

School of Contentment

by *natalie wickham*

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Several weeks ago, I posted on my blog that I was wrestling with God. Let me explain. In November of last year I was contacted by a lady who is part of our church women's ministry. They were in the process of planning a winter event for the 23rd of January and wondered if I would consider being the speaker for the event. The topic was "Being Content." I was excited about the opportunity, and after several days of prayer and getting counsel from Mom and Dad, I agreed to speak at the event. Little did I know what I was getting myself into...

I began studying and preparing in earnest. The Bible and concordance were my constant companions as I spent hours pouring over Scripture passages, cross-referencing, jotting down notes and ideas, meditating, trying to understand the true nature of contentment and how it is attained. I considered myself a fairly content person most of the time, and tried to imagine what it would feel like to be living a wholly discontented life. What were the factors that would contribute to such a state of being? I searched desperately for answers to my questions, eager to uncover gems of truth that I could incorporate into my message and share with women who might be struggling with discontentment. Friends who were aware of my upcoming talk shared helpful resources that further enlightened me. But still, something was missing.

One of the primary truths that the Lord impressed upon my heart was gleaned from Paul's familiar declaration in Philippians 4:11-13, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Even in the midst of apparent need, Paul stated that he wasn't in

need. Far from a contradiction, he was revealing that the secret of contentment is that the sufficiency of Christ transcends any situation and grants contentment and fulfillment in the context of what is perceived as a need.

In the afore-mentioned post, I alluded to the account of Jacob in Genesis 32:24-31 when I said that I would keep wrestling until God sent me away with a blessing. Well, I think that I should have re-read the account before referencing it as an application to my situation, because I forgot a rather critical element of the story. I forgot that when the angel of God didn't prevail over Jacob within a considerable amount of time, He supernaturally knocked Jacob's hip out of joint, leaving him with a pronounced limp. In a similar manner for me, after several weeks, apparently God felt like it was time to end the wrestling. So He knocked my hip out of joint and gave me a limp...

As I sat having my quiet time one morning, less than two weeks before the event was to be held, I grew increasingly frustrated. I had pages and pages of notes, ideas, thoughts, Scriptures, etc., but every attempt to develop an outline into which I could incorporate all these elements was fruitless. I was expressing these frustrations in my journal, noting that the event was quickly approaching and that I needed to have an outline, and I needed to have it well in advance so that I could spend adequate time filling in the content and practicing my delivery. After writing words to this effect, I stopped short. As I re-read the freshly penned sentences, one word jumped at me from the page: need. I was telling God what I needed. Essentially, I was discontent because God was not bringing the fulfillment of my desire – the desire to have a carefully planned outline and well organized notes. Instead, the words of Paul reverberated in my mind, "Not that I am speaking of being in need..." And then came the whisper upon my heart, "I am sufficient. I

am all that you need. You don't need *your* notes; you need Me.”

My heart skipped a beat. Actually, I think it was more like ten beats. I was terrified. Was God really asking me to do what I thought He was? Was God asking me to go into my talk without an outline, without any notes? It was too much. I told God as much. I tried to put the horrible thought out of my mind. So God filled my mind with the image of Moses standing before Him at the burning bush, refusing to go before Pharaoh because he can't speak well. God reminds Moses that He is the Creator of man's mouth and will teach him what to say. “That's nice, Lord,” I thought. “If You appeared to me in a burning bush and told me to carry Your message, I would do it in a heartbeat.” But my communication with God was far from a burning bush scenario. It was just a still, small voice whispering into my heart. How could I be sure that it was from the Lord?

Another day came and went. My heart was unyielding. What if I was mistaken? What if I didn't use notes and then no words came when I was supposed to talk? It was more than I could bear. There was just no way that I could fill up an hour of time with a cohesive message with no notes from which to plot the course of my message. As I read Psalm 12 before going to bed that night, I was pierced, “Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men. They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak. The LORD shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things: Who have said, With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?” (Psalm 12:1-4) The prideful insistence that my words would be more effective than the Lord's exposed my lack of godliness and

faithfulness. I went to bed duly convicted, but not yet broken.

The next morning, I awoke in turmoil. My heart was conflicted. My desires were obviously not in harmony with God's desires, and the discontentment I experienced was acute. Finally, I was convinced that I had heard the Lord correctly, so my approach shifted from one of unbelief to an effort to persuade Him to change His mind. It was in vain. Instead, He reminded me of 2 Corinthians 12:8-11 when Paul petitions Him to remove his “thorn in the flesh” – “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.” For three days I had questioned God, doubted Him, and pleaded with Him to show me another way. But He said, “My grace is sufficient for you.” And so it was that I walked away from my quiet time that third morning with a limp – a limp that would remind me continually of my utter dependence upon Jesus Christ.

The intervening days were filled with special times of learning from the Lord, enlightening insights, moments of eager anticipation quickly followed by visions of disastrous failure, reminders of promises passed down through the ages, attempts to sneak in the writing of detailed notes to organize my thoughts (which were stopped short by the Lord's obvious disapproval), e-mail exchanges with friends who exhorted me and offered up manifold prayers on my behalf, and the realization that my desire must be to “wait only upon the Lord” and seek to please Him alone. I

became more and more firm in my resolve. There was a peculiar exhilaration in walking by faith, anticipating the great things that God was going to do, and wondering how the evening would play out. At times, I imagined myself opening my mouth and God speaking forth a message of eloquent beauty. At other times, the image of myself staring at a blank podium and then running off in humiliation prevailed. But by and large, my heart was filled with a peace that far transcended my understanding. God would work all things according to the counsel of His own will. Of that I was certain.

At long last, the day arrived. January 23, 2009. A feeling of oppression assaulted me almost as soon as I got up. My quiet time was dry, and I had a hard time focusing and calming my heart. An e-mail from a friend provided important words of truth that I recalled to mind throughout the day. I did my work dutifully, but a feeling of darkness permeated my mind. As I finished getting ready and prepared to head over to the church building, I had an emotional breakdown. I got upset with Mom over something that was my fault and broke into tears. She told me to relax. But I couldn't. Dad talked with me, asking me questions to try to discern why I was feeling and acting like this. I couldn't explain it very well, but he did his best to understand and offer words of counsel. I was trying to be the epitome of contentment, but here I was – an emotional wreck. As I tried to get myself under control, I watched the minutes on the clock tick by. I had to leave. But I couldn't show up with red eyes and tear-streaked mascara running down my face. Another layer of makeup attempted to conceal the emotions that raged within me. I started quoting Scripture out loud and praying for God's protection from the enemy. I begged God to clothe me with His armor and help me stand against the wiles of the devil. I felt weaker than ever. Just before leaving, the whole family gathered

around me, laid hands on me, and prayed for me. I left with Dad and Joey assuring me that they would be praying for me throughout the night.

I walked into the church building and was greeted by a roomful of women and their daughters who were busily putting the finishing touches on the decorations and making sure that everything was ready to go. I conversed casually with various people and greeted other friends as they arrived. As I spoke with the lady who had originally called me about speaking at the event, she expressed amazement that I didn't even seem nervous. I laughed and said that if only she had seen me thirty minutes before, she would think otherwise. She told me that the whole committee had been praying for me, and that she really sensed that God's hand was orchestrating this event. Several others expressed their eagerness at having the occasion to hear me speak. I tried to be gracious, but the pressure I felt was immense. God's grace alone sustained me.

Soon the lights flickered on and off, signaling the commencement of the program for the evening. The room was packed with over 100 women and their daughters. I sat in my assigned seat at a front table, facing a room full of loving hearts and friendly faces. The Lord was present in our midst. His hedge of protection kept the enemy without from wreaking havoc on the events within. God would emerge the victor in this battle. I enjoyed visiting with the girls at my table while we munched on desserts and sipped hot drinks. My spirit was considerably calmer than an hour before, but I still felt on edge. After several short announcements and special music selections, I was introduced and called to the stage. Technical difficulties with the microphone gave me a few additional moments to formulate how I would begin. Eventually, with my Bible in one hand and a microphone in the other, I opened with a

short prayer. I shared a relatively brief introduction to the topic of contentment, which was followed by the first act of a skit that was written to portray the image of a discontented heart. As the act concluded, I again made my way onto the stage and looked out over the sea of expectant faces.

Visions of eloquence and clear delivery were short-lived. I fumbled through sentences, repeated myself unnecessarily, and left some thoughts woefully undeveloped. Much sooner than I anticipated, I led into the second act of the skit. This act depicted the beauty of a heart that is waiting only upon the Lord. Following a wonderful performance, I resumed my position behind the black podium and delivered the remainder of the message. It was more of the same, with brief moments of clarity overwhelmed by the primarily disorganized nature of my thoughts. I had not a clue where I was going as I moved from one point to the next. Then suddenly, it was the end and the words of one of my favorite quotes were on my lips, bringing my talk to a close. This quote was the one sure thing the Lord had given me. I knew that it was to be the closing. As soon as the last word escaped my lips, I was back at my seat, utterly spent. The tears again streamed down my face as we were led in several songs of worship and then in a closing prayer.

I wanted to run and hide. The content and delivery of my talk seemed like a disaster. But in my heart I knew that God was pleased. I had believed that He would be sufficient for me. And that belief had led me to act in obedience to what He called me to do. As one after another lady came up to me and expressed in utter sincerity that the Lord had spoken to her heart through the message, I was dumbfounded. My expressions of “Praise the Lord” were never as fraught with meaning as they were that night. I couldn’t see how God could have used my jumbled

presentation to touch so many hearts. Again I was compelled to greater faith, for faith is the “evidence of things not seen.” And for perhaps the first time in my life, I understood what it was for me to be nothing and God to be everything.

As I later told Mom, this whole ordeal was the second hardest experience of my life. And it was by far the most humbling. But now, by the grace of God, I can say with Paul that I have learned the secret of contentment. Not by studying it out and coming to an intellectual understanding of what it means. But by going through God’s custom-designed “school of contentment.” I have learned *by experience* that contentment is recognizing that our sufficiency is found in Christ alone. He is all that we truly need. And when we recognize this, we can endure the loss of anything and everything, because He will never leave us or forsake us. Indeed, though we petition God for what we think we need, we trust Him to give us what He knows we *truly* need (which may be the lack of the very thing that we think we need) in order to draw our hearts to Himself.

It is with a profound sense of gratitude that I praise God that he still touches His people and leaves them with a limp. For it is *after* the limp that the blessing comes.

*Natalie Wickham is the author of the book, **Pajama School – stories from the life of a homeschool graduate**. Visit the Pajama School website at <http://pajamaschool.com> for more information.*