

THE POWER
of
CHRISTIAN
CONTENTMENT

FINDING DEEPER, RICHER
CHRIST-CENTERED JOY

ANDREW M. DAVIS



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PART I

THE SECRET
of CONTENTMENT

one

A RARE JEWEL IN A DISCONTENTED WORLD

The stone had been formed in the depths of the earth centuries before it was found, transformed from worthless carbon by unimaginable temperatures and pressures. It had been driven to the surface of the earth by tectonic forces and had made its way down various tributary streams until it came to rest at the edge of the Abaetezinho River in Brazil. No one could know how long it was there, unrecognizable, covered with mud and sand. It looked like any ordinary stone, but it was precious beyond words. In 1990, a Brazilian farmer needed some water for his fields and stooped down to get it. The stone somehow caught his eye, and he scooped it up, dripping and dirty. There's no way the farmer could have known that he had just discovered the largest red diamond in history—13.9 carats in its rough form. All diamonds are rare, but red diamonds are the rarest of them all. That red diamond would eventually be cut into a triangular shape

weighing 5.11 carats. It is now known as the Moussaieff Red Diamond, after the collector who purchased it in 2001. Its sale price was undisclosed, but estimates put its value as high as \$8 million.¹

This amazing red diamond is exceedingly precious. An immeasurably more precious jewel to the Christian is *contentment*. In 1642, the Puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs preached a series of sermons on Christian contentment that were gathered and published in 1648, two years after his death. The title the editors chose was *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. It carries the reader through a powerful unfolding of this vital topic, beginning with the apostle Paul's assertion in Philippians 4:12, "In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content" (CSB). Unfortunately, many Christians in the twenty-first century have never delved into the topic of contentment. Like the muddy rock scooped up from the bank of a Brazilian river, its true worth has been hidden from many eyes for centuries. I desire that more and more Christians would experience the kind of Christian contentment that Paul discovered and Burroughs so skillfully described. Its worth in eternity will prove far greater than that of the red diamond.

Why do I say that? Consider this hypothetical scenario: Imagine you just won the most extraordinary sweepstakes prize ever, but it came through supernatural means. Let's call it the "Faustian Travel Agency," owned and operated by a Mr. Mephistopheles.² The prize is a two-week all-expense-paid trip anywhere in the world. You will stay at the most expensive five-star hotels, eat the highest-quality food, cooked by the best chefs in the world. You will see the most spectacular scenery, drive the most expensive cars, and wear a whole new

wardrobe specifically tailored for you. The trip will have the best of everything and will cater to your every whim.

But here's the catch: you would have to agree to be continually discontent at every moment of the trip. Would you do it? Two weeks of constant discontentment in the most luxurious setting possible? For many people, I think the answer might be pretty clear: "No way! Why would I want to be miserable for two straight weeks?" Actually, we see many of the world's most elite people essentially living out this kind of tragedy in real life—famous athletes and movie stars, living in spectacular mansions on their own private estates on rocky coastlines, with architectural plans that maximize the view of the sunrise or sunset over the ocean, yet tragically discontent, going from divorce to divorce, addicted to drugs, bored, even suicidal.

Conversely, suppose a different offer were made to you, this one by your heavenly Father. He is offering a painful trial of suffering. You will be publicly beaten, imprisoned in a gloomy dungeon with your feet in stocks. You will be deprived of food, water, medical care, and even light. Surrounding you will be other suffering prisoners, the stench of human bodily fluids, and the kind of despair that comes when the end of your agony isn't in sight. *But* you will also be filled with such a supernatural contentment through the presence of God that you will later remember it as one of the sweetest times of your life. And you will have the privilege of leading a whole family to Christ (see Acts 16:16–34).

Which offer would you take? If you are a Christian, it is possible you would choose the second experience, despite its high cost. And if so, you probably already agree that contentment is the greatest state of inner well-being one could ever

have in this world. The value of contentment is vastly greater than any that the red diamond could bring. Yet despite the value of this rich, full, continual contentment, and despite the fact that it is possible for every Christian in the world to experience it, this exquisite jewel is rare in our lives. And how desperately the unsaved world needs Christians to discover it.

In this tragic world, we are surrounded by discontented people. Every minute of the day, it is possible to see evidence of this restless discontentment in the way people respond to circumstances. People show their discontent while driving, because the traffic is too slow. Or perhaps the weather is too hot, too rainy, or too humid. Or in their jobs people aren't making enough money or receiving enough credit for the hard work they are putting in. Or they can't stand their coworkers. People feel deeply disappointed with their marriage or with how their children are turning out. Their bodies are too fat or not beautiful enough. Mired in their discontent, people often buy things they don't really need to improve their outlook on life. People try to find their way into happiness by seeking healing from counselors for their dysfunctional childhoods. Discontent with the love they haven't found shows up in lustfully roving eyes at office parties. Their outlooks darken as they take the commuter rail to another day at the same jobs that have imprisoned them for years.

The restless discontent of the world of non-Christians will not surprise many believers who have sought to win them to Christ. We realize Scripture reveals the true spiritual condition of the lost: they are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12 CSB). They are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). Their enslavement to invisible powers of darkness (Eph. 2:1-3)

means that they share with Satan and the demons the same restlessness that causes them to roam the earth, constantly seeking some kind of rest but finding none (Job 1:7; Matt. 12:43). The spiritual condition of the lost and their bondage to sin guarantees that they can never find true rest and peace, which are essential to genuine contentment. Isaiah put it plainly: “‘The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked’” (57:20–21).

This churning discontentment of unbelievers explains a lot of the terrible events that happen on planet Earth. Powerful rulers, discontent with the size of their domains, move out in greedy conquest, leaving a bloody trail of death and destruction across the pages of history. Every crime that rips apart the fabric of society comes from discontent people who are addicted to drugs, alcohol, money, power, or sensual pleasure and are willing to destroy other people’s lives to get what their restless souls are demanding. Every marriage that ends in divorce begins that tragic journey in a heart of discontent. Though we cannot say that every misery in this world begins with human discontent, we may safely say that all the suffering of the world is exponentially intensified by the failure to find genuine contentment in the midst of any and every circumstance.

As Christians, we should be surprised by none of this diagnosis of the unbelieving world. But the great tragedy is that so often we don’t really seem to live much differently. Many Christians hardly ever experience the daily foretaste of heaven that the Holy Spirit lives within us to provide (Eph. 1:13). Many display high levels of discontentment in all the same circumstances that I just listed, and in countless others.

Many of us Christians are restless, searching for something of value in our lives and not finding it. Many are spiritually immature, unable to handle even the smallest afflictions and inconveniences without verbalizing our complaints to whomever will listen. Many Christians live such discontent lives that they are never asked by any of the similarly discontent unbelievers surrounding them to give a reason for the hope that they have (1 Pet. 3:15), because they don't evidently have any hope.

What makes this all the more amazing is that, for over two and a half centuries, developments in science, industry, the economy, and medicine have steadily and systematically reduced the physical miseries common to every preceding generation of humanity. The Industrial Revolution brought astonishing technological progress to the world, resulting in labor-saving devices, new sources of power, amazing advances in transportation, indoor plumbing, and houses wired for electricity. Heating and air-conditioning regulate the temperature that surrounds us at nearly every moment. Refrigerators enable us to keep perishable items fresher longer, and delivery systems from the farmland to our homes ensure that a constant stream of delicious and affordable foods will keep our families eating like royalty. Medical researchers never stop searching for remedies to ailments and diseases that make life so miserable. And we have a clear expectation that someone somewhere is applying technological genius to remove every painful affliction from daily life. We say, "If we can put a man on the moon, surely we can cure the common cold!" The digital revolution has been a miracle of modern science, and our amazing little smartphones bring the entire world to our hands instantaneously.

Yet despite all of these advancements, we are more discontent than ever. Gregg Easterbrook wrote a book on this very topic entitled *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*.³ In First World countries, he argues, even as the advances I have just cataloged have materially improved the physical comfort level of everyone in those societies, the rates of depression and psychosis continue to rise. People feel their lives lack meaning, and they can't seem to find any remedy to the plague of their own consistent discontentment.

A clear example is transportation across long distances. It has never been easier, and yet still we complain! I remember sitting recently in a brand-new airport terminal reading a historical account of the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower* crossing the North Atlantic in perilous conditions in November of 1620. These intrepid people lived for many weeks in the dark and crowded below-deck area, eating cold biscuits and putting up with the stench of the vomit caused by the incessantly heaving little ship. A woman even gave birth in that setting. As I was reading this book, I overheard a well-dressed businessman as he was walking by me, talking with immense annoyance on a cell phone: "Yeah, it was a total nightmare! We were sitting on the tarmac for over an hour before we finally took off! Now I'm probably going to miss my connecting flight!" His voice trailed off as he hustled past me, and I chuckled to myself about his perspective. He was certainly not thinking how blessed we are to be able to cover thousands of miles by air in the astonishing comfort of a modern jet. We don't have to board a tiny wooden sailing vessel and cross a terrifying ocean. Neither do we have to load up a Conestoga wagon with weeks of provisions and cross churning rivers without bridges in a perilous journey to the Oregon Territory.

Another factor in our present-day discontentment is that we are more aware of the general misery of the human race than ever before. Our smartphones link us to news apps that keep us up to date on major occurrences around the world, pouring a steady stream of human suffering into our consciousness. We are instantly aware of a devastating earthquake in the Indian Ocean and the subsequent tsunami that wipes out whole communities and kills thousands. Or we hear of yet another terrorist attack in London or Paris or Madrid resulting in the killing or maiming of dozens. Or we read about a virus for which there is no cure, originating in West Africa and threatening to spread by human carriers through air travel to metropolitan sites all over the world. We realize that this is a world of misery in which very few ever find lasting contentment.

It is in this pulsating, seething world of restless unhappiness that I desire to rediscover the rare jewel of Christian contentment—first from the Scriptures and then from Burroughs’s masterpiece—and make its ancient light shine radiantly for the twenty-first-century reader. It has the power to bring supernatural peace and eternal fruitfulness into any and every circumstance we will ever face in life and is therefore much more valuable than Moussaieff’s stunning red diamond. My thesis for this book is that Christian contentment is finding delight in God’s wise plan for my life and humbly allowing him to direct me in it. My goal is that we will more consistently display Christian contentment so that, in the end, God will be glorified in our daily lives, we will be more joyful, we will be sources of inspiration, and those watching us will seek the Savior, through whom alone they can have this same supernatural contentment.