

A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO FINDING
CONTENTMENT

Calm My Anxious
Heart

LINDA DILLOW



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

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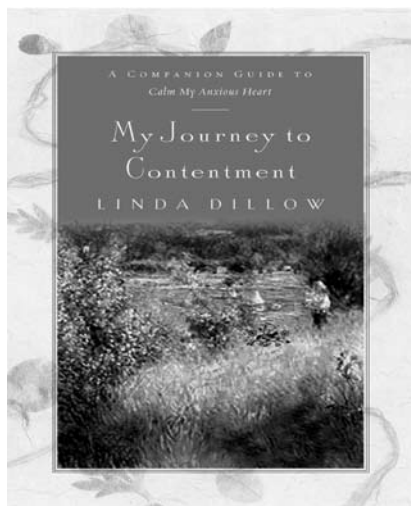
*To the women in Eastern Europe
who lived contentment before me.*

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Chapter 1



*My
Journey to
Contentment*



Chapter 1

My Journey to Contentment

As Meredith slumped into a chair in my kitchen, I prepared myself for yet another litany of her tragic life. She had asked to meet with me to talk about how she could become more content. Without a doubt, Meredith was the most negative person I'd ever met — she even looked negative!

What we are on the inside, what we continually think about, eventually shows in our words, actions, and even on our countenances. Meredith's posture and facial expression plainly revealed that she lived her own private reinterpretation of Philippians 4:8: "Finally, Meredith, whatever is untrue, whatever is not noble, whatever is not right, whatever is impure, whatever is unlovely, whatever is not admirable — if there is *anything* that is not excellent or worthy of praise — think about such things." Meredith's life was a living translation of her negative thinking.

Ironically, many women would have traded lives with Meredith in an instant. Her life was far from tragic. She was blessed with good health, a petite figure that stayed that way without effort, a husband who loved her, two adorable children, and even new furniture her husband had recently purchased to make her happy.

I asked Meredith why she was so unhappy when God had given her so many good things. Without hesitation she spouted off her complaints: First, God hadn't given her a house. She wanted her own home. She deserved it. And her husband — yes, he loved her, but she just hadn't realized his many faults. Yes, her children were adorable, but they were also negative and complaining (I didn't have to guess why!).

Meredith was like a horse with blinders on, only seeing the dirty road straight ahead. She never raised her gaze upward to God or counted her blessings. She had a blurred perspective, an unholy habit of discontent.

CONTENTMENT BEGINS WITH AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

While Meredith was convinced her easy life was difficult, Ella's life was *truly* one long series of hardships. But Ella had a "holy habit" of contentment. Her vision was clear, and she lived with an eternal perspective.

What do I mean by perspective? According to Webster's, the term suggests "looking through; seeing clearly; the capacity to view things in their true relation of relative importance." I like to think of perspective as a way of seeing. An eternal perspective, then, is God's way of seeing. When we have God's perspective, we view our lives and evaluate what is important from His viewpoint. That's what Ella did.

Along with her husband and children, Ella worked as a missionary with the pygmies in Africa for fifty-two years. She had left her country, her family, and all that was familiar. Primitive doesn't begin to describe her living conditions in the scorching heat and humidity of the African bush. But Ella found no relief because electricity, air conditioning, and other modern conveniences were only a dream. Some days it was so unbearably hot that she had to bring the thermometer inside because it couldn't register past 120 degrees without breaking.

Ella's daughter, Mimi, is my friend. Mimi wondered how her mother had done it—how she had lived a life of contentment when her circumstances would have caused the hardest to complain. Recently Mimi unearthed a treasure, a much more significant find than gold or silver. In an old diary of her mother's, she

discovered Ella's prescription for contentment:

- ✚ Never allow yourself to complain about anything — not even the weather.
- ✚ Never picture yourself in any other circumstances or someplace else.
- ✚ Never compare your lot with another's.
- ✚ Never allow yourself to wish this or that had been otherwise.
- ✚ Never dwell on tomorrow — remember that [tomorrow] is God's, not ours.¹

Her words overwhelm me; they shame me. How could Ella not complain of the weather when the perspiration dripped off her, when the stale, humid air kept her from sleeping? What made her everyday focus so different from Meredith's? The secret is in Ella's last statement. Her eyes were fixed on eternity. Her tomorrows belonged to God. She had given them to Him. And because all her tomorrows were nestled in God's strong arms, she was free to live today. One day at a time she could make the right choices and grow to possess the holy habit of contentment. Ella's focus was eternal, and her focus led to an internal contentment.

CONTENTMENT HAPPENS ON THE INSIDE

Ella possessed *a soul sufficiency, a peace separate from her circumstances*. Most of us base our contentment on our circumstances, on our feelings, or on other people. However, true contentment is separate from our circumstances. Contentment is a state of the heart, not a state of affairs.

In *King Henry VI* Shakespeare poetically described internal contentment. A king is wandering in the country and meets two gamekeepers. He informs them that he is a king. One of them

asks, “But, if thou be a king, where is thy crown?” He replies:

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
 Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,
 Nor to be seen; my crown is call'd content
 A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy.²

How many women do you know who wear this crown called “content”? You can probably count them on one hand. But if I asked how many women you know who have an anxious spirit or a spirit of discontent, you would probably run out of fingers and toes counting! Contentment is rare, but it is possible.

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

The apostle Paul makes an amazing statement in the book of Philippians.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11-13)

A look at Paul's life reveals how amazing these verses are. His life was full of anything but positive circumstances. He wrote them while imprisoned in a dark, dreary dungeon without sanitation, heat, or exercise equipment — elements that are a part of our American prisons. He was chained to a guard. He was lonely. I'm sure he wondered if all his work for Christ really mattered.

Paul lived an extremely difficult life. He was beaten almost to death, constantly misunderstood, deserted by friends — Paul’s life was anything but perfect and controlled; yet he said, “*I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.*” Incredible! In other words, contentment can be *learned*. This means you and I can learn to be content.

Paul followed his extraordinary declaration about having learned to be content in all circumstances with the secret of *how* (Philippians 4:13). This often-quoted verse is translated literally from the Greek as, “I am able to face anything by the one who makes me able [to do it].” Have you ever wondered why this verse immediately follows Paul’s bold statements about contentment? Paul recognized that the source and strength of all Christian contentment is God Himself.³

My favorite translation of Philippians 4:13 is from the late Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest.

I am strong for all things in the One who constantly infuses strength in me.⁴

At *all* times, in all circumstances, Christ is able and willing to provide the strength we need to be content. Contentment occurs when Christ’s strength is *infused* into my weak body, soul, and spirit. To *infuse* means to pour, fill, soak, or extract. Every morning when I dip my herbal tea bag into boiling water, I witness infusion.

How does God enable us to be content? He *infuses* contentment into us through His Word. As it seeps into our minds, it transforms us. Just as a cup of tea gets stronger when we give it time to steep, so we become more content when we spend time in God’s Word and allow it to seep into our lives, transforming us to be like Him.

FROM CONTROL TO CONTENT

My journey to contentment began fifteen years ago when all my masterful methods of control evaporated. They quit working because life was out of control. Two of my children were on an “adolescent advance” in the wrong direction.

I had become a Christian as a college student and was excited about rearing my children in a Christian home. I had the mistaken perspective that if I pumped all the “right” things (God, His Word) into my children, they would automatically love and obey God. When it looked like my plan wasn’t working, my heart was anxious and I became depressed.

When I told a friend about my fears, she observed, “Linda, you like control, and there are too many ‘uncontrollables’ in your life.” At the time, I didn’t understand what she meant. After all, I trusted God. I was a missionary — I was *paid* to trust God. What did she mean, “You like control”?

Looking back, I realize I did desire to trust God, but sometimes He was very slow. When He was moving at what I thought was a snail’s pace, I unconsciously decided He needed my help. I know that sounds blasphemous. God doesn’t need our help. Yet when I stepped in to massage (the truer word is *manipulate*, but *massage* sounds better!) the circumstances or to organize the people, my actions were saying, “God, You’re not doing what I think needs to be done, so I’ll help You out.” It’s our “helping God out” that leads to an anxious heart. When we take over and try to control what happens, we take our focus off the One who is in control and put our eyes on our circumstances.

Two verses guided me through those days. I memorized them, wrote them on my heart, and made a commitment to live them. First:

God . . . is the blessed controller of all things, the king over all kings and the master of all masters.
(1 Timothy 6:15, PH)

I meditated on the truths in this verse: Who controls my life? God. What kind of a controller is He? Blessed. In the words of the well-known theologian J. I. Packer, “Contentment is essentially a matter of accepting from God’s hand what He sends because we know that He is good and therefore it is good.”⁵

The second verse was Psalm 16:5:

LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure.

Speaker and author Elisabeth Elliot makes this thought-provoking statement about Psalm 16:5:

I know of no greater simplifier for all of life. Whatever happens is assigned. Does the intellect balk at that? Can we say that there are things that happen to us that do not belong to our lovingly assigned “portion” (“This belongs to it, that does not”)? Are some things, then, out of the control of the Almighty? Every assignment is measured and controlled for my eternal good. As I accept the given portion other options are canceled. Decisions become much easier, directions clearer, and hence my heart becomes inexpressibly quieter. *A quiet heart is content with what God gives.*⁶

Ella, the dear woman who was a missionary to Africa, knew that someone had to be “in control” of her life in this out-of-control world. Because she chose to let God be in charge instead of herself, she was a woman of contentment.

TEACUP THEOLOGY

Let's go back to our tea analogy. God has lovingly assigned each of us to be a uniquely special teacup. Perhaps we're an antique cup, painted with dainty roses set in gold. Maybe we see ourselves as an everyday cup — useful, but a little chipped around the edges. Or we could be a heavy-duty mug — rugged, unbreakable, and able to hold much.

Then God fills our cup with our portion, what He determines best. Our portion is our physical and emotional being, our abilities, circumstances, roles, and relationships.

Sometimes we don't like what's been poured into our cup. Remember the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? When He saw the suffering He was about to endure, He pleaded, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Christ grasped the handle of His cup and lifted it to God and said, "I accept my portion. Infuse me with Your strength that I may drink."

Every cup — whether dainty china or rough-hewn pottery — has a handle. God has placed our portion in our cup. We either choose to grasp it by the handle and lift it to Him, saying, "I accept my portion; I accept this cup," or we choose to smash our cup to pieces, saying, "God, I refuse my portion. This cup is not the right size for me and I don't like what You've put in it. I'll control my life myself."

MY CONTENTMENT JOURNEY

Contentment is accepting God's sovereign control over all of life's circumstances. It was humbling for me to have to say to God, "I've tried to trust You, but too much of my own strength has been mixed with that trust."

The following story of two monks helped me to put my

control versus God's control into perspective.

“I need oil,” said an ancient monk, so he planted an olive sapling. “Lord,” he prayed, “it needs rain that its tender roots may drink and swell. Send gentle showers.” And the Lord sent gentle showers. “Lord,” prayed the monk, “my tree needs sun. Send sun, I pray thee.” And the sun shone, gilding the dripping clouds. “Now frost, my Lord, to brace its tissues,” cried the monk. And behold, the little tree stood sparkling with frost, but at evening it died.

Then the monk sought the cell of a brother monk, and told his strange experience. “I, too, planted a little tree,” he said, “and see! It thrives well. But I entrust my tree to its God. He who made it knows better what it needs than a man like me. I laid no condition. I fixed not ways or means. ‘Lord, send what it needs,’ I prayed, ‘storm or sunshine, wind, rain, or frost. Thou hast made it and Thou dost know.’”⁷⁷

I had failed to make God my trust because I tried too hard. You may be like me or you may be at the other end of the spectrum.

You fail to make God your trust by default. Your life is out of control, so you give up. It's impossible to make sense of life, beyond impossible to be content, so you give up and give in. Most of us either try too hard or we quit trying. In both cases, we miss God. We miss His infusion of strength that leads to contentment.

This book is the story of my journey with God. How He took a first-monk woman and grew her into a second-monk woman. I am still on the journey. It is an exciting adventure! God has become my breath, my joy, my worship, my total strength. Daily He infuses His power and strength into me. He has calmed my anxious heart.

I invite you to come alongside me on the journey, to grow in your understanding of what true contentment is and how your perspective of your circumstances, yourself, your roles, and your relationships can change; to see how the barriers of anxiety, greed, and a faulty focus can keep you from possessing a heart of contentment. And, finally, I invite you to discover the bridge of trust that carries you over the barriers to contentment. Ella is not the only woman who could learn contentment. Discouraged Meredith, who thinks contentment is impossible, can learn. I can learn. You can learn, too.

And when you do learn the secret of contentment, you will see God in a new way. You will know in your heart that He is the one who is the Blessed Controller of all things, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords!

ALINA

We pushed the grocery cart around Pam Pam, my big grocery store in Vienna, Austria. Next to Safeway and Albertsons, Pam Pam left much to be desired; but compared to the small, cramped Polish stores with empty shelves, Pam Pam was a fairyland of plenty.

My companions, Alina and Henryk, were overwhelmed with the numbers and variety of goods available. When Alina picked the “just for children” toothpaste off the heavily laden shelf, I felt sick to my stomach. As we continued around the store, my nausea grew. Usually Pam Pam seemed inadequate to my American eyes, but today I saw the plenty through their Polish eyes.

Later, as we ate lunch together in my large home, I asked Alina and Henryk how they were able to accept this abundance when they knew that in two days they would return to Poland where there was no toothpaste, let alone a special toothpaste for children! I’ll never forget what Alina said. “Linda, we have learned that when we are here we can enjoy the plenty, but we know that we can be just as content with little in Poland.” The apostle Paul’s words filled my mind. “I have learned in whatever state to be content . . . in plenty and in need.”

I pushed many more carts around Pam Pam after that, but my perspective had changed. I now saw through Polish eyes, and I was humbled and blessed.