

Contentment

Previewing the Issue

An American businessman was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The Mexican replied only a little while.

The American then asked why didn't he stay out longer and catch more fish? The Mexican said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs. The American then asked, but what do you do with the rest of your time? The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late; fish a little; play with my children; take siesta with my wife, Maria; stroll into the village each evening where I play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor."

The American scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat, with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution.

You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA, and eventually NYC where you will run your expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman asked, "But señor, how long will this all take?" To which the American replied, "15-20 years." "But what then, señor?"

The American laughed and said that's the best part. "When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions." "Millions, señor? Then what?"

The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could play your guitar with your amigos."

Probing the Scriptures

One of the wisest, wealthiest, most renowned men to ever live was Solomon. King Solomon was the third ruler of the nation of Israel. He found himself blessed by God with wisdom, wealth and power... and he used these to his full advantage. There was nothing that he did not do or see. He recorded the adventures of his life in his final book. It was the book of Ecclesiastes. Read the following excerpts from his book Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:12 – 2:11

Call me "the Quester." I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there's not much to write home about. God hasn't made it easy for us. I've seen it all and it's nothing but smoke—smoke, and spitting into the wind.

Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened, a minus that won't add up.

Contentment

I said to myself, "I know more and I'm wiser than anyone before me in Jerusalem. I've stockpiled wisdom and knowledge." What I've finally concluded is that so-called wisdom and knowledge are mindless and witless—nothing but spitting into the wind. Much learning earns you much trouble. The more you know, the more you hurt.

I said to myself, "Let's go for it—experiment with pleasure, have a good time!" But there was nothing to it, nothing but smoke. What do I think of the fun-filled life? Insane! Inane! My verdict on the pursuit of happiness? Who needs it?

With the help of a bottle of wine and all the wisdom I could muster, I tried my level best to penetrate the absurdity of life. I wanted to get a handle on anything useful we mortals might do during the years we spend on this earth.

Oh, I did great things: built houses, planted vineyards, designed gardens and parks and planted a variety of fruit trees in them, made pools of water to irrigate the groves of trees. I bought slaves, male and female, who had children, giving me even more slaves; then I acquired large herds and flocks, larger than any before me in Jerusalem. I piled up silver and gold, loot from kings and kingdoms. I gathered a chorus of singers to entertain me with song, and—most exquisite of all pleasures—voluptuous maidens for my bed.

Oh, how I prospered! I left all my predecessors in Jerusalem far behind, left them behind in the dust. What's more, I kept a clear head through it all. Everything I wanted I took—I never said no to myself. I gave in to every impulse, held back nothing. I sucked the marrow of pleasure out of every task—my reward to myself for a hard day's work!

Then I took a good look at everything I'd done, looked at all the sweat and hard work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.

- Make a list of the different possessions you think Solomon would have owned if he were alive today.

- How do you think others viewed Solomon? Was he revered? Was he despised?

- Name some of the pleasures of life that Solomon indulged in.

Contentment

☐ Do you sometimes wish you could trade places with him? Why, or why not?

☐ What were Solomon's conclusions as it pertained to the following?

◆ Wealth	◆ Excitement
◆ Power	◆ Sexual Indulgence
◆ Empire	◆ Fame

For many in this world who are destroying themselves to “keep up” or “get ahead”, Solomon's words can be very discouraging. The words may lead one to ask, “Is there anything in Life WORTH living for?”

If you look closely in the book of Ecclesiastes, you can see that Solomon has found something to make life WORTH living for. Tucked neatly into his discourse are about a dozen verses that give us a clue.

Read the following verses.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25:

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13:

I have concluded that there is nothing more beneficial for people than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live;^{3:13} And also that everyone should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all his toil, for it is the gift of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:22:

So I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, because that is his reward;

Ecclesiastes 8:15:

So I recommend the enjoyment of life, for there is nothing better on earth for man to do except to eat, drink, and enjoy life; thus, joy will accompany him in his toil during the days of his life which God gives him on earth.

Ecclesiastes 5:18:

I myself have seen what is the only beneficial and appropriate thing for man: to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all his hard work on earth during the few days of his life which God has given to him, for this is his reward.

☐ Do you notice a common theme in these verses? What is it?

Contentment

☐ Who do you enjoy your meals (eat and drink) with?

☐ What different occasions can you recall where family and friends gather to eat and drink?

☐ Do you enjoy work? Why, or why not?

Perusing other Pages

A Lesson in Contentment

Mary Lawrence Comm

We in America live in luxury. Running water in our homes is standard. Inside toilets are expected. Electricity is available at the flip of a switch. Most of us can maintain the perfect temperature within our homes year round if we so desire. We have access to the latest fashions. We have shoes for every occasion. We want for nothing. Or so you would think.

Seeing all that we have, it astounds me that I still want more. My kitchen sink is chipped. I want a new one. My floor tile is long out of style. I want to replace it. The carpeting throughout the house is old and, well, not what I would've chosen. I want new carpet. I want, I want, I want. Contentment becomes a casualty of the want-more's. I want more!

My husband and I have a great marriage. We have two beautiful children: a boy and a girl. We are all healthy. We own our home. We have two vehicles in the driveway. My husband has his own company. Most of all we have a growing, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. What more could we want?

In Philippians 4, Paul shares that he has "learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Ah, so this contentment thing is learned. He continues, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty." Okay, so he's been there. He's done without. "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Oh, so there's a secret to this.... "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." Ah-ha. It all comes back to Jesus.

That sounds simple enough. Simple, yes. But never easy.

In the past two years I've had two experiences where I was faced with doing "it" through Christ, in His strength. The first was the birth of our second child. The labor and delivery went perfectly. But a few hours later, for some unknown reason, our sweet baby girl stopped breathing...five times in one hour. I will never forget when the nurse practitioner came to tell us about Jenna's condition. There was no hope in her voice. She was preparing us for the worst. In a moment, the bottom dropped out of our joy and we were free-falling in the black uncertainty of an illness we knew nothing about. We were helpless. All we could do was trust God to do what was best for us and Jenna. All we could do was hold onto Him and His strength. There in that hospital room He became our strength---and our peace. He gently carried us through the next ten days as we watched and waited. Finally, on Christmas Eve we brought our precious gift from God home, perfectly healthy.

The second situation happened the following Christmas. After experiencing the temporary loss of my peripheral vision, I contacted my doctor to determine if I needed to be examined. I wasn't ready for her response. There was urgency in her voice as she advised me to seek the medical attention of an ophthalmologist as soon as possible. Her concern? Multiple Sclerosis.

Because of the Christmas holiday, I had to wait a full week for the appointment. During that week, my husband and I considered all the implications that accompany MS. Would I end up in a wheelchair? Would it be a minor inconvenience or a major change in every aspect of our lives? We assumed the worst, then hoped for the best.

The interesting thing about that week was that although I constantly mulled over the questions, internally I was filled with indescribable joy and peace. For probably the first time in my life, I was truly thankful for my mobility, agility, and independence. The sky seemed to be bluer than ever before. The trees, although brown and bare, were beautiful to me. I laughed more that week, enjoying the little things that so often went unnoticed.

As it turned out, what I had experienced was not MS, but a minor inconvenience, the result of stress. What could have been a diagnosis of disability, became a rare and precious gift. For Christmas, God had given me the gift of His strength, His joy, His peace—even in the face of fear.

I promised myself I wouldn't let the preciousness of that gift fade. I promised myself I wouldn't forget how blue the sky was or how thankful I was for those things in my life I had always taken for granted.

Even so, it wasn't long till discontentment began to ease its way back into my thinking. The kitchen sink was still chipped. The carpet still stained. But God has been true to Himself, and to me, in that He has gently reminded me about true contentment. And now I, like Paul, can say I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. The interesting thing is that need and plenty have been redefined. My need is to lean on Jesus no matter what the circumstances. Plenty smiles at me every morning from her crib and plenty fills my legs with strength as I walk over to pick her up. I still need reminders, but I can honestly say, I am learning the secret.

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Scriptures from New International Version*

Processing Together

☐ If you could wish for one thing, what would it be? (And you can't say "World Peace".)

☐ Do you struggle with want? For esteem? For popularity? For money? For possessions?

☐ What does the word materialistic mean to you?

Contentment

☐ Would you consider yourself materialistic?

☐ What makes us materialistic?

Review together the life and words of Solomon (see previewing the scriptures).

☐ How would you compare and contrast Solomon's description of the way he lived life and the way he commanded others to live life?

☐ Does the fact that he "did it all" change how you view his words? Why, or why not?

☐ What does it mean to be content?

☐ What are some of the "secrets" of contentment according to Solomon? Do you think he's right?

Putting it into Practice

Below is a list of areas of non-contentment. Place a checkmark next to the areas that challenge you the most. What would you be willing to do to grow in that area?

- Status
- Power
- Money
- Possessions
- Activities
- Adventure/Travel
- Other _____

Is there a “dream” that you have had your entire life that you feel God may be asking you to give up? If so, what is it? Would you be willing to release it and be content with where you are?
