

The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment

by Jeremiah Burroughs

Christian Contentment Described

'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.'
Philippians 4:11

This text contains a very timely cordial to revive the drooping spirits of the saints in these sad and sinking time. For the 'hour of temptation' has already come upon all the world to try the inhabitants of the earth. In particular, this is the day of Jacob's trouble in our own bowels.

Our great Apostle holds forth experimentally in this Gospel-text the very life and soul of all practical divinity. In it we may plainly read his own proficiency in the school of Christ, and what lesson every Christian who would prove the power and growth of godliness in his own soul must necessarily learn from him.

These words are brought in by Paul as a clear argument to persuade the Philippians that he did not seek after great things in the world, and that he sought not 'theirs' but 'them'. He did not long for great wealth. His heart was taken up with better things. 'I do not speak', he says, 'in respect of want, for whether I have or have not, my heart is fully satisfied, I have enough: I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.' 'I have learned'-Contentment in every condition is a great art, a spiritual mystery. It is to be learned, and to be learned as a mystery. And so in verse 12 he affirms: 'I know how to be abased, and I now how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed.' The word which is translated 'instructed' is derived from the word that signifies 'mystery'; it is just as if he had said, 'I have learned the mystery of this business.' Contentment is to be learned as a great mystery, and those who are thoroughly trained in this art, which is like Samson's riddle to a natural man, have learned a deep mystery. 'I have learned it'-I do not have to learn it now, nor did I have the art at first; I have attained it, though with much ado, and now, by the grace of God, I have become the master of this art.

'In whatsoever state I am'-The word 'estate' is not in the original, but simply 'in what I am', that is, in whatever concerns or befalls me, whether I have little or nothing at all.

'Therewith to be content'-The word rendered 'content' here has great elegance and fullness of meaning in the original. In the strict sense it is only attributed to God, who has styled himself 'God all-sufficient', in that he rests fully satisfied in and with himself alone. But he is pleased freely to communicate his fullness to the creature, so that from God in Christ the saints receive 'grace for grace' (John 1:16). As a result, there is in them the same grace that is in Christ, according to their measure. In this sense, Paul says, I have a self-sufficiency, which is what the word means.

But has Paul got a self-sufficiency? you will say. How are we sufficient of ourselves! Our Apostle affirms in another case, 'That we are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves' (2 Corinthians 3:5).

Therefore his meaning must be, I find a sufficiency of satisfaction in my own heart, through the grace of Christ that is in me. Though I have not outward comforts and worldly conveniences to supply my necessities, yet I have a sufficient portion between Christ and my soul abundantly to satisfy me in every condition. This interpretation agrees with that place: 'A good man is satisfied from himself' (Proverbs 14:14) and also with what Paul avers of himself in another place, that 'though he had nothing yet he possessed all things'. Because he had a right to the covenant and promise, which virtually contains everything, and an interest in Christ, the fountain and good of all, it is no marvel that he said that in whatsoever state he was in, he was content.

Thus you have the true interpretation of the text. I shall not make any division of the words, because I take them only to promote the one most necessary duty, viz. quieting and comforting the hearts of God's people under the troubles and changes they meet with in these heart-shaking times.

The doctrinal conclusion briefly is this: That to be well skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory and excellence of a Christian.

This evangelical truth is held forth sufficiently in the Scripture, yet we may take one or two more parallel places to confirm it. In

1 Timothy 6:6 and 8 you find expressed both the duty and the glory of it: 'Having food and raiment', he says in verse 8, 'let us be therewith content'-there is the duty.

'But godliness with contentment is great gain' (v. 6)-there is the glory and excellence of it; as if to suggest that godliness were not gain except contentment be with it. The same exhortation you have in Hebrews: 'Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as you have' (Hebrews 13:5).

I do not find any Apostle or writer of Scripture who deals so much with this spiritual mystery of contentment as this our Apostle has done throughout his Epistles.

To explain and prove the above conclusion, I shall endeavor to demonstrate four things:

1. THE NATURE OF THIS CHRISTIAN CONTENTMENT: WHAT IT IS.
2. THE ART AND MYSTERY OF IT.
3. WHAT LESSONS MUST BE LEARNED TO BRING THE HEART TO CONTENTMENT.
4. WHEREIN THE GLORIOUS EXCELLENCE OF THIS GRACE CHIEFLY CONSISTS.

I offer the following description: Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.

I shall break open this description, for it is a box of precious ointment, and very comforting and useful for troubled hearts, in troubled times and conditions.

1. CONTENTMENT IS A SWEET, INWARD HEART-THING.

IT IS A WORK OF THE SPIRIT INDOORS.

It is not only that we do not seek to help ourselves by outward violence, or that we forbear from discontented and murmuring expressions with perverse words and bearing against God and others. But it is the inward submission of the heart. 'Truly, my soul waiteth upon God' (Psalm 62:1) and 'My soul, wait thou only upon God' (verse 5)-so it is in your Bibles, but the words may be translated as correctly: 'My soul, be thou silent unto God. Holy thy peace, O my soul.' Not only must the tongue hold its peace; the soul must be silent. Many may sit silently, refraining from discontented expressions, yet inwardly they are bursting with discontented expressions, yet inwardly they are bursting with discontent.

This shows a complicated disorder and great perversity in their hearts. And notwithstanding their outward silence, God hears the peevish, fretful language of their souls. A shoe may be smooth and neat outside, while inside it pinches the flesh. Outwardly there may be great calmness and stillness, yet within amazing confusion, bitterness, disturbance and vexation.

Some people are so weak that they cannot restrain the unrest of their spirits, but in words and behavior they reveal what woeful disturbances there are within. Their spirits are like the raging sea, casting forth nothing but mire and dirt, and are troublesome not only to themselves but also to all with whom they live. Others, however, are able to restrain such disorders of heart, as Judas did when he betrayed Christ with a kiss, but even so they boil inwardly and eat away like a canker. So David speaks of some whose words are sweeter than honey and butter, and yet have war in their hearts.

In another place, he says, 'While I kept silence my bones waxed old'. In the same way these people, while there is a serene calm upon their tongues, have blustering storms upon their spirits, and while they keep silence their hearts are troubled and even worn away with anguish and vexation. They have peace and quiet outwardly, but within war from the unruly and turbulent workings of their heart.

If the attainment of true contentment were as easy as keeping quiet outwardly, it would not need much learning. It might be had with less strength and skill than an Apostle possessed, yea, less than an ordinary Christian has or may

have. Therefore, there is certainly more to it than can be attained by common gifts and the ordinary power of reason, which often bridle nature. It is a business of the heart.

2. IT IS THE QUIET OF THE HEART.

All is sedate and still there. That you may understand this better, I would add that this quiet, gracious frame of spirit is not opposed to certain things: 1. To a due sense of affliction. God gives his people leave to be sensible of what they suffer. Christ does not say, 'Do not count as a cross what is a cross'; he says, 'Take up your cross daily'. It is like physical health: if you take medicine and cannot hold it, but immediately vomit it up, or if you feel nothing and it does not move you-in either case the medicine does no good, but suggests that you are greatly disordered and will hardly be cured. So it is with the spirits of men under afflictions: if they cannot bear God's potions and bring them up again, or if they are insensitive to them and no more affected by them than the body is by a draught of small beer, it is a sad symptom that their souls are in a dangerous and almost incurable condition. So this inward quietness is not in opposition to a sense of afflictions, for, indeed, there would be no true contentment if you were not apprehensive and sensible of your afflictions, when God is angry.

2. It is not opposed to making an orderly manner our moan and complaint to God, and to our friends. Though a Christian ought to be quiet under God's correcting hand, he may without any breach of Christian contentment complain to God. As one of the ancients says, Though not with a tumultuous clamor and shrieking out in a confused passion, yet in a quiet, still, submissive way he may unbosom his heart to God. Likewise he may communicate his sad condition to his Christian friends, showing them how God has dealt with him, and how heavy the affliction is upon him, that they may speak a word in season to his weary soul.

3. It is not opposed to all lawful seeking for help in different circumstances, nor to endeavoring simply to be delivered out of present afflictions by the use of lawful means. No, I may lay in provision for my deliverance and use God's means, waiting on him because I do not know but that it may be his will to alter my condition. And so far as he leads me I may follow his providence; it is but my duty, God is thus far mercifully indulgent to our weakness, and he will not take it ill at our hands if by earnest and importunate prayer we seek him for deliverance until we know his good pleasure in the matter. Certainly seeking thus for help, with such submission and holy resignation of spirit, to be delivered when God wills, and as God wills, and how God wills, so that our wills are melted into the will of God-this is not opposed to the quietness which God requires in a contented spirit.

But what, then, it will be asked, is this quietness of spirit opposed to? 1. It is opposed to murmuring and repining at the hand of God, as the discontented Israelites often did. If we cannot bear this either in our children or servants, much less can God bear it in us.

2. To vexing and fretting, which is a degree beyond murmuring. I remember the saying of a heathen, 'A wise man may grieve for, but not be vexed with his afflictions'. There is a vast difference between a kindly grieving and a disordered vexation.

3. To tumultuousness of spirit, when the thoughts run distractingly and work in a confused manner, so that the affections are like the unruly multitude in the Acts, who did know for what purpose they had come together. The Lord expects you to be silent under his rod, and, as was said in

Acts 19:36, 'Ye ought to be quiet and to do nothing rashly.' 4. It is opposed to an unsettled and unstable spirit, whereby the heart is distracted from the present duty that God requires in our several relationships, towards God, ourselves and others. We should prize duty more highly than to be distracted by every trivial occasion. Indeed, a Christian values every service of God so much that though some may be in the eyes of the world and of natural reason a slight and empty business, beggarly elements, or foolishness, yet since God calls for it, the authority of the command so overawes his heart that he is willing to spend himself and to be spent in discharging it. It is an expression of Luther's that ordinary works, done in faith and from faith, are more precious than heaven and earth. And if this is so, and a Christian knows it, he should not be diverted by small matters, but should answer every distraction, and resist every temptation, as Nehemiah did Sanballat, Geshem and Tobiah, when they would have hindered the building of the wall, with this: 'I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?' (Nehemiah 6:3).

5. It is opposed to distracting, heart-consuming cares. A gracious heart so esteems its union with Christ and the work that God sets it about that it will not willingly suffer anything to come in to choke it or deaden it. A Christian is desirous that the Word of God should take such full possession as to divide between soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12), but he would not allow the fear and noise of evil tidings to take such a hold in his soul as to make a division and

struggling there, like the twins in Rebekah's womb. A great man will permit common people to stand outside his doors, but he will not let them come in and make a noise in his closet or bedroom when he deliberately retires from all worldly business. So a well-tempered spirit may enquire after things outside in the world, and suffer some ordinary cares and fears to break into the suburbs of the soul, so as to touch lightly upon the thoughts. Yet it will not on any account allow an intrusion into the private room, which should be wholly reserved for Jesus Christ as his inward temple.

6. It is opposed to sinking discouragements. When things do not fall out according to expectation, when the tide of second causes runs so low that we see little in outward means to support our hopes and hearts, then the heart begins to reason as did he in

2 Kings 7:2: 'If the Lord should open the windows of heaven how should this be?' We never consider that God can open the eyes of the blind with clay and spittle, he can work above, beyond, and even contrary to means. He often makes the fairest flowers of man's endeavors to wither and brings improbable things to pass, in order that the glory of the undertaking may be given to himself. Indeed, if his people stand in need of miracles to bring about their deliverance, miracles fall as easily from God's hands as to give his people daily bread. God's blessing many times is a secret from his servants so that they do not know from which way it is coming, as 'Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain, yet the valley shall be filled with water' (2 Kings 3:17).

God would have us to depend on him though we do not see how the thing may be brought about; otherwise, we do not show a quiet spirit. Though an affliction is on you, do not let your heart sink under it. So far as your heart sinks and you are discouraged under affliction, so much you need to learn this lesson of contentment.

7. It is opposed to sinful shiftings and shirkings to get relief and help. We see this kind of thing in Saul running to the witch of Endor, and offering sacrifice before Samuel came. Nay, good King Jehoshaphat joins himself with Ahaziah (2 Chronicles 20:35). And Asa goes to Benhadad, King of Syria, for help, 'not relying upon the Lord' (2 Chronicles 16:7, 8), though the Lord had delivered the Ethiopian army into his hands consisting of a thousand thousand (2 Chronicles 14:12). And good Jacob joined with his mother in lying to Isaac; not content to await God's time and use God's means, he made too great a haste and went out of his way to procure the blessing which God intended for him. Thus do many, through the corruption of their hearts and the weakness of their faith, because they are not able to trust God and follow him fully in all things and always. For this reason, the Lord often follows the saints with many sore temporal crosses, as we see in the case of Jacob, though they obtain the mercy. It may be that your carnal heart thinks, I do not care how I am delivered, if only I may be freed from it. It is not so many times in some of your hearts, when any cross or affliction befalls you? Do you not experience such workings of spirit as this? 'Oh, if I could only be delivered from this affliction in any way, I would not care'-your hearts are far from being quiet. This sinful shifting is the next thing which is in opposition to the quietness which God requires in a contented spirit.

8. The last thing that quietness of spirit is the opposite of it desperate risings of the heart against God by way of rebellion. That is the most abominable. I hope many of you have learned so far to be content as to restrain your hearts from such disorders. Yet the truth is that not only wicked men, but sometimes the very saints of God find the beginnings of this, when an affliction remains for a long time and is very severe and an affliction remains for a long and is very severe and heavy indeed upon them, and strikes them, as it were, in the master vein. They find in their hearts something of a rising against God, their thoughts begin to bubble, and their affections begin to move in rebellion against God himself.

Especially is this the case with those who besides their corruptions have a large measure of melancholy. The Devil works both upon the corruptions of their hearts and the melancholy disease of their bodies, and though much grace may lie underneath, yet under affliction there may be some risings against God himself.

Now Christian quietness is opposed to all these things. When affliction comes, whatever it is, you do not murmur; though you feel it, though you make your cry to God, though you desire to be delivered, and seek it by all good means, yet you do not murmur or repine, you do not fret or vex yourself, there is not a tumultuousness of spirit in you, not an instability, there are not distracting fears in your hearts, no sinking discouragements, no unworthy shifts, no risings in rebellion against God in any way: This is quietness of spirit under an affliction, and that is the second thing, when the soul is so far able to bear an affliction as to keep quiet under it.

3. NOW THE NEXT THING I WANT TO EXPLAIN IN THE DESCRIPTION IS THIS, IT IS AN INWARD, QUIET, GRACIOUS FRAME OF SPIRIT.

It is a frame of spirit and also a gracious frame. Contentment is a soul business. First, it is inward; Secondly, quiet; Thirdly, it is a quiet frame of spirit. I mean three things when I say that contentment consists in the quiet frame of the spirit of a man.

1. That it is a grace that spreads itself through the whole soul. It is in the judgment, that is, the judgment of the soul of a man or woman tends to quiet the heart-in my judgment I am satisfied. It is one thing to be satisfied in one's judgment and understanding, so as to be able to say, 'This is the hand of God, and is what is suitable to my condition or best for me.'

Although I do not see the reason for the thing, yet I am satisfied in my judgment about it.' Then it is in the thoughts of a man or woman. As my judgment is satisfied, so my thoughts are kept in order, so that it goes through the whole soul.

In some there is a partial contentment. It is not the frame of the soul, but some part of the soul has some contentment. Many a man may be satisfied in his judgment about a thing who cannot for his life rule his affections, nor his thoughts, nor his will. I do not doubt that many of you know this in your own experience, if you observe the workings of your own hearts. Can you not say when a certain affliction befalls you, I can bless God that I am satisfied in my judgment about it? I see the hand of God and I should be content, yea, in my judgment I am satisfied that mine is a good condition.

But I cannot for my life rule my thoughts and will and my affections.

methinks I feel my heart heavy and sad and more than it should be; yet my judgment is satisfied. This seemed to be the position of David in Psalm 42: 'O my soul, why art thou disquieted?' As far as David's judgment went there was a contentedness, that is, his judgment was satisfied as to the work of God on him. He was troubled, but he knew not why: 'O my soul, why art thou cast down within me?' This is a very good psalm for those who feel a fretting, discontented sickness in their hearts at any time to read and sing. He says once or twice in that Psalm: 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' and in verse 5, 'And why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.' David had enough to quiet him, and what he had, prevailed with his judgment. But after it had prevailed with his judgment, he could not get it any further. He could not get this grace of contentment to go through the whole frame of his soul.

Sometimes, a great deal of disturbance is involved in getting contentment into people's judgments, that is, to satisfy their judgment about their condition. If you come to many, whom the hand of God is upon perhaps in a grievous manner, and seek to satisfy them and tell them they have no cause to be so disquieted, 'Oh, no cause?' says the troubled spirit, 'then there is no cause for anyone to be disquieted. There has never been such an affliction as I have.' And they have a hundred things with which to evade the force of what is said to them, so that you cannot so much as get at their judgments to satisfy them. But there is a great deal of hope of attaining contentment, if once your judgments are satisfied, if you can sit down and say in your judgment, 'I see good reason to be contented.' Yet even when you have got so far, you may still have much to do with your hearts afterwards. There is such unruliness in our thoughts and affections that our judgments are not always able to rule our thoughts and affections. That is what makes me say that contentment is an inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit-the whole soul, judgment, thoughts, will, affections and all are satisfied and quiet. I suppose that merely in opening this subject you begin to see that it is a lesson that you need to learn, and that if contentment is like this then it is not easily obtained.

2. Spiritual contentment comes from the frame of the soul. The contentment of a man or woman who is rightly content does not come so much from outward arguments or from any outward help, as from the disposition of their own hearts. The disposition of their own hearts causes and brings forth this gracious contentment rather than any external thing.

Let me explain myself. Someone is disturbed, suppose it to be a child or a man or a woman. If you come and bring some great thing to please them, perhaps it will quiet them and they will be contented. It is the thing you bring that quiets them, not the disposition of their own spirits, not any good temper in their own hearts, but the external thing you bring them. But when a Christian is content in the right way, the quiet comes more from the temper and disposition of his own heart than from any external argument or from the possession of anything in the world.

I would unfold this further to you with this simile: To be content as a result of some external thing is like warming a man's clothes by the fire. But to be content through an inward disposition of the soul is like the warmth that a man's clothes have from the natural heat of the body. A man who is healthy in body puts on his clothes, and perhaps at first on a cold morning they feel cold. But after he has had them on a little while they are warm. Now, how did they get warm? They were not near the fire? No, this came from the natural heat of his body. Now when a sickly man, the

natural heat of whose body has deteriorated, puts on his clothes, they do not get hot after a long time. He must warm them by the fire, and even then they will soon be cold again.

This will illustrate the different contentments of men. Some are very gracious, and when an affliction comes on them, though at first it seems a little cold, after they have borne it a while, the very temper of their hearts makes their afflictions easy. They are quiet under it and do not complain of any discontent. But now there are others that have an affliction upon them and have not this good temper in their hearts. Their afflictions are very cold and troublesome to them. Maybe, if you bring some external arguments to bear upon them like the fire that warms the clothes, they will be quiet for a while. But, alas, if they lack a gracious disposition in their own hearts, that warmth will not last long. The warmth of the fire, that is, a contentment that results merely from external arguments, will not last long. But that which comes from the gracious temper of one's spirit will last. When it comes from the spirit of a man or woman—that is true contentment. We shall, however, have more to say of this in explaining the mystery of contentment.

3. It is the frame of spirit that shows the habitual character of this grace of contentment. Contentment is not merely one act, just a flash in a good mood. You find many men and women who, if they are in a good mood, will be very quiet. But this will not hold. It is not a constant course. It is not the constant tenor of their spirits to be holy and gracious under affliction.

Now I say that contentment is a quiet frame of spirit and by that I mean that you should find men and women in a good mood not only at this or that time, but as the constant tenor and temper of their hearts. A Christian who, in the constant tenor and temper of his heart, can carry himself quietly with constancy has learned this lesson of contentment. Otherwise his Christianity is worth nothing, for no one, however furious in his discontent, will not be quiet when he is in a good mood.

So first, contentment is a heart-business; secondly, it is the quiet of the heart; and then thirdly, it is the frame of the heart.

4. CONTENTMENT IS THE GRACIOUS FRAME OF THE HEART.

Indeed, in contentment there is a compound of all graces, if the contentment is spiritual, if it is truly Christian. There is, I say, a compound of a great many precious ingredients, so it is in this grace of contentment, which we shall say more of in unfolding its excellence. But now the gracious frame of spirit is in opposition to three things: 1. In opposition to the natural quietness of many men and women. Some are so constituted by nature that they are more still and quiet; others are of a violent and hot constitution and they are more impatient.

2. In opposition to a sturdy resolution. Some men through the strength of a sturdy resolution do not seem to be troubled, come what may. So they are not disquieted as much as others.

3. By way of distinction from the strength of natural (though unsanctified) reason, which may quiet the heart in some degree. But now I say that a gracious frame of spirit is not merely a stillness of the body which comes from its natural constitution and temper, nor a sturdy resolution, nor merely through the strength of reason.

You will ask, In what way is the grace of contentment distinguished from all these? More will be spoken of this when we come to show the mystery of contentment and the lessons to be learned. But now we may speak a little by way of distinction from the natural quietness of spirit and such a bodily constitution that you seldom find them disquieted. Now, mark these people and you will see that they are likewise of a very dull spirit in any good matter; they have no quickness or liveliness of spirit in such matters either.

But where contentment of heart springs from grace, the heart is very quick and lively in the service of God. Yea, the more any gracious heart can bring itself to be in a contented disposition, the more fit it is for any service of God. And just as a contented heart is very active and busy in the work of God, so he is very active and busy in sanctifying God's name in the affliction that befalls him.

The difference is very clear: The one whose disposition is quiet is not disquieted as others are, but neither does he show any activeness of spirit to sanctify the name of God in his affliction. But, on the other hand, he whose contentment is of grace is not disquieted and keeps his heart quiet with regard to vexation and trouble, and at the same time is not dull or heavy but very active to sanctify God's name in the affliction that he is experiencing.

For if a man is to be free from discontent and worry it is not enough merely not to murmur but you must be active in sanctifying God's name in the affliction. Indeed, this will distinguish it from a sturdy resolution not to be troubled. Though you have a sturdy resolution that you will not be troubled, do you make it a matter of conscience to sanctify God's name in your affliction and is this where your resolution comes from? That is the main thing that brings quietness of heart and helps against discontent in a gracious heart. I say, the desire and care your soul has to sanctify God's name in an affliction is what quietens the soul, and this is what others lack.

A quietness which comes from reason only does not do this either. It is said of Socrates that, though he were only a heathen, he would never so much as change his countenance whatever befell him, and he got this power over his spirit merely by the strength of reason and morality. But gracious contentment comes from principles beyond the strength of reason. I cannot develop that until we come to unfold the mystery of spiritual contentment.

I will give you just one mark of the difference between a man or woman who is content in a natural way and one who is content in a spiritual way: Those who are content in a natural way overcome themselves when outward afflictions befall them and are content. They are just as content when they commit sin against God. When they have outward crosses or when God is dishonored, it is all one to them; whether they themselves are crossed or whether God is crossed. But a gracious heart that is contented with its own affliction, will rise up strongly when God is dishonored.

5. THE FIFTH CHARACTERISTIC IS CONTENTMENT IS FREELY SUBMITTING TO AND TAKING PLEASURE IN GOD'S DISPOSAL.

It is a free work of the spirit. There are four things to be explained in this freedom of spirit: 1. That the heart is readily brought over. When someone does a thing freely, he does not need a lot of moving to get him to do it. Many men and women, when afflictions are heavy upon them, may be brought to a state of contentment with great ado. At last, perhaps, they may be brought to quiet their hearts in their affliction, but only with a great deal of trouble, and not at all freely. If I desire a thing of someone else and I get it with much ado and a great deal of trouble, there is no freedom of spirit here. When a man is free in a thing, only mention it and immediately he does it. So if you have learned this art of contentment you will not only be content and quiet your hearts after a great ado, but as soon as you come to see that it is the hand of God your heart acts readily and closes at once.

2. It is freely, that is, not by constraint. Not, as we say, patience by force.

Thus many will say that you must be content: 'This is the hand of God and you cannot help it.' Oh, but this is too low an expression for Christians.

Yet when Christians come to visit one another, they say, 'Friend (or neighbor), you must be content.' Must be content is too low for a Christian.

No, it should be, 'Readily and freely I will be content.' It is suitable to my heart to yield to God and to be content. I find it a thing that comes naturally that my soul should be content. Oh, you should answer your friends so who come and tell you that you must be content: No, I am willing to yield to God, and I am freely content. That is the second point about freedom of spirit. Now a free act comes in a rational manner. That is freedom; it does not come through ignorance, because I know of no better condition or because I do not know why my affliction is, but it comes through a sanctified judgment. That is why no creature but a rational creature can do an act of freedom. Liberty of action is only in rational creatures and comes from hence, for that is only freedom that is done in a rational way. Natural freedom is when I, by my judgment, see what is to be done, understand the thing, and my judgment agrees with what I understand: that is done freely.

But if a man does something, not understanding what he is doing, he cannot be said to do it freely. Suppose a child was born in prison and never went outside of it. He is content, but why? Because he never knew anything better. His being content is not a free act. But for men and women who know better, who know that the condition they are in is an afflicted and sad condition, and still by a sanctified judgment can bring their hearts to contentment-this is freedom.

3. This freedom is in opposition to mere stupidity. A man or woman may be contented merely from lack of sense. This is not free, any more than a man who is paralysed in a deadly way and does not feel it when you nip him is patient freely. But if someone should have their flesh pinched and feel it, and yet for all that can control themselves and do it freely, that is another matter. So it is here: many are contented out of mere stupidity. They have a dead paralysis upon them. But a gracious heart has sense enough, and yet is contented, and therefore is free.

6. CONTENTMENT IS FREELY SUBMITTING TO AND TAKING PLEASURE IN GOD'S DISPOSAL.

Submitting to God's disposal-What is that? The word submit signifies nothing else but 'to send under'. Thus in one who is discontented the heart will be unruly, and would even get above God so far as discontent prevails.

But now comes the grace of contentment and sends it under, for to submit is to send under a thing. Now when the soul comes to see its own unruliness-Is the hand of God bringing an affliction and yet my heart is troubled and discontented-What, it says, will you be above God? Is this not God's hand and must your will be regarded more than God's? O under, under! get you under, O soul! Keep under! keep low! keep under God's feet! You are under God's feet, and keep under his feet! Keep under the authority of God, the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God, the power that God has over you! To keep under, that is to submit. The soul can submit to God at the time when it can send itself under the power and authority and sovereignty and dominion that God has over it. That is the sixth point, but even that is not enough. You have not attained this grace of contentment unless the next point is true of you.

7. CONTENTMENT IS TAKING PLEASURE IN GOD'S DISPOSAL.

This is so when I am well pleased in what God does, in so far as I can see God in it, though, as I said, I may be sensible of the affliction, and may desire that God in his due time would remove it, and may use means to remove it. Yet I am well pleased in so far as God's hand is in it. To be well pleased with God's hand is a higher degree than the previous one. It comes from this: not only do I see that I should be content in this affliction, but I see that there is good in it. I find there is honey in this rock, and so I do not only say, I must, or I will submit to God's hand. No, the hand of God is good, 'it is good that I am afflicted.' To acknowledge that it is just that I am afflicted is possible in one who is not truly contented. I may be convinced that God deals justly in this matter, he is righteous and just and it is right that I should submit to what he has done; O the Lord has done righteously in all ways! But that is not enough! You must say, 'Good is the hand of the Lord.' It was the expression of old Eli: 'Good is the hand of the Lord,' when it was a sore and hard word. It was a word that threatened very grievous things to Eli and his house, and yet Eli says, 'Good is the word of the Lord.' Perhaps, some of you may say, like David, 'It is good that I was afflicted', but you must come to this, 'It is good that I am afflicted.' Not just good when you see the good fruit it has wrought, but to say when you are afflicted, 'It is good that I am afflicted. Whatever the affliction, yet through the mercy of God mine is a good condition.' It is, indeed, the top and the height of this art of contentment to come to this pitch and to be able to say, 'Well, my condition and afflictions are so and so, and very grievous and sore; yet, through God's mercy, I am in a good condition, and the hand of God is good upon me notwithstanding.' I should have given you several Scriptures about this, but I will give you one or two, which are very striking. You will think it is a hard lesson to come so far as not only to be quiet but to take pleasure in affliction.

'In the house of the righteous is much treasure, but in the revenues of the wicked is trouble' (Proverbs 15:6): here is a Scripture to show that a gracious heart has cause to say that it is in a good condition, whatever it is. In the house of the righteous is much treasure; his house-what house? It may be a poor cottage, and perhaps he has scarcely a stool to sit on. Perhaps he is forced to sit on a stump of wood or part of a block instead of a stool, or perhaps he has scarcely a bed to lie on, or a dish to eat in. Yet the Holy Ghost says, 'In the house of the righteous is much treasure.' Let the righteous man be the poorest man in the world-it may be that someone has come and taken all the goods from out of his house for debt. Perhaps his house is plundered and all is gone; yet still, 'In the house of the righteous is much treasure.' The righteous man can never be made so poor, to have his house so rifled and spoiled, but there will remain much treasure within. If he has but a dish or a spoon or anything in the world in his house, there will be much treasure so long as he is there. There is the presence of God and the blessing of God upon him, and therein is much treasure. But in the revenues of the wicked there is trouble. There is more treasure in the poorest body's house, if he is godly, than in the house of the greatest man in the world, who has his fine hangings and finely-wrought beds and chairs and couches and cupboards of plate and the like. Whatever he has, he has not so much treasure in it as there is in the house of the poorest righteous soul.

It is no marvel, therefore, that Paul was content, for a verse or two after my text you read: 'But I have all and abound. I am full' (Philippians 4:18). I have all? Alas, poor man! what did Paul have that could make him say he had all? Where was there ever a man more afflicted than Paul was? Many times he had not tatters to hang about his body to cover his nakedness. He had no bread to eat, he was often in nakedness, and put in the stocks and whipped and cruelly used, 'Yet I have all', says Paul, for all that. Yes, you will find it in 2 Corinthians: He professes there that he did possess all things: 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things' (2 Corinthians 6:10).

Mark what he says-it is, 'as having nothing' but it is 'possessing all things'. He does not say: 'As possessing all things', but 'possessing all things'. I have very little in the world, he says, but yet possessing all things. So you see that a Christian has cause to take pleasure in God's hand, whatever his hand may be.

8. THE EIGHTH THING IN CONTENTMENT IS, SUBMITTING, AND TAKING PLEASURE IN GOD'S DISPOSAL.

That is to say, the soul that has learned this lesson of contentment looks up to God in all things. He does not look down at the instruments and means, so as to say that such a man did it, that it was the unreasonableness of such and such instruments, and similar barbarous usage by such and such; but he looks up to God. A contented heart looks to God's disposal, and submits to God's disposal, that is, he sees the wisdom of God in everything. In his submission he sees his sovereignty, but what makes him take pleasure is God's wisdom. The Lord knows how to order things better than I. The Lord sees further than I do; I only see things at present but the Lord sees a great while from now. And how do I know but that had it not been for this affliction, I should have been undone. I know that the love of God may as well stand with an afflicted condition as with a prosperous condition. There are reasonings of this kind in a contented spirit, submitting to the disposal of God.

9. THE LAST THING IS, THIS IS IN EVERY CONDITION.

Now we shall enlarge on this a little.

1. SUBMITTING TO GOD IN WHATEVER AFFLICTION BEFALLS US: AS TO THE KIND OF AFFLICTION.

2. AS TO THE TIME AND CONTINUANCE OF THE AFFLICTION.

3. AS TO THE VARIETY AND CHANGES OF AFFLICTION: WHATEVER THEY ARE, YET THERE MUST BE A SUBMISSION TO GOD'S DISPOSAL IN EVERY CONDITION.

1. As to the kind of affliction. Many men and women will in general say that they must submit to God in affliction; I suppose that if you were to go now from one end of this congregation to the other, and speak thus to every soul: 'Would you not submit to God's disposal, in whatever condition he might place you?', you would say, 'God forbid that it should be otherwise!' But we have a saying, There is a great deal of deceit in general statements. In general, you would submit to anything; but what if it is in this or that particular case which crosses you most?-Then, anything but that! We are usually apt to think that any condition is better than that condition in which God has placed us. Now, this is not contentment; it should be not only to any condition in general, but for the kind of affliction, including that which most crosses you. God, it may be, strikes you in your child.-'Oh, if it had been in my possessions' you say, 'I would be content!' Perhaps he strikes you in your marriage. 'Oh,' you say, 'I would rather have been stricken in my health.' And if he had struck you in your health-'Oh, then, if it had been in my trading, I would not have cared.' But we must not be our own carvers. Whatever particular afflictions God may place us in, we must be content in them.

2. There must be a submission to God in every affliction, as to the time and continuance of the affliction. 'Perhaps I could submit and be content', says someone, 'but this affliction has been on me a long time, three months, a year, many years, and I do not know how to yield and submit to it, my patience is worn out and broken.' I may even be a spiritual affliction-you could submit to God, you say, in any outward affliction, but not in a soul-affliction.

Or if it were the withdrawing of God's face-'Yet if this had been but for a little time I could submit; but to seek God for so long and still he does not appear, Oh how shall I bear this?' We must not be our own disposers for the time of deliverance any more than for the kind and way of deliverance.

I will give you a Scripture or two about this. That we are to submit to God for the time as well as the kind of affliction, see the latter end of the first chapter of Ezekiel: 'When I saw it I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.' The Prophet was cast down upon his face, but how long must he lie upon his face? 'And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me, when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet.' Ezekiel was cast down upon his face, and there he must lie till God should bid him to stand up; yea, and not only so, but till God's Spirit came into him and enabled him to stand up. So when God casts us down, we must be content to lie till God bids us stand up, and God's Spirit enters into us to enable us to stand up. You know how Noah was put into the Ark-certainly he knew there was much affliction in the Ark, with all kinds of creatures shut up with him for twelve months together-it was a mighty thing, yet God having shut him up, even though the waters were assuaged, Noah was not to come out of the Ark till God bid him. So though we be shut up in great afflictions, and we may think of this and that and the other means to come out of that affliction, yet till God opens the door, we

should be willing to stay; God has put us in, and God will bring us out. So we read in the Acts of Paul, when they had shut him in prison and would have sent for him out; 'No', says Paul, 'they shut us in, let them come and fetch us out.' So in a holy, gracious way should a soul say, 'Well, this affliction that I am brought into, is by the hand of God, and I am content to be here till God brings me out himself.' God requires it at our hands, that we should not be willing to come out till he comes and fetches us out.

In Joshua 4:10 there is a remarkable story that may serve our purpose very well: We read of the priests that they bore the ark and stood in the midst of Jordan (you know when the Children of Israel went into the land of Canaan they went through the river Jordan). Now to go through the river Jordan was a very dangerous thing, but God had told them to go. They might have been afraid of the water coming in upon them. But mark, it is said, 'The priests that bare the ark stood in the midst of Jordan till every thing was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua, and the people hasted and passed over: And it came to pass when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the Lord passed over, and the priests in the presence of the people.' Now it was God's disposal that all the people should pass over first, that they should be safe on land; but the priests must stand still till all the people had passed over, and then they must have leave to go. But they must stay till God would have them to go, stay in all that danger! For certainly, to reason and sense, there was a great deal of danger in staying, for the text says that the people hasted over, but the priests they must stay till the people have gone, stay till God calls them out from that place of danger. And so many times it proves the case that God is pleased to dispose of things so that his ministers must stay longer in danger than the people, and likewise magistrates and those in public places, which should make people to be satisfied and contented with a lower position into which God has put them. Though your position is low, yet you are not in the same danger as those who are in a higher position. God calls those in public positions to stand longer in the gap and place of danger than other people, but we must be content to stay even in Jordan till the Lord shall be pleased to call us out.

3. And then for the variety of our condition. We must be content with the particular affliction, and the time, and all the circumstances about the affliction—for sometimes the circumstances are greater afflictions than the afflictions themselves—and for the variety. God may exercise us with various afflictions one after another, as has been very noticeable, even of late, that many who have been plundered and come away, afterwards have fallen sick and died; they had fled for their lives and afterwards the plague has come among them; and if not that affliction, it may be some other. It is very rarely that one affliction comes alone; commonly, afflictions are not single things, but they come one upon the neck of another. God may strike one man in his possessions, then in his body, then in his name, wife, child or dear friend, and so it comes in a variety of ways; it is the way of God ordinarily (you may find it by experience) that one affliction seldom comes alone. Now this is hard, when one affliction follows after another, when there is a variety of afflictions, when there is a mighty change in one's condition, up and down, this way, and that: there indeed is the trial of a Christian. Now there must be submission to God's disposal in them. I remember it was said even of Cato, who was a Heathen, that no man saw him to be changed, though he lived in a time when the commonwealth was so often changed; yet it is said of him, he was the same still, though his condition was changed, and he passed through a variety of conditions. Oh that the same could be said of many Christians, that though their circumstances are changed, yet that nobody could see them changed, they are the same! Did you see what a gracious, sweet and holy temper they were in before? They are in it still. Thus are we to submit to the disposal of God in every condition.

Contentment is the inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, freely submitting to and taking pleasure in God's disposal in every condition: That is the description, and in it nine distinct things have been opened up which we summarize as follows: First, that contentment is a heart-work within the soul; Secondly, it is the quieting of the heart; Thirdly, it is the frame of the spirit; Fourthly, it is a gracious frame; Fifthly, it is the free working of this gracious frame; Sixthly, there is in it a submission to God, sending the soul under God; Seventhly, there is a taking pleasure in the hand of God; Eighthly, all is traced to God's disposal; Ninthly, in every condition, however hard it be and however long it continue.

Now those of you who have learned to be content, have learned to attain to these various things. I hope that the very opening of these things may so far work on your hearts that you may lay your hands upon your hearts on what has been said, I say, that the very telling you what the lesson is may cause you to lay your hands on your hearts and say, 'Lord, I see there is more to Christian contentment than I thought there was, and I have been far from learning this lesson. Indeed, I have only learned my ABC in this lesson of contentment. I am only in the lower form in Christ's school if I am in it at all.' We shall speak of these things more later, but my particular aim in opening this point is to show what a great mystery there is in Christian contentment, and how many distinct lessons there are to be learned, that we may come to attain to this heavenly disposition, to which St. Paul attained.