trees.

It seemed to him that God pointed to a tree and asked, "How old is that tree?" He said, out aloud, "I don't know. May be a hundred years." Then God seemed to say to him, "Yes. It takes Me a hundred years to grow a great tree, and it takes a few years to grow a great preacher, too. So why not be patient and wait for the necessary growing process?" From that day on he was satisfied with whatever way God was shaping his life.

Happiness is not something we are born with. Strangely enough, happiness is not the possession of children except for "flights" of happiness. Older people sometimes say that the happiest time of one's life has been their childhood and their time at school. However, you would rarely find a young person who would agree with that. Our perceptions are often coloured by a hindsight that has gone out of focus. Children are rarely happy. Nor is happiness suddenly given to young people. It generally comes to us after we have passed our thirtieth birthday. Then it doesn't come automatically. As Erich Fromm said, "Happiness is not a gift of the gods."

Under God, happiness includes accepting the fact of all the futility and mortality in this life. Many people don't come to terms with the realisation that they are mortal until they are forty years or so. Many young people have the impression that life could go on for ever in this world for them. Happiness and contentment, real peace, come from knowing that God has provided peace for sinners with Himself, and assured a wonderful future for them. Once that is said, it lies in knowing, with the writer of Ecclesiastes, that the best for a person is to find joy in his work under the sun, even though he knows that, finally, it is futile. Whatever he accumulates will be taken over by someone else, and there is no knowing whether he will be wise or foolish. We also fool ourselves if we think that just having no responsibilities and achieving nothing makes a person happy.

Contentment is an important factor in happiness. Hankering for more possessions and more money doesn't bring happiness. When Jesus warned of covetousness, He said that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses. How many people who have won large sums of money in a lottery have found that it has not brought them happiness? As Paul wrote, "Godliness with contentment is great gain." Happiness certainly doesn't come through trying to keep up with the Joneses in the latest thing to possess, because there will always be more. It doesn't come with wearing the latest in fashion, because we know very well that fashions will soon be different again, and, besides, someone else may look more attractive than we do. Material things don't simply fail to provide true happiness. Jesus spoke of the "deceitfulness of riches". They are not what they seem to be. They are a trap!

In this life with all its futility, happiness often comes with the satisfaction that one's inner life has been productive, under God. It comes with the ability to grow to personal maturity. Happiness is composed of pieces of experience that enable a person to make sound judgments, enough vitality to love, bits of courage, larger fragments of clear vision, and goodly portion of honest self-appraisal.

It is a wonderful fact that, for a Christian, one of the greatest ways to find happiness and the satisfied life

is to begin with thanksgiving. No matter what happened, Pollyanna could be expected to react by saying, "I am glad that..." Believers in Christ can be Christian Pollyannas. They look around for the small things for which that can praise the Lord. They clear their minds of criticism and refuse to see the bad things, and, better, if evil is still visible, set it right through the Lord's forgiveness. They try to see the silver lining on the dark clouds, and deliberately set aside the negative aspects. The more they praise God, the better conditions appear to them.

This is a splendid exercise for that frightful moment when you first wake up in the morning and decide you had better stay in bed and not try to face the day. Sit on the edge of your bed and make yourself say, "Praise the Lord!" Then think of something for which you can be really thankful, like "I can see, can't I?" or "I am alive enough to feel my aching head and my wore back!"

This is not a new-age pep talk, as if trouble and evil were simply illusions that a person had to convince himself didn't really exist. This is confidence that comes from knowing that God is a God of love. It is a confidence, because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, that, no matter what happens, the believer's first words in response can be, and should be: "Nevertheless..." This may well be what Jeremiah meant when he wrote about the "sacrifice of praise" (Jr 33:11). It was the task of the Messiah, Isaiah foretold, "to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they might be called 'the trees of righteousness', 'the planting of the Lord', that He might be glorified."

The Psalms are full of praise and thanksgiving, and provide real uplift for those who are downcast. We use them too little. It is God-pleasing to be thankful rather than grouchy. The Israelites in the wilderness, with all their complaining against God and against Moses, were not happy people, though they could have been, and should have been. A thankful spirit, moreover, is attractive and infectious. It is a good advertisement for what the Lord has done.

David wrote: "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments." It is very clear that the Christian's source of joy is closely related to God's Word, and, particularly, His gracious promises. If all we do we do to the glory of God, they every heartbeat, breath we take is an ongoing way of expressing our praise to the Lord. Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always." That says it all.