

[chapter taken from]
**SHALL WE KNOW
ONE ANOTHER?**

AND OTHER PAPERS.

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BE CONTENT.

I.

THE words which head this paper are soon spoken, and often cost the speaker very little. Nothing is cheaper than good advice. Everybody fancies he can give his neighbour good counsel, and tell him exactly what he ought to do.

Yet to practise the lesson which heads this paper is very hard. To talk of contentment in the day of health and prosperity is easy enough; but to be content in the midst of poverty, sickness, trouble, disappointments, and losses, is a state of mind to which very few can attain.

Let us turn to the Bible and see how it treats this great duty of contentment. Let us mark how the great Apostle of the Gentiles speaks when he would persuade the Hebrew Christians to be content. He backs up his injunction by a beautiful motive. He does not say nakedly, "Be content;" he adds words which would ring in the ears of all who read his letter, and nerve their hearts for a struggle: "Be content," he says, "with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

Reader, I see things in this golden sentence, which, I venture to think, deserve special notice. Give me your attention for a few minutes, and we will try to find out what they are.

1. Let us first examine *the precept which St. Paul gives us*—"Be content with such things as ye have."

These words are very simple. A little child might easily understand them. They contain no high doctrine; they involve no deep metaphysical question; and yet, simple as they are, the duty which these words enjoin on us is one of the highest practical importance to all classes.

Contentment is one of the rarest graces. Like all precious things, it is most uncommon. The old Puritan divine, who wrote a book about it, did well to call his book "The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment." An Athenian philosopher is said to have gone into the market-place at midday with a lantern, in order to find out an honest man. I think he would have found it equally difficult to find one quite contented.

The fallen angels had heaven itself to dwell in, before they fell, and the immediate presence and favour of God; but they were not content. Adam and Eve had the garden of Eden to live in, with a free grant of everything in it excepting one tree; but they were not content. Ahab had his throne and kingdom, but so long as Naboth's vineyard was not his, he was not content. Haman was the chief favourite of the Persian king; but, so long as Mordecai sat at the gate, he was not content.

It is just the same everywhere in the present day. Murmuring, dissatisfaction, discontent with what we have, meet us at every turn. To say, with Jacob, "I have enough," seems flatly contrary to the grain of human nature. To say, "I want more," seems the mother tongue of every child of Adam. Our little ones around our family hearths are daily illustrations of the truth of what I am saying. They learn to ask for "more" much sooner than they learn to be satisfied. They are far

more ready to cry for what they want, than to say “thank you” when they have got it.

There are few readers of this very paper, I will venture to say, who do not want something or other different from what they have—something more or something less. What you have does not seem so good as what you have not. If you only had this or that thing granted, you fancy you would be quite happy.

Hear now with what power St. Paul’s direction ought to come to all our consciences: “Be content,” he says, “with such things as ye have,” not with such things as ye once used to have—not with such things as ye hope to have—but with such things as ye have now. With such things, whatever they may be, we are to be content—with such a dwelling, such a position, such health, such income, such work, such circumstances as we have, we are to be content.

Reader, a spirit of this kind is the secret of a light heart and an easy mind. *Few*, I am afraid, have the least idea what a short cut to happiness it is to be content.

To be content is to be *rich* and well off. He is the rich man who has no wants, and requires no more. I ask not what his income may be. A man may be rich in a cottage and poor in a palace.

To be content is to be *independent*. He is the independent man who hangs on no created things for comfort, and has God for his portion.

Such a man is the only one who is always happy. Nothing can come amiss or go wrong with such a man. Afflictions will not shake him, and sickness will not disturb his peace. He can gather grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles, for he can get good out of evil. Like Paul and Silas, he will sing in prison, with his feet fast in the stocks. Like Peter, he will sleep quietly in prospect of death, the very night before his execution. Like Job, he will bless the Lord, even when stripped of all his comforts.

Ah! reader, if you would be truly happy (who does not want this?) seek it where alone it can be found. Seek it not in money, seek it not in pleasure, nor in friends, nor in learning. Seek it in having a will in perfect harmony with the will of God. Seek it in studying to be content.

You may say, It is fine talking: how can we be always content in such a world? I answer, that you need to cast away your pride, and know your deserts, in order to be thankful in any condition. If men really knew that they deserve nothing, and are debtors to God’s mercy every day, they would soon cease to complain.

You may say, perhaps, that you have such crosses, and trials, and troubles, that it is impossible to be content. I answer, that you would do well to remember your ignorance. Do *you* know best what is good for you, or does God? Are you wiser than He?

The things you want might ruin your soul. The things you have lost might have poisoned you. Remember, Rachel must needs have children, and she had them and died. Lot must needs live near Sodom, and all his goods were burned. Let these things sink down into your heart.

2. Let us, in the second place, examine *the ground on which St. Paul builds his precept*. That ground is one single text of Scripture.

It is striking to observe what a small foundation the apostle seems to lay down, when he bids us be content. He holds out no promise of earthly good things and

temporal rewards. He simply quotes a verse of God's word. The Master hath spoken. "He hath said."

It is striking, beside this, to observe that the text he quotes was not originally addressed to the Hebrew Christians, but to Joshua; and yet St. Paul applies it to them. This shows that Bible promises are the common property of all believers. All have a right and title to them. All believers make one mystical body; and in hundreds of cases that which was spoken to one may be fairly used by all.

But the main point I want to impress on men's minds is this: that we ought to make the texts and promises of the Bible our refuge in time of trouble, and the fountain of our soul's comfort.

When St. Paul wanted to enforce a grace and recommend a duty, he quoted a text. When you and I would give a reason for our hope, or when we feel that we need strength and consolation, we must go to our Bibles, and try to find out suitable texts. The lawyer uses old cases and decisions when he pleads his cause. "Such a judge has said such a thing, and therefore," he argues, "it is a settled point." The soldier on the battle-field takes up certain positions, and does certain things; and if you ask him why, he will say, "I have such and such orders from my general, and I obey them."

The true Christian must always use his Bible in like manner. The Bible must be his book of reference and precedents. The Bible must be to him his captain's orders. If any one asks him why he thinks as he does, lives as he does, feels as he does, all he has need to reply is, "God has spoken to such an effect: I have my orders, and that is enough."

Reader, I know not whether I make the point clear, but it is one which, simple as it seems, is of great practical importance. I want you to see the place and office of the Bible, and the unspeakable importance of knowing it well, and being acquainted with its contents. I want you to arm yourself with texts and verses of the Bible fastened down in your memory, to read so as to remember, and to remember so as to use what you read.

You and I have trouble and sorrow before us: it needs no prophetic eye to see that. Sicknesses, deaths, partings, separations, disappointments, are sure to come. What is to sustain us in the days of darkness, which are many? Nothing so able to do it as texts out of the Bible.

You and I, in all probability, may lie for months on a bed of sickness. Heavy days and weary nights, an aching body, and an enfeebled mind, may make life a burden. And what will support us? Nothing is likely to cheer and sustain us so much as verses out of the Bible.

You and I have death to look forward to. There will be friends to be left, home to be given up, the grave to be visited, an unknown world to be entered, and the last judgment after all. And what will sustain and comfort us when our last moments draw nigh? Nothing, I firmly believe, is so able to help our heart in that solemn hour as texts out of the Bible.

I want men to fill their minds with passages of Scripture while they are well and strong, that they may have sure help in the day of need. I want them to be diligent in studying their Bibles, and becoming familiar with their contents, in order that the grand old Book may stand by them and talk with them when all

earthly friends fail.

II.

From the bottom of my heart I pity that man who never reads his Bible. I wonder whence he expects to draw his consolation by-and-by. I do implore him to change his plan, and to change it without delay. Cardinal Wolsey said on his death-bed, "If I had served my God half as well as I have served my king, he would not have left me in my trouble." I fear it will be said of many, one day, "If they had read their Bibles as diligently as they read their newspapers, they would not have been devoid of consolation when they needed it most."

The Bible applied to the heart by the Holy Ghost is the only magazine of consolation. Without it we have nothing to depend on; "our feet will slide in due time" (Deut. xxxii. 35). With it we are like those who stand on a rock. That man is ready for anything who has got a firm hold of God's promises.

Once more, then, I say to every reader, arm yourself with a thorough knowledge of God's word. Read it, and be able to say, "I have hope, because it is thus and thus written; I am not afraid, because it is thus and thus written." Happy is that soul who can say with Job, "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food" (Job xxiii. 12).

Let us examine, in the last place, *the particular text St. Paul quotes* in enforcing the duty of contentment. He tells the Hebrews, "He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

It matters little to what person in the Trinity we ascribe these words, whether to Father, Son, or Holy Ghost. It all comes to the same in the end. They all are engaged to save man in the covenant of grace. Each of the three Persons says, as the other two, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

There is great *sweetness* in this peculiar promise. It deserves close attention. God says to every man or woman, who is willing to commit his or her soul to the mercy that is in Christ, "I will never leave thee, and never forsake thee." I, the eternal Father, the mighty God, the King of kings, "will never leave thee." The English language fails to give the full meaning of the Greek. It implies, "never—no never—no, nor ever!"

Now, if I know anything of this world, it is a world of "leaving, forsaking, parting, separation, failure, and disappointment." Think how immense the comfort of finding something that will never leave nor fail.

Earthly good things leave us. Health, money, property, friendship, all make themselves wings and flee away. They are here to-day, and gone tomorrow. But God says, "I will never leave thee."

We leave one another. We grow up in families full of affections and tender feelings, and then we are all thoroughly scattered. One follows his calling or profession one way, and another in another. We go north and south, and east and west, and perhaps meet no more. We meet our nearest friends and relations only at rare intervals, and then to part again. But God says, "I will never leave thee."

We are left by those we love. They die and diminish, and become fewer and

fewer every year. The more lovely—like flowers—the more frail, and delicate, and short-lived, they seem to be. But God says, “I will never leave thee.”

Separation is the universal law everywhere, except between Christ and his people. Death and failure stamp every other thing; but there is none in the love of God to believers.

The closest relation on earth—the marriage bond—has an end. To use the words of the Prayer-book service, it is only “till death us do part.” But the relation between Christ and the sinner that trusts in him never ends. It lives when the body dies. It lives when flesh and heart fail. Once begun, it never withers. It is only made brighter and stronger by the grave. “I am persuaded,” says St. Paul, “that neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. viii. 38, 39).

But this is not all. There is a peculiar depth of wisdom in the words, “I will never leave nor forsake.” Observe, God does not say, “My people shall always have pleasant things; they shall always be fed in green pastures, and have no trials—or trials very short and few.” He neither says so, nor does he appoint such a lot to his people. On the contrary, he sends them affliction and chastisement. He tries them by suffering. He purifies them by sorrow. He exercises their faith by disappointments. But still, in all these things he promises, “I will never leave nor forsake.”

Let every believer grasp these words, and store them up in his heart. Keep them ready, and have them fresh in your memory; you will want them one day. The Philistines will be upon you; the hand of sickness will lay you low; the king of terror will draw near: the valley of the shadow of death will open up before your eyes. Then comes the hour when you will find nothing so comforting as a text like this—nothing so cheering as a realising sense of God’s companionship.

Stick to that word “*never*.” It is worth its weight in gold. Cling to it as a drowning man clings to a rope. Grasp it firmly, as a soldier attacked on all sides grasps his sword. God has said, and will stand to it, “I will never leave thee.”

“*Never!*” Though your heart often faints, and you are sick of self, and your many failures and infirmities: even then the promise will not fail.

“*Never!*” Though the devil whispers, I shall have you at last. Yet a little time and your faith will fail, and you will be mine. Even then God will keep his word.

“*Never!*” Though waves of trouble go over your head, and all hope seems taken away. Even then the word of God will stand.

“*Never!*” When the cold chill of death is creeping over you, and friends can do no more, and you are starting on that journey from which there is no return. Even then Christ will not forsake you.

“*Never!*” When the Day of Judgment comes, and the books are opened, and the dead are rising from their graves, and eternity is beginning. Even then the promise will bear all your weight. Christ will not leave his hold on your soul.

Oh, believing reader, trust in the Lord for ever, for he says, “I will never leave you.” Lean back all your weight upon him: do not be afraid. Glory in his promise. Rejoice in the strength of your consolation. You may say boldly, “The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear.”

I conclude this paper with three practical remarks. Consider them well, reader, and lay them to heart:—

(1.) Let me tell you *why there is so little contentment in the world*. The simple answer is, because there is so little grace, and true religion. Few know their own sin; few feel their desert; and so few are content with such things as they have. Humility, self-knowledge, a clear sight of our own utter vileness and corruption, these are the true roots of contentment.

(2.) Let me show you, secondly, *what you should do*, if you would be content. You must know your own heart, seek God for your portion, take Christ for your Saviour, and use God's word for your daily food.

Contentment is not to be learned at the feet of Gamaliel, but at the feet of Jesus Christ. He who has God for his friend and heaven for his home can wait for his good things, and be content with little here below.

(3.) Let me tell you, lastly, that *there is one thing with which we ought never to be content*. That thing is a little religion, a little faith, a little hope, and a little grace. Let us never sit down satisfied with a little of these things. On the contrary, let us seek them more and more.

When Alexander the Great visited the Greek philosopher Diogenes, he asked him if there was anything that he wanted and he could give him. He got this short answer: "I want nothing but that you should stand from between me and the sun." Let the spirit of that answer run through our religion. One thing there is which should never satisfy and content us, and that is, "anything that stands between our souls and Christ."