

Published in the July/August 2003 issue of “Women of the Harvest” magazine
Revised by the author November 2005

CONTENTMENT

Is it as elusive as it seems?

by Taryn R. Hutchison

I warily stepped down from the train onto the stark platform in Belgrade. Scanning the sea of faces, I was glad to see two smiling ones I recognized. I’d come from Budapest, Hungary to encourage our missionary workers in Yugoslavia. As we scooted my bags out to the car, Liz and Penny eagerly went over all the planned activities during my short time with them.

“Tonight we’re having a meeting with all the women – the students in our movement and the staff. We’d like you to share your convictions on singleness,” they said.

I gulped. The timing was interesting. During my eight-hour train ride, I’d been struggling with that very topic. I’d realized long before that dealing with being single was not a once-for-all thing. There were seasons when I felt very content with my life; other times my neediness was acute.

At age 14, when I became a Christian, I gave Jesus my whole life and future. I was sincere. I said, “I’ll trust You no matter what. Even if You make me be a missionary in Africa or an old maid.” But, of course, I never thought He’d really do it. I wasn’t in Africa, but I’m sure God was smiling.

And then at age 21, I obediently broke up with a non-Christian boyfriend. *Surely God has someone better for me.* Later when I graduated from college and joined Campus Crusade staff, I said, “Whatever you want, Lord”, but secretly I was convinced I’d get married. The guys liked me and I was cute enough.

Again I yielded my singleness to Him when I turned 25. I just expected Him to give it back to me – not to keep it. I was glad to have fun now before I’d have to settle down and never have it again.

Age 30, another milestone and another surrender. *I’ll probably get married someday, and how great it is that I got to have a career first so I won’t feel I missed out on that when my time comes.*

Age 35, *There’s a good chance God still has someone for me.*

Age 38, *There's a chance*. I stopped saying “when” I get married and started using the word “if.” (I should've used that word all along.)

And then I turned 40. I still wanted a husband someday, but I had to start thinking of it as a slim possibility, and grieve the fact that I'd probably never have children. At each milestone, I meant it when I told God I was trusting Him. I just couldn't predict how I'd feel in the future.

That day on the train, my mind was flooded with memories of my very first trip to Yugoslavia. It was exactly 10 years before. I was living in Berkeley, California and went on a pioneering mission trip for the summer with 10 of my very favorite people. We were all single then, all ministering to college students around the Bay Area. I pleasantly recalled that summer that set the course of my life, thought of each of those friends and what they're doing now. It occurred to me, for the first time, that nine of the ten were now married. Guess who was the only one who wasn't?

What's wrong with me? Am I unable to love? Do I have too many walls up? Am I not loveable? Not desirable? Too ugly? Too intimidating? Not submissive enough? Was my boss right when he said I'll never get a husband until I learn to cook? Do I repel men? Each thought was like a sharp arrow piercing my heart.

God gently reminded me of what was true that day. And that's what I shared when I spoke to the Serbian women. He brought His Word to my raw heart, soothing each jab. His Word is truer than how I felt on that train, truer than the messages from society, the seeming condescension from Christian married couples.

God has something to say about contentment.

Colossians 2:10 came to my mind. “In Him, You have been made complete.” Period. He didn't say in Christ plus a spouse. *I'm complete now*, I reasoned. *Just as I am*.

He reminded me of His promise to provide all I need (Phil. 4:19). Since I wasn't married, I didn't need to be. It's that simple.

And then Matthew 6:8. He knows what I need before I even ask.

Psalm 84:11. He'll never withhold any good thing from me if I walk uprightly. I guess that up until that point in my life, a husband wouldn't have been the best thing for me.

My mind was racing now, searching for more promises in Scripture. When I ask God for a husband, He won't give me a snake instead. He gives good gifts. (Matt. 7:9-11). Singleness was a good gift for me. It wasn't punishment. It wasn't because there was something wrong with me!

His will for me is good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom. 12:2), for my future and hope and welfare (Jer. 29:11).

He tells me He’s my Good Shepherd and He takes good care of me. I will never want for anything. (Ps. 23:1).

Contentment does not come naturally, not to me anyway. I was not born with an innate sense of fulfillment and ability to accept whatever life throws my way. The apostle Paul tells us (in Phil. 4:11) that contentment must be *learned*.

He then goes on to say, in verse 12, that he’s learned the *secret* of being content, no matter what the circumstances. *Hmmmm*. The theme of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is joy, I mused. If I can get this down, I will probably learn the secret of the joyful Christian life.

I eagerly read on. In the very next verse, Paul wrote that God is the One who strengthens me to do all things. There’s no way I can muster up contented feelings on my own. I can experience joy and learn contentment only when I draw on His strength.

Contentment is really an issue of trust, I further pondered. Paul had learned to trust God, to have faith. My dear friend Ney Bailey (author of “Faith is Not a Feeling”) defines faith as simply taking God at His Word. It’s trusting God’s character, His faithfulness. Trusting that His plan for me is good and that He is able to carry out this good plan in my life. Discontentment, then, really means disbelief, a lack of faith.

Everyone struggles with feeling content.

Contentment is not just something elusive for singles. Everyone struggles with it. As women, we have become adept at comparing ourselves to other people and feeling like we come up short. Isn’t there always something we wish we had but don’t, or something we don’t want but we’re stuck with anyway? God may provide a husband, but then you want a more attentive one; you long for children. If He gives you children, you may want better-behaved ones, more grateful ones. You may want a better job, a bigger apartment.

Here’s a quick test to see if you may be less than completely content. Think about these two sentences: “If only I was _____, I’d be happy” or the flip side, “If only I wasn’t _____, I’d be happy.” If only I was thin like Amber, then I’d be happy. If only my boss treated me with respect, or if only I was a mother like all my other friends, then I know I’d be content.

Can you fill in the blank? If you can, then take your issue to the Lord. Say something like this to Him, “*Father, You know I want to be married (or whatever it is for you). I believe You’ve allowed and orchestrated all the circumstances that have come into my life, even this. I choose by faith to trust that You are in control and You have my best interests at heart. I will not let this steal the joy and peace You alone give.*”

There will never be an ideal situation.

We tend to think the grass is greener on the other side. But it never is. Every life, every season, every situation has problems of its own. It's never ideal. Erma Bombeck said the grass is only greener over the septic tank!

I asked the single Serbian women that night if they were lonely. I told them that the loneliest women I knew were young moms. They were incredulous. In my shepherding role, traveling around Eastern Europe and meeting with missionary women in many countries, the wives finally convinced me that they were lonelier. Their husbands could not possibly meet all their needs (nor should they), they weren't as free to hang with their girlfriends (that is, if they even had any where they now lived), they were isolated with kids at home, they were less involved in ministry and often felt useless.

When we look longingly toward the other side, we miss the lush green grass at our own feet. The Shepherd says, “Look to Me. Don't let your desire for what you don't have rob you of the joy for what I've given you.”

If I want it badly enough, won't He give it to me?

How do we reconcile Psalm 37:4? “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” It had been a desire of my heart for 20 years to have a husband, but God hadn't given me one. Not yet anyway. I asked the Serbian women if they desired a spouse. Do you?

Is there something your heart longs for that God hasn't given you? Pour it out to Him. The Lover of your Soul will carefully keep your tears in His bottle. No use pretending or stuffing or gritting your teeth and bearing it. Tell Him how you feel. Be honest. He knows it all anyway. Invite Him to enter into your pain and bring His healing balm. Use your loneliness to draw closer to Him. Let Him fulfill your longings. That's intimacy; that's delighting in Him.

Realize that the real, deep-down desires and longings of our soul are for one thing – God and God alone. And that He gives us freely! He more than meets what our souls long and yearn and thirst and pant for. He will never leave us or forsake us.

It's tough to be single in a married Christian world.

Do you ever feel like it's harder for Christians to be single? I know I did. We have a higher standard than the world has. It's a constant struggle to die to the hormonal urges we all face and remain sexually pure, especially in this sex-crazed world we inhabit. Some have learned that we can't do it on our own; we need to draw on Christ's strength day-by-day (or moment-by-moment) to enable us to live the way He wants for us.

Sadly, many beloved children of God give in to those urges, and then are ensnared by guilt. Before we sin, Satan whispers, “Come on, don’t be a prude. It’s no big deal. Everyone is doing it.” Then after we sin, he sneers, “I lied. It *is* a big deal, and you are a failure. You are worthless. It’s all over. God can never forgive you. There’s no point in trying.” (Nothing could be further from the truth! Our God, who ran with outstretched arms to welcome back the prodigal son, is always ready to forgive and restore.)

Well-meaning Christian friends, happy in their own marriages and family life, have a tendency to bombard singles with the never-ending question: “*Why aren’t you married yet?*” The following truths run counter to what they may communicate to you, out loud or otherwise, and refute what your heart is apt to internalize.

Truth #1: You’re not second-rate because you’re single, and you’re not alone.

Forty-some percent of the adult U.S. population is single. (Not as surprisingly, a much smaller percentage of church membership is single.) There are many godly examples of single lives. Jesus, Paul, Jeremiah, the three siblings Jesus loved (Mary, Martha and Lazarus), Amy Carmichael, Corrie ten Boom. C.S. Lewis married late in life. You’re in good company.

Truth #2: We are not “rewarded” with marriage because we deserve it.

I was single for 43 years and I’ve just been married for a few years now. I wasn’t a loser for all that time and now I’ve finally made it to a higher plane. God didn’t bring my dear friend, Steve, back into my life at a time when I was on a spiritual mountaintop. Our whirlwind courtship began two months after I moved back to the States, in culture shock after a decade in Eastern Europe. I was spiritually numb. There have been so many other times in my life when I felt closer to God. I didn’t do one thing to earn the gift of Steve. I’m still the same person I used to be. My life had meaning and purpose before marriage; it has meaning and purpose now.

Let’s face it. We all have a lot of baggage, at least some rough edges that need smoothing. Our souls were made to be loved. Our parents’ dysfunctional marriage or our own verbal or sexual abuse has wounded us deeply. We put up walls to try to protect ourselves from being hurt again, and those same walls also keep the love out. We’re afraid of the very thing we long for. Maybe we’ve even let our appearance go to keep the guys at bay, or we just keep stuffing food in to try to fill the void. If you have unresolved issues, ask God to heal your heart (*He can!*) and talk it over with a wise friend or a trusted counselor. But never think that just because someone gets married, it means that they have life all sorted out.

Truth #3: It’s not about us and what we do.

When I was single, I heard the full gamut of advice. Women would say God gave them a husband once they finally understood some deeper truth about Him. Or when they prayed more (maybe even fasted) for a spouse. I love this one – some said it was because they stopped praying and stopped wanting to be married. (Either we’re not praying enough or we’re praying too much!) They’d say it was when they got a new haircut, learned to cook, lost weight, got contact lenses. Husbands would tell me they married their wives because they were so beautiful. (In the next breath, they’d claim they were only seeking the more important internal qualities. Hah!)

There are no magic formulas. Don’t believe anyone who claims they have the secret. Nobody knows the 10 Easy Steps to Catching a Husband.

Truth #4: Marriage is not the goal of the Christian life.

Jesus is our prize, the reason we run the race of life. Being married isn’t the answer to your problems. There is so much more to life than marriage. I can say that because I happen to be married to one of the most wonderful men God ever created. But he’s not my whole life. He’s second to Jesus.

When Jim Elliot was single, he described the Sleeping Principle. Like Adam, we need to let God be the One who sees our needs and provides for us (if He chooses) as we sleep peacefully, resting in our trust in Him. When Adam awoke, there was God’s provision waiting for him. There was no need to go hunting. You don’t need to “help” God out by being in the right place at the right time. You can be free to just be friends with guys instead of evaluating each one as a potential spouse.

Truth #5: God has handpicked His gift for each of His children because of His great love for us.

He’s the one who decides what He will give us. He knows what we need; we are often wrong. Some people are more easily conformed to Christ’s image through the struggles, heartache, and responsibility of marriage and family. Some through trusting God for what they don’t have and learning to live with unfulfilled desires. All God’s gifts come out of His character of grace and love.

We can never merit God’s grace and His gifts. I’ll tell you a secret. Sometimes even ugly people get married, women who hate to cook, spiritually immature people. And sometimes beautiful and godly people are called to be single. People like you.

You can thank God for the gift He chose for you by enjoying it.

Contentment is not just passive resignation. It’s active. It has a lot to do with remembering and being thankful. Recount, over and over again, God’s faithfulness to you in the past, thanking Him for specific instances, and then, by faith, thanking Him for whatever He has in store for you in the future. Re-affirm to Him that you will trust Him to take good care of you. Thank Him for whatever your present situation is.

People know we like the gifts they choose for us when they see us enjoying them. Make the most of what God has given you today. Live life to the fullest. Enjoy Him! See the blessing of these years of greater freedom, fewer distractions, less complicated responsibilities. Really get to know the Lord. Serve Him with abandon.

Amy Carmichael wrote, “May my home on earth be empty, Lord, that Thy home in heaven be made more full.” Think about this - you may be single now because God wants you to raise a whole brood of spiritual children who will look just like their Father.

Invest in people. Be an active participant in your life. When you feel lonely, don’t sit at home and feel sorry for yourself. Initiate! Make your home a haven and a refuge now. There’s no need to put it off, hoping for marriage someday. Concentrate on being the person God wants you to be, living in a manner worthy of His high calling.

Don’t ever settle for a man who may not love you as Christ loves the church, someone you’re not sure you respect. It’s just not worth it. It’s so much better to be single than to have a miserable marriage.

Waiting is not a bad thing. A wise friend of mine used to say that delays never thwart God’s purpose but always polish His instrument.

If His plan for you includes marriage some day, you can trust Him to bring you both together, in His way and in His time. He can do it. No matter where in the world you are. And if that’s not His plan for you, His plan is still good. He still loves you.

Corrie ten Boom once asked her father how to deal with her unfulfilled longing for a husband. “You can kill the love so that it stops the pain,” he said, “or you can ask God to open up another route for that love to travel.” Let Him surprise you with new avenues for loving.