

## **Learning to Be Content in Christ**

*Allen Webster*

“**S**tanding Knee-Deep in a River (Dying of Thirst)” is a classic Kathy Mattea song, first made popular in 1992 and still often replayed on YouTube. It is a moving song of a person thinking back over all the friends with whom she had lost touch, the sweethearts who went separate ways, and other lonely people she passed each day who could be friends if she just reached out to them.

Most Americans are “standing parched knee-deep in a river” of blessings but seem to be dying of the thirst of discontent. The English word “content” means “desiring no more than what one has.” The Greek word (*arkeo*) means “to be satisfied.” Thus, one who is content is satisfied with what he has and has no desire for more. How many people do you know like that?

### **PART 1: A THIRST METAPHOR STANDING IN A RIVER OF BLESSINGS**

We are the most blessed people in the world. In 1776, 13 colonies and 56 representatives met with Congress and declared that America would be a sovereign nation. The Declaration of Independence was drafted; the Constitution was formed; the Bill of Rights was added. The second sentence of the Declaration of Independence says: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with

certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The rich young ruler is a well known New Testament character (Luke 18:23). We do not know how much he was worth, but from Jesus’ conversation with him, it appears that he had much. Have you ever considered that *you* are better off than the rich young ruler? No matter how much wealth the rich young ruler had, he could not

ride in a car,  
have a surgery,  
turn on a light,  
buy penicillin,  
watch TV,  
wash dishes in running water,  
type a letter,  
mow a lawn,  
fly in an airplane,  
sleep on an innerspring mattress,  
or talk on the phone.

If he was very rich, then what are we?

We have much for which to be thankful and little reason for discontent. The phrase “give thanks” is found seven times in the New Testament. The list shows how material things account for so little of what is truly valuable:

- Christian friends (Rom. 16:4);
- Christian liberty (1 Cor. 10:30);
- Faithful and loving church (Eph. 1:16);
- God and Jesus Christ (Col. 1:3);
- Faithful, loving, patient Christians (1 Thess. 1:2);
- Everything (1 Thess. 5:18);
- God’s plan of salvation (2 Thess. 2:13).

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Since there are seven of these, perhaps it suggests that we should give thanks seven times a day.

According to the last census, those classified as “poor” in our country would be considered rich in almost any other part of the world. The “poverty line” or threshold for a four-person family unit with two children in 2006 was \$20,444. For one- or two-person family units, the poverty thresholds differ by age; the 2006 threshold for one individual under age 65 was \$10,488, whereas for an individual 65 or over it was \$9,669 (*Institute for Research on Poverty*). According to a report by Robert Rector in 2003, the following things are true of the poorest of American citizens:

- 46% of all poor households own their own homes.
- 76% of poor households have air conditioning, while 30 years ago, only 36% of the entire U.S. population enjoyed air conditioning.
- Nearly three-quarters of poor households own a car; 30% own two or more cars.
- 97% of poor households have a color television. Over half own two or more color televisions.
- 78% have a VCR or DVD player.
- 62% have cable or satellite TV reception.
- 73% own microwave ovens.
- More than half have a stereo.
- A third have an automatic dishwasher.
- The average poor American has more living space than the average individual (all classes) living in Paris, London, Vienna, Athens and other cities throughout Europe. In 1973, the average new house had 1660 square feet. Today the average new home being built is 2,434 square

feet. (These comparisons are to the average citizens in foreign countries not to those classified as poor.) In Israel's early days, the average home in Jerusalem had only 300-600 square feet.

- As a group, the poor are far from being chronically undernourished. Most poor children today are in fact super-nourished, on average growing up to be one inch taller and ten pounds heavier than the GIs who stormed the beaches of Normandy in World War II.

Jesus wants us to be thankful people, and He must shake His head at a discontented generation. He must again ask, "Where are the nine?" (Luke 17:17). Consider the blessings we take for granted each day:

- Electricity and running water 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Air conditioning in the summer and heating in the winter.
- 95.4% of citizens have a job.
- The ability to walk into a grocery store at any time and see more food in moments than Darfur has seen in the last year.
- The ability to drive from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean without having to present identification papers as we move through each state.
- Hundreds of clean and safe hotels we would find along the way that can provide temporary shelter.
- Thousands of restaurants with varying cuisine from around the world.

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- When we wreck our car, emergency workers show up and provide services to help all and even send a helicopter to take you to the hospital.
- 70% of Americans own a home. In the unfortunate case of a fire, a group of trained firefighters will appear in moments and use top notch equipment to extinguish the flames thus saving you, your family and your belongings.
- If, while at home watching your flat-screen TV, a burglar or prowler intrudes, an officer equipped with a gun and a bullet-proof vest will come to defend you and your family against attack or loss.
- A neighborhood free of bombs or militias raping and pillaging the residents.
- Neighborhoods where 90% of teenagers own cell phones and computers.
- Complete religious, social and political freedoms that are the envy of everyone in the world.

Certainly, we “abound with blessings” (Prov. 28:20). [All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.]

Most of us enjoy relatively good health (2 John 3:2). A church group traveled to the Caribbean on a mission trip. Their host took them to visit a leper colony on the Island of Tobago. While visiting with these sad patients, they held a worship service in the campus chapel. The lepers took their seats and sang hymns. The preacher, Jack, noticed that one patient was sitting on the back row, facing in the opposite direction. He thought this was unusual but did not say anything.

When Jack asked, “We have time for one more hymn. Does anyone have a favorite?” For the first time, the leprous woman on the back row turned around to face the

front. Jack said, "I found myself staring into the most hideous face I had ever seen. She had no nose and no lips—just the bare teeth, like a skull." As she turned, she raised her hand in the air. Except it wasn't a hand. It was the bony end of her arm, just a nub. As poor Jack was trying to take this in, she spoke. "Could we sing 'Count Your Many Blessings'?" The preacher lost it. He stumbled out of the pulpit and through the door into the yard, with tears in his eyes. Someone else stepped up and led the hymn and a friend walked outside and put his arm around Jack. "You'll never be able to sing that song again, will you, Jack?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll sing it," Jack said, "but not in the same way." (Story found on [www.joemckeeper.com](http://www.joemckeeper.com).)

Add to this that as Christians we have spiritual blessings, which are far more valuable (Eph. 1:3). "Blessings are upon the head of the just" (Prov. 10:6). An aged Christian was called upon by the tax assessor to determine the amount of taxes he should pay. When asked what property he had, the Christian said, "I am a very wealthy man." Whereupon the tax assessor asked him to list his possessions. The man did:

1. I have remission of my sins – Acts 2:38.
2. I have a mansion in heaven – John 14:2.
3. I have peace that passeth understanding – Phil. 4:7.
4. I have joy unspeakable – 1 Pet. 1:8.
5. I have a divine love that never faileth – 1 Cor. 13:8.
6. I have a faithful, pious wife – Prov. 31:10.
7. I have devoted children – Ex. 20:12.
8. I have true, loyal friends – Prov. 18:24.
9. I have songs in the night – Psa. 42:8.
10. I have a crown of life – Jas. 1:12.
11. I have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who supplies all my needs freely – Phil. 4:19.

Closing the book, the tax assessor said, "You are truly a wealthy man, but do you know that I'm not able to tax you on any of this?" He then added, "You have possessions that give 100% profit."

### **Dying of Thirst**

In spite of living in one of the most prosperous nations in the world, at a time of economic growth and prosperity, there is a spirit of discontentedness in our land. A *Newsweek* poll stated that 67 percent of Americans are unhappy with the direction the country is headed, and 69 percent of the country is unhappy with the performance of the president. Even Christians struggle with contentment. One poet said,

As a rule, Man's a fool.  
When it's hot, He wants it cool.  
And when it's cool, He wants it hot,  
Always wanting What is not.  
("Contentment," qtd. on NetBible)

Bono, lead singer of "U2," summed up the modern psyche when he sang: "I have climbed the highest mountains. I have run through the fields. I run, I have crawled, I have scaled city walls. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

We live in a culture in which many have reached the level of dissatisfaction that they no longer see life as worth living. The Centers for Disease Control report that:

- More people die from suicide than from homicide.
- Overall, suicide is the eighth leading cause of death for all Americans, and is the third leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24.
- An average of 1 person every 17.1 minutes commits suicide.

- There are 775,000 annual attempts in U.S. (25 attempts for every completion).

Typically the richest people in the world are the least content. The rich young ruler was “very sorrowful” for he was “very rich” (Luke 18:23), perhaps showing that those two often go together. Solomon wrote,

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes? The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep. There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt. (Ecc. 5:10-13)

Jesus said, “I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Paul offered “peace that passeth understanding” (Phil. 4:7). He also described a generation that lost their ability to be thankful (Rom. 1:21).

### **Learning to Drink from the Seven Springs**

Rivers have sources. Lewis and Clark, for instance, famously searched for (and found) the source of the Missouri River. What, then, are the springs from which the river of contentment flows?

**Spring 1: Contentment comes through the fear of God.** Solomon wrote, “The fear of the Lord tendeth to life: and he that hath it shall abide satisfied; he shall not be visited with evil” (Prov. 19:23). The one who fears the Lord is here promised both safety and satisfaction. The word “abide” has as its original sense of “passing the night.”



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Even in the hour of darkness he shall be free from fear (Barnes).

There is a story about millionaire William Randolph Hearst, who invested a fortune in collecting art treasures from around the world. One day, Hearst was reading a description of a valuable art item which he sent his agent abroad to find. After months of searching, the agent reported that he had finally found the treasure. To the surprise of Hearst, the priceless masterpiece was stored in none other than his own warehouse! The multi-millionaire had been searching all over the world for a treasure he already possessed. Had he read the catalog of his treasures, he would have saved himself a lot of time and money (“Contentment,” qtd. on NetBible). I think we as believers are like that. Contentment isn’t something that the world can give us but that Christ has given us (Simms). The fear of God leads us to seek out God’s way, which in turn helps us find contentment.

**Spring 2: Contentment comes through knowledge of God’s mercy.** “O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Psa. 90:14). The beginning point for self-forgiveness is divine forgiveness. Once we know that God’s mercy has been applied to our souls, then we can move toward a contented life.

**Spring 3: Contentment comes through a strong desire for righteousness.** Jesus said, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matt. 5:6). Athletes are said to “be hungry” when they have a strong competitive spirit. An aspiring businessman is said to be “hungry” when willing to work extra hard and do whatever it takes to be successful. Some are hungry for prestige, riches, honor, fame or political office. These are not the things for which we should

hunger (Col. 3:2). He wants us to be hungry for righteousness (1 Pet. 2:2; Heb. 5:12-14). In so doing, He makes a promise to “fill” us. The word means to be “satisfied with food” and was originally used of feeding animals with hay. What is a better picture of contentment than a cow having eaten to the full and then standing in the shade chewing its cud?

**Spring 4: Contentment comes through trust in God’s presence.** Only God has the ability to provide lasting satisfaction (Psa. 107:8-9). He promises to give that which truly satisfies – “the sure mercies of David” (i.e., the blessings promised through the coming Messiah) (Isa. 55:1-3). David came to see himself as a sheep in God’s pasture, and there he found deep contentment. He wrote, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures” (Psa. 23:2).

The Spirit ties contentment to trusting in God’s presence and protection. The book of Hebrews says, “Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (13:5-6). Like any good father, God wants His children to enjoy life (Ecc. 3:12-13).

Solomon made a search for life’s meaning. Among other things, he observed that the ability to enjoy the fruits of one’s labor is a gift from God (Ecc. 2:24-26; cf. Matt. 5:18-20). On the other hand, many are allowed to “gather” and “collect,” who do not enjoy the fruits of their labor (Ecc. 2:26; 6:1-2).

What was it that Paul had in mind when he made the famous statement, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13)? He was facing the challenge of contentment (4:11-12). For someone as ambitious as Paul, it doubtless was difficult for him to cool his heels in prison without frustration bubbling over. The

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phrase, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” is actually one word in the original Greek and Paul wrote it twice. That means that it is something that Paul wanted his readers to really notice. He is saying, “I can do all things, I really can!”

**Spring 5: Contentment comes through trust in God’s promises.** Paul’s contentment sprang from his confidence in “even as.” He told a pagan ship crew, “Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be **even as** it was told me” (Acts 27:25, emp. added). He told the young preacher, “For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12).

The knowledge that God always keeps His promises will grant us peace in the midst of any difficulty.

- When we are persecuted, we can trust this promise: “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).
- When are tired and burdened, we can trust the promise: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).
- When our life is in chaos, we can trust the promise of “peace that passeth understanding” (Phil. 4:7).
- When we are tempted, we can trust the promise: “For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

- When we are facing sickness, disease, injury and aging, we can trust Him to “change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:21).
- When we fear that we may be lost, we can pillow our heads upon this wonderful truth: “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

**Spring 6: Contentment comes through trust in God’s providence.** How can a man who believes “that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28) not be content? Paul’s trust in God’s providence was a key to his contentment: “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:18). Isaiah said it long ago: “Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusts in thee” (Isa. 26:3).

Imagine being on a beach, and God asking you to make an elaborate sandcastle on the beach. Imagine that this sandcastle is your life: your job, your accomplishments, your achievements, your bank account, your home. So you build it. As you finally finish, you stand back to look at your beautiful sand castle, the life you’ve built for yourself. But just as you do, the waves begin to touch the base of the castle. Soon the waves are destroying your castle, as you see all you’ve worked for, all you’ve poured your life into, turn back into sand. You cry out, “Stop. It’s my castle,” and you try to stop the waves, but the ocean is far too powerful. But then you

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remember that you only built the castle because God asked you to. Which is more important? The castle you've built or God, whom you were trying to please by building the castle? That's the question we need to ask ourselves every day.

**Spring 7: Contentment comes through a relationship with Christ.** Jesus is the "water of life" (John 7:37), who offers an overflowing life to His followers (John 10:10). He promises to "give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely" (Rev. 21:6). When He encountered a Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar, He promised, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:10-14).

Two centuries after our nation was founded, we still enjoy the freedom that the Declaration of Independence created for us: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Better than that—and before that—God granted us the same three blessings. He wants to give us:

- *Life.* Jesus said, "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). The thief is the devil. He wants to steal your life with drugs, alcohol, pornography, pain, stress, worry, heartache, headaches, anger and depression. If we want a better life, our lives must be in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the LIFE!" (John 14:6, emp. added).
- *Liberty.* We live in a free enterprise system, a free market; we give free will offerings. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath

made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1).

- *The Pursuit of Happiness.* Peter wrote, "For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it" (1 Pet. 3:10-11). Look again at what the Bible says about happiness:
  - a. Psalm 144:15—"Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the Lord."
  - b. Proverbs 14:21—"He that despiseth his neighbour sinneth: but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he."
  - c. Proverbs 16:20—"He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the Lord, happy is he."
  - d. James 5:11—"Behold, we count them happy which endure."
  - e. 1 Peter 3:14—"But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye."

It is obvious: to pursue happiness is to pursue God!

Contentment is not merely a Bible suggestion. It is a divine command. Scripture says, "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5; cf. 1 Tim. 6:6-9). "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful" (Col. 3:15). Paul implemented this precept in his own life. He wrote, "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know

both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Phil. 4:11-12).

## **PART 2: THE REBOOT METAPHOR REBOOT YOUR CRANIUM**

When your computer begins acting strangely and you contact your IT guy (or your friend who knows about computers), he will always begin with the same question, "Did you reboot yet?"

Rebooting closes and reloads all the programs and goes back to default settings. Most of the time that is enough to get the computer back on track and us back to work.

The world's first computer didn't come from the Germans or the Japanese. Al Gore didn't invent it. It came from God. The most complicated computer in the world is still the one between your ears. And there are times when it needs to be "rebooted." The files can become corrupted by selfish thinking, doubtful questions, envious attitudes, lustful desires and sour dispositions (cf. Luke 12:29; Eph. 2:3; Col. 2:18; Tit. 1:15). God wants us to love him "with all the mind" (Luke 10:27).

When Paul wrote, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:23), he could have said, "Reboot your cranium." When the Bible commands, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5), it is telling us to install some new software (cf. 1 Pet. 4:1). Similar "reboot" commands are found throughout the New Testament:

- "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).

- “And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:10).
- Peter said we should “gird up the loins of your mind” (1 Pet. 1:13).

God is in the refinishing business (Psa. 51:10), as well as performing heart transplants (Ezek. 36:26). He also does mind refurbishing. Since “the carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7), it needs to be replaced with a “sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7; cf. 1 Cor. 2:16). When Jesus met “Legion,” he was in a horrible state of mind; when He left Him, he was “in his right mind” (Luke 8:35). He wants to do the same for us (except in a less dramatic way).

One day a Quaker leaned on his fence watching his new neighbor move in next door. The men on the moving van carried in appliances, all sorts of electronic gadgets and plush furnishings. As the door of the moving van closed, the man called across the fence to his new neighbor. “If you find that you’re lacking anything, neighbor, let me know, and I’ll show you how to live without it” (Moss).

“Living without it” is not something that most Americans are good at. “Whoso would be a man,” wrote nineteenth-century essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, “must be a nonconformist.” If you are a contented person, it will be in spite of the culture, and not because of it. It will mean that the advertisers have been unsuccessful, the Joneses have not enticed you to keep up with them and you have not bought into our culture’s three big lies: You can have it all; you can do it all; you deserve it all (Farrar).

Paul said contentment is something to be “learned” (Phil. 4:11). Contentment doesn’t come naturally to most of us. How then does one develop contentment? He simply must “reboot his cranium.” He must change his mind.



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Contentment is a mental exercise. It is an attitude. Wendell Winkler observed, "You will never find a discontented person who thinks otherwise than primarily on things materialistic. To overcome discontent he must change his thinking from the earthly to the heavenly, from the temporal to the eternal" (41).

What does renewing the mind include?

### **Reboot #1: Always act better than you feel.**

Contented individuals let their minds guide their behavior instead of their emotions. Sometimes we have to do something because it is right, not because we feel like it. G.D. Morgan said, "It is easier to act your way into a better way of feeling than to feel your way into a better way of acting." Someone said, "If you go through the motion, you will feel the emotion." One motto Alcoholics Anonymous uses with success is: "Fake it until you can make it!"

Isn't this hypocritical? No, there is a difference between hypocrisy and acting responsibly. When a crying baby awakens a mother in the middle of the night, does she say, "I'd be a hypocrite to get up and do something I do not want to do"? Instead, she gets up, talks sweetly to the child, changes the diaper, and rocks it back to sleep. Sometimes we step up and do the right thing because it is the right thing to do!

Jesus did not "feel" like going to the cross. He prayed that He might not have to (Matt. 26:42). When that was not possible, He "endured" it (Heb. 12:2). Paul did not "feel" like staying and preaching in Corinth. He was afraid, but he stayed because he knew it was the right thing to do (Acts 18:8-9). It is a matter of perspective. We can act better than we feel if we recognize that each day alive is a blessing.

The German mystic Johannes Tauler one day met a beggar. "God give you a good day, my friend," he said.

The beggar answered, "I thank God I never had a bad one."

Amazed, Tauler responded, "What do you mean?"

"Well," said the beggar, "when it is fine, I thank God; when it rains, I thank God; when I have plenty, I thank God; when I am hungry, I thank God; and since God's will is my will, and whatever pleases Him pleases me, why should I say I am unhappy when I am not?"

Tauler looked at the man, astonished. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am a king," said the beggar.

"Where then is your kingdom?" asked Tauler.

The beggar answered, "In my heart."

If we let our feelings determine our outlook, attitude and actions, how many of our 27,375 (assuming a lifetime of 75 years) days on earth will we be content with our circumstances?

- The last twenty years (55-75) are usually spent with daily aches, pains and declining strength. The outward man is "perishing" even as the inward man is gaining strength (2 Cor. 4:16). Solomon called these the "evil days" (Ecc. 12:1) and then described the aging body in memorable terms (12:3-6).
- The middle thirty years (25-55) are filled the stresses of marriage, family, career, financial debt and the daily grind of making a living. Jesus had these in mind when He talked of the "cares of this life" that can choke the Word out of our hearts (Mark 4:19; cf. Luke 21:34).
- The early years (birth to college graduation) have the sinful temptations of youth with which to

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contend (2 Tim. 2:22). Everything is so dramatic, “life and death,” and “peak and valley” during this time that contentment would not come from feelings.

If we wait until we “feel” our best to act our best, then we will have few days of contentment on Planet Earth. Instead, we should always try to act better than we feel.

Consider implementing three suggestions that will help you to act better than you feel.

### **First, smile more.**

The Bible often refers to the countenance (facial expression) as a mirror of the heart (Gen. 4:6; 1 Sam. 1:18; Neh. 2:2). David said that God was the “health of his countenance” (Psa. 42:11). There is an interesting contrast between Proverbs 13:15 and Proverbs 15:13. The first says, “The way of transgressors is hard.” The second says: “A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance.” God’s way leads to easy smiles; the devil’s way leads to hard miles. Someone wrote of “The Power of a Smile”:

She smiled at the sorrowful stranger.  
The smiling seemed to make him feel better.  
He remembered past kindnesses of a friend  
And wrote him a thank you letter.

The friend was so pleased with the thank you  
That he left a large tip with his bill.  
The waitress, touched by the size of the tip,  
On the way home stopped to kneel and gave it to a man  
on the street.

The man on the street was grateful;  
For two days he’d had nothing to eat.

After he finished his dinner,  
He left for his small dingy room.

He didn't know at that moment  
That he might be facing his doom.

On the way he picked up a shivering puppy  
And took him home to get warm.  
The puppy was very grateful  
To be in out of the storm.

That night the house caught on fire.  
The puppy barked the alarm.  
He barked till he woke the whole household  
And saved everybody from harm.

One of the boys that he rescued  
Grew up to be President.  
All this because of a simple smile  
That hadn't cost a cent.

**Second, compliment more.**

The wise man often noted the power of words for good (Prov. 12:25; 15:23; 16:24; 25:11; 27:9). Isaiah said that God had given him "the tongue of the learned," that he should know how to "speak a word in season to him that is weary" (Isa. 50:4). He gave you and me a tongue for the same purpose. An angel talked with Zechariah "with good words and comfortable words" (Zech. 1:13), but we do not need the tongues of angels to speak such words to those around us. Paul explained that a man who had repented needed someone to "comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" (2 Cor. 2:7).

Jesus complimented five people in His earthly sojourn:

- Nathaniel (John 1:47),
- Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-10) ,
- John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11),
- A poor widow (Mark 12:41-44),

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- The woman who anointed His feet (John 12:1-8).

Thus, Jesus complimented honesty, faith, fearless preaching, liberality and doing good works.

### **Third, make more positive statements.**

Jesus made a number of memorable positive statements (Mark 9:23; 10:27; John 10:28-30), as did His apostles (Phil. 4:13; 2 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:31; 1 John 4:4). We should follow their example. Consider a few ways we might do this:

#### **At Home**

1. Express appreciation for a quality your spouse has; suggest no improvement.
2. Compliment each child about something (without an admonition).

#### **At Work**

1. Encourage your boss by thanking him for handling something well.
2. Express appreciation to those under you...recognize progress apart from ideal goals.

#### **Among Church Services**

1. Pray for those who request prayer, and then mention to them that you are praying for their needs.
2. Listen to them when they share (summarize).
3. When someone does something well, let them know you noticed.

### **Reboot #2: Refuse to compare yourself with others.**

When the Pharisee compared himself to the Publican, it did not turn out well (Luke 18:11). Comparing ourselves with others—siblings, coworkers, neighbors, fellow Christians, fictional TV characters—often breeds

discontent. Paul wrote, "For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12).

Many are content with their house, vehicle, clothes, boat, golf clubs or property until they see someone with a better one than theirs. Some people can't go window shopping without returning home miserable. The same Bible that warns against "the lust of the flesh" (immorality), also warns against "the lust of the eyes" (materialism). Both are contrary to the Father's will (1 John 2:15-17).

We have to learn to be happy on our own side of the fence. We are to "do our own business" (1 Thess. 4:11) and "bear our own burden" (Gal. 6:5). Both Peter and Paul warned against being "busybodies in other men's matters" (1 Pet. 4:15; 2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13). The word "busybody" literally means "an inspector of another; meddling with other people's concerns" (*Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*). Even Jesus did not think He should be involved in people's personal affairs (Luke 12:13-14).

Albert Barnes says Peter's word (which he seems to have coined) means "one who busies himself with what does not concern him." Comparing our possessions, professions, positions, promotions and pay with others would be "busying ourselves in things that do not concern us." If God has seen fit to give another servant, or even an enemy, something different than us, who are we to complain (cf. Matt. 20:1-13)? "Why dost thou judge thy brother?" (Rom. 14:10). We are only here for a "vapor" existence anyway (Jas. 4:14), so why work up a sweat about anything in a world we'll be leaving shortly?

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The grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence, but why worry about shades of green? Looking down at the grass may cause us to fail to look up to see the blessings we already have. Glenn Parker is a former NFL offensive lineman who played for the Buffalo Bills, the Kansas City Chiefs and the New York Giants. He is now a television NFL analyst. Parker lived on his side of the fence. He was once asked why lineman always seemed to be cheerful. He responded, "There are not a lot of well-paying jobs for 300-pounders. We found one, and we're happy about it."

An ancient Persian legend tells of Al Haffed, a wealthy man who owned a large farm. One evening a visitor related to him tales of diamonds that could be found in other parts of the world. The vision of all this wealth made him feel poor by comparison. So, he sold his prosperous farm and set out to find treasure. The search proved fruitless. Finally, penniless and in despair, he committed suicide by jumping into the sea. Meanwhile, the man who had purchased his farm noticed one day the glint of an unusual stone in a shallow stream on the property. To his amazement he pulled out a huge diamond. Later when working in his garden, he uncovered more valuable gems. Poor Al Haffed had spent his life traveling to distant lands seeking jewels that were on the farm he had left behind.

Don't overlook what you have! Contrast what you are with what you might have been, but for the grace of God. One man became dissatisfied with his house so he listed it with a real estate agent in hopes of selling it and purchasing another one. Several weeks later, as he was reading the classified ads in the newspaper, he saw the description of a house that sounded ideal. He immediately called the Realtor and said, "I found a house in today's

paper that I'm interested in, and I would like to see it as soon as possible." The agent asked several questions about it, and then said, "That's *your* house you're describing."

Someone put it well: "The poor man would give his soul if only he had the rich man's gold. The rich man would give all his wealth if only he had the poor man's health." A classic Reader's Digest quotable goes: "If you worry about missing the boat, remember the Titanic."

There is a tendency with many people to reflect more on the things we don't have than to appreciate the things we do have. One of the surest ways to make ourselves miserable is to compare ourselves with the wrong people. You can always find someone who:

- has a better income than you do,
- has a bigger house in a nicer sub-division,
- gets better grades or more promotions,
- is better looking, taller or thinner.

When making comparisons, why do we always pick someone who has more and not someone who has less? We say, "Why can't we be like the Smiths, who have two Lexus's and a half-million dollar mansion?" instead of saying, "Why aren't we like the Johnsons, who have medical bills and just lost their house and car to bankruptcy?"

Tom Tune, missionary in Hong Kong, gave this picture: "Over 500,000 people live in squatter huts in Hong Kong. More than 150,000 live in bed spaces. In the day they are rented by night workers and at night by day workers. More than 60,000 live on roof tops and about 50,000 in shops, garages, corridors and staircases. Nearly 70,000 live in verandahs and cocklofts; 12,000 in basements; 10,000 in stalls and caves; and about 30,000 people in boats and hulks. There are as many as 3,000 living on one acre of land, and in one six acre tract there



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are over 100,000. More than 20,000 people in Hong Kong have no housing of any kind. They sleep in the street. Each night they wander around waiting until about nine o'clock when the shops close so they can put their 'beds' outside the doors" (Winkler 41).

### **Reboot #3: Accept more people as they are and not like we would like for them to be.**

Tolerance and patience are hard things for many to muster. We stand up for our rights and demand to be heard. We pull strings and push viewpoints. We want to have it our way. Diotrephes was like this, and he forever ruined his name (3 John 9). Moses found it challenging to have patience with those God gave him to lead. His frustration bubbled over one day, and he said,

Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers? Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they weep unto me, saying, Give us flesh, that we may eat. I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. (Num. 11:12-14)

The Christians in Rome ran low on tolerance, too. Paul spent two chapters discussing it (Rom. 14-15). The upshot is: "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Rom. 15:10). He said we are to "receive" (*proslambano*: "To take to oneself; admit to friendship or hospitality") each other in matters of opinion (Rom. 14:1).

What does this mean? The verb described the gracious hospitality of the Melita (Malta) natives, who kindled a fire and "received" a shipwrecked group (Acts

28:2). When Paul was afraid the Philippians would reject Epaphroditus, he urged them to “receive” him as a coworker (Phil. 2:29). John criticized Diotrephes for not “receiving” those John sent to the church (3 John 9-10).

A part of the Spirit’s fruit is longsuffering (Gal. 5:22; cf. Col. 3:12). Longsuffering is “a long-protracted restraint of the soul from yielding to passion, especially the passion of anger.” It is opposed to haste, to passionate expressions and thoughts, and to irritability. It denotes the state of mind which can bear long when provoked (Barnes). A loving person “beareth all things...endureth all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). Although the Arabs seem not to practice it, an Arab proverb says, “We owe the world a debt of tolerance.” Barclay said, “Our rights are far less important than our obligations.”

**Reboot #4: Adjust to circumstances when circumstances cannot be adjusted.**

There are some things that we cannot change, so we should just accept them. Abraham Lincoln was surprised one day when a rough-looking man drew a revolver and thrust it in his face. “What seems to be the matter?” asked Lincoln, with all the calmness and self-confidence he could muster.

“Well,” replied the stranger, who did not appear at all excited, “Some years ago I swore an oath that if I ever came across an uglier man than myself I’d shoot him on the spot.”

A feeling of relief came over Lincoln. “Shoot me,” Lincoln said to the stranger, “for if I am an uglier man than you, I don’t want to live.”

If circumstances need to be changed, then God will change them. If they do not change after much prayer, then God will give us the strength to bear with them. Jesus

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exemplified this attitude when He was facing Golgotha in Gethsemane. He asked that the cup be removed, but then added, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). God did not remove the cup, but He did give Jesus the strength to drink it.

We have the power to change self to fit circumstances, if we cannot change circumstances to fit self. Jesus explained that His followers would be blessed by persecution (Matt. 5:10-12). In fact, they were to "rejoice and be exceeding glad" when they were reviled, persecuted and slandered. Paul was able to manifest this "very glad" attitude in "serving himself" for ungrateful and unloving people (2 Cor. 12:15).

When Paul prayed three times about his thorn in the flesh, the Lord chose not to change the circumstance. The Lord did not adjust Paul's thorn in the flesh; He adjusted Paul (2 Cor. 12:7-8). Paul came to see he could enjoy what he had instead of worrying over what he did not have: "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" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Dear Abby once received this letter:

Dear Abby,

Happiness is knowing that your parents won't almost kill you if you come home a little late.  
Happiness is having your own bedroom.  
Happiness is having parents that trust you.  
Happiness is getting the telephone call you've been praying for. Happiness is getting good grades and having your parents who don't fight.  
Happiness is knowing that you're as well dressed as anybody. Happiness is something I don't have.    – *15 and Unhappy*

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A few days later Dear Abby published this response:

Dear Abby,  
Happiness is being able to walk. Happiness is  
being able to talk. Happiness is being able to see.  
Happiness is being able to hear. Unhappiness is  
reading a letter from a 15 year old girl who can  
do all these things and still says she isn't happy.  
I can talk, I can see, I can hear, but I can't walk.  
– *Thirteen and Happy*

If we don't get what we want, then we should want what  
we get; if we cannot do what we like, then we should learn  
to like what we do. We enjoy what we have instead of  
fretting over what you don't have! Adversity can be  
turned into joy.

I wish I had a telescope to scan the starry skies;  
But since I have no telescope,  
I'm glad I have two eyes.

I wish I had a kitchen run by push-buttons commands,  
But while that kitchen's still a dream,  
I'm glad I have two hands.

I wish I had a super-car to give my friends a treat;  
But 'til that new car comes along,  
I'm glad I have two feet.

Two eyes to look to God above –  
Two hands to clasp in prayer –  
Two feet to carry me to church –  
Why, I'm a millionaire!

**Reboot #5: Remember that life is about the  
journey, not just the destination.**

Life is not only about destination. It is also about  
journey. God doesn't just want us to be happy in heaven;  
He wants us to be happy on earth (John 10:10). Christianity

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does have a delayed gratification aspect to it, but it also has a get-to-eat-our-cake now facet as well. Jesus said,

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened . . . how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? (Matt. 7:7-8, 11)

If we are not careful, in spite of such an offer, we will wish our lives away, always thinking that tomorrow will be the day we will finally arrive at some circumstance that will provide us satisfaction.

- The six-year-old thinks that a new racer bicycle will make his life complete.
- The fifth grader must have the latest DS game.
- The junior high girl needs designer jeans like certain other girls to be happy.
- The high school boy can't even imagine contentment without his own car.
- The college girl is unhappy until she meets a romantic guy who will sweep her off her feet, give her a diamond ring, a big wedding, a house and a beautiful baby.
- The young man thinks he will be satisfied only when he lands a high paying job.
- Young marrieds can't start living until they have a nice house in a beautiful neighborhood.
- Parents think that once they can get their children reared and through college, they can begin enjoying life without the pressures.
- The older person thinks once he gets his health back, or she gets relief from arthritis, there will be happy contentment.

We thus just wish our lives away. Someone wrote, "The tragedy of life is not that it ends so soon, but that we wait so long to begin it."

First I was dying to finish high school and start college.

And then I was dying to finish college and start working.

And then I was dying to marry and have children.

And then I was dying for my children to grow old enough for school so I could return to work.

And then I was dying to retire.

And now, I am dying...

And suddenly I realize I forgot to live.

### **Reboot #6: Always remember what day it is.**

The only day that needs to concern us is the date on today's calendar. Philippians 3:13 teaches us to forget the things of the past. Matthew 6:34 teaches that each day has enough trouble of its own, so don't live in the future. As someone once said, "Yesterday is a canceled check, tomorrow is a promissory note, only today is cash."

When we drive at night, the headlights do not shine all the way to our destinations. They shine just a few feet in front of the car, but as we move forward, they always keep ahead of us. God likewise gives us enough light to walk in today and does not want us to worry about the darkness beyond. When we get to tomorrow, He will give us new opportunities and blessings. "Come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isa. 2:5).

God wants us to live one day at a time. He says, "Enjoy today, and I'll have something different and better for you tomorrow." God has always taken care of us (Psa. 42:6; cf. Deut. 3:9), and He always will. This gracious knowledge makes us rest easy at night (Psa. 127:2). One

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who feeds his heart on the record of what God has done will never worry about what God will do.

Some practical suggestions on ways to have a better life:

- When you hear a kind word spoken about a friend, tell him so (Prov. 3:27; Gal. 6:10).
- Spoil your spouse, not your children (2 Sam. 12:3; Prov. 5:18-19; Eph. 5:25; 1 Pet. 3:7).
- Remember, it's not your job to get people to like you. It's your job to like people (John 13:35; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:17).
- To help your children turn out well, spend twice as much time with them and half as much money (Gen. 44:30; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 5:16; 6:4; Col. 4:5) (H. Jackson Browne).
- Focus on others, and not on self (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 2:3-5). Someone wrote, "How to Be Miserable." It reads:

Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use "I" as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinions of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others.

**Reboot #7: We should recognize that things could be worse.**

A Russian woman lived in a very small hut with her husband and two children. When her husband's parents lost their home, they moved in with them. In desperation, she went to the village wise man whom she knew had solved many, many problems.

"The situation is unbearable. What should I do?" she begged.

"Do you have a cow?" asked the wise man.

"Yes," she replied.

"Then bring her into the hut too. And come back and see me in a week," said the wise man.

A week later she was back. "This is utterly unbearable," she said.

"Do you have any chickens?" asked wise man.

"Yes," she replied. "What about them?"

"Bring them into the hut, and come back and see me in another week."

"You are out of your mind," she said. Nevertheless, still awed by his reputation, she did as he asked. A week later she returned.

"This is absolutely impossible," she said. "Our home is a mess."

"All right," said the wise man, "take out the chickens."

The next week she reported that without the chickens it was definitely better, but still a miserable situation. "All right," said the wise man, "Now take out the cow and that will settle your problem."

And it did. Without the chickens and cow, the woman, her husband, the children, and his two parents got along peacefully. Everything is relative! Sometimes we



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don't know how well off we really are, until things get much worse.

Everybody has bad days. One hard-hat employee had a really bad day. Here is what he wrote on a company accident form:

When I got to the building I found that the hurricane had knocked off some bricks around the top. So I rigged up a beam with a pulley at the top of the building and hoisted up a couple barrels full of bricks. When I had fixed the damaged area, there were a lot of bricks left over. Then I went to the bottom and began releasing the line. Unfortunately, the barrel of bricks was much heavier than I was—and before I knew what was happening the barrel started coming down, jerking me up.

I decided to hang on since I was too far off the ground by then to jump, and halfway up I met the barrel of bricks coming down fast. I received a hard blow on my shoulder. I then continued to the top, banging my head against the beam and getting my fingers pinched and jammed in the pulley. When the barrel hit the ground, it burst its bottom, allowing the bricks to spill out.

I was now heavier than the barrel. So I started down again at high speed. Halfway down I met the barrel coming up fast and received severe injuries to my shins. When I hit the ground, I landed on the pile of spilled bricks, getting several painful cuts and deep bruises. At this point I must have lost my presence of mind, because I let go of my grip on the line. The barrel came down fast—

giving me another blow on my head and putting me in the hospital. I respectfully request sick leave. (Swindoll 194-195)

Had any days like that? Sometimes worse things than this come toward us. How will our faith hold up if we hear words like:

- I'm sorry but you have a malignancy.
- Honey, I had a wreck.
- I'm sorry, sir, your air conditioner will have to be replaced (\$4,000).
- Our house has been burglarized.
- Your child has a broken arm.
- Your father has passed away.
- Insufficient funds – \$40 fee.
- Divorce granted.
- The house is on fire.
- We are down-sizing and your position is no longer needed.

Job faced such a day. He lost his house, possessions, children, wealth, everything. How did he react? "In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly" (Job 1:22). Remember, God never promised Disneyland, but He did promise Canaan's land (John 14:1). Stay faithful.

## CONCLUSION

In Florence, Italy, a young artist labored long and hard over a marble statue of an angel. When finished, he asked Michelangelo to examine it. No master looked over the work more carefully than Michelangelo. It appeared perfect in every way. The young artist waited. His heart nearly broke when he heard, "It lacks only one thing." But the great artist didn't tell him what it lacked.

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For days the artist could not eat or sleep, until a friend called on Michelangelo at his studio and asked him what he thought. He said, "It lacks only life."

Don't let your Christianity be like that—a form that lacks life. Reboot your cranium!

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Allen Webster preaches for the Jacksonville church of Christ in Jacksonville, Alabama. He is also the editor of *House to House/Heart to Heart* and author of numerous tracts and articles.