

The Key to Christian Contentment

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I once heard a comedian tell a joke about a pastor's sermon series on contentment in the Christian life. His punch line was the title of the series: "*Content or Discontent: Which Tent Do You Live In?*" Everyone enjoys a good laugh, but contentment in the Christian life is really not a laughing matter. Where it is lacking, its rightful place is occupied by the sin of discontentment—dissatisfaction with God.

Psalm 73 is one man's confession of his journey from discontentment with God, through understanding and repentance, to being fully satisfied in God despite trying circumstances.

The first fourteen verses are the psalmist's description of his former discontentment—specifically, his envy of the wicked in their prosperity. This section ends with the psalmist grumbling against God for favoring the wicked while making his own life difficult (vv. 13-14). Then, in a moment of enlightenment, he realizes that the prosperity enjoyed by the wicked in this life is ultimately futile because God will destroy them in His final judgment (vv. 15-20).

Verses 21-28 are the psalmist's explanation of the truth that turned him around. From this final section of Psalm 73 we learn five important lessons about contentment and discontentment.

Discontentment produces unpleasant feelings. Describing his former discontentment with God, the psalmist writes, "When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within" (v. 21). These are admissions of the depression, anxiety, and even anger brought on by his grumbling, discontented, and complaining disposition toward God.

Discontentment results from unbiblical thinking. In verse 22 the psalmist connects his former bitterness of heart with his former lack of right thinking. "Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You." No one who is thinking biblically about his lot in life will be bitter toward God, because God's promises in the Bible assure us that every trial a Christian faces, no matter how severe or long-lasting, is for his or her ultimate good (Rom. 8:28; James 1:2-3; 1 Peter 1:3-9).

Contentment is found in looking to the future. Verse 24 says, "With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory." Note the word "afterward." Glory, for the believer, comes later, not now.



In Romans 8:18 Paul assures us that though we suffer now, glory is in our future. The same thought is found in 1 Peter 1:3-9. And that's the key to contentment—the willingness to do without for now, or to suffer for now, or to have hard times now, if God wills it so, and to wait until later for perfect comfort, ease, bliss, and prosperity.

Contentment is the result of comparison. In verse 25 the psalmist proceeds to compare God with everything else. "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth." Certainly when he was hungry he desired food. When he was cold he desired warmth. When he was destitute he desired provision. When he was ill he desired to be well again. His point was not to say that being content means to have no desires *at all* other than God. Clearly he was comparing the relative value of anything and everything earthly—up to and including his own life—with the blessing of knowing the Lord.

Contentment is found in the person of God, not in what God gives us in this life. Verse 26 is really the highlight of the psalm: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." The first phrase was his way of saying, "Even if everything that could possibly go wrong, goes wrong," followed by his comforting conviction that even if this happens, God is all he really needs. Too many believers are happy in God only when God is giving them health, wealth, and prosperity. They are not content with God, in other words, but what God gives. But this psalmist had clearly come to the point where he was content with God Himself, even if God determined that his lot in life would be one of continual suffering, poverty, and pain. As he said in verse 28, "the nearness of God is my good."

One final note: the order of the wording in Psalm 73:26 is critical. The first half of verse 26 admits the likelihood of difficult trials, but then the second half proclaims that knowing God is more important. In other words, the knowledge of God overcomes *any* difficulty, producing contentment in *any* circumstance. Be careful not to turn verse 26 around in your own thinking—as if it said, "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever, but I am still so sad," or "I am so tired of this pain," or "I am still so grieved because of my loss." If you dutifully remind yourself that knowing God is wonderful, but then turn your mental focus back to your difficulties as if they were bigger than God, your own heart will be embittered and you will be pierced within.

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