

Psalm 34 – The Difficult Doctrine of Contentment

February 22, 2026

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of contentment is a difficult doctrine. What the Bible has to say about contentment was for years a persistent rock in my shoe. However hard I tried to work it out, it would never quite stop bugging me.

Contentment might seem like an odd idea to get all worked up about, but that's what happened. I could never really get away from it. For several years it was the anvil that God used to bang out a good core of other doctrinal issues for me.

Look at verses 8-10. Here's a decent summary of what the Bible has to say positively on the concept of contentment.

⁸Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

⁹Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!

¹⁰The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

Taste and see – there's an experiential aspect, it's more than just a doctrinal affirmation. Then there's the objective promise – those who fear him *have no lack*, those who seek the Lord *lack no good thing*.

Those are big promises. Do you believe this? Do you live like this is true? Do you talk like this is true?

What is contentment? Maybe you're not familiar with it. Let me give you a quick definition up front. We'll nuance this a bit and describe *biblical* contentment later on, but for now let me just give you a quick sketch on the front end.

A good synonym for contentment is satisfaction. Contentment could be thought of as a fusion of peace and gratitude. Contentment is not complacency or apathy. There's certainly a way that you could use 'content' as a bad thing as a synonym for lazy, or disinterested, or apathetic, but that's not what we're talking about today.

Contentment comes from the same basic root as the word contain. They both basically come from two Latin words meaning 'hold together.'

Which is interesting. So, you can think of contentment like the state of being intact, held together. I think a good picture of contentment and discontent is the difference between a normal airplane, and an airplane that someone forgot to bolt on the emergency exit door. Contentment – a normal airplane, a held-together plane. Discontent – a plane with a big hole in the side at 35,000 feet. Both are working hard to get somewhere. Both have a goal. Both have somewhere to be. But the experience of getting there is wildly different.

So, this is what we're talking about today. Contentment, satisfaction. Now, contentment shouldn't be measured in hours or days. Every flight is going to have its turbulence. But there's turbulence in an intact plane, and turbulence on a plane with a hole in the side. So, we're talking about something a bit more enduring. We're talking about the subjective context of the day-to-day emotional experiences.

Some of you may have heard me talk about how significant the book of Ecclesiastes was for my early formation, and that's probably where my obsession with this doctrine began. Given the apparent chaos and randomness of life, what Solomon calls "vanity" in Ecclesiastes. How can I live a good, meaningful, and satisfied life? How can I actually find this contentment?

I can remember the moment that this wrestle became clear for me. Before it was just a foggy unease about a few related ideas.

This would have been the Spring of 2019. We had previously lived in Phoenix for a year, and now we were back in the city visiting some friends. One afternoon during this trip, Heather had plans to go visit one of her

friends, and I stayed back. We were staying at our friend Ricardo's house, so I was sitting on his patio with some books, my Bible, and a journal, while he was at work.

That was where the difficulty of contentment became really clear to me. On the one hand, I was wrestling with texts like this one – **those who seek the Lord lack no good thing** – and Ecclesiastes 3:12, **“I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live”** – and Philippians 4:4, **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”** These texts seem to present a vision of the Christian life as a life of contentment, and satisfaction.

But on the other hand, I was wrestling with texts like Luke 9:23, **“If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”** – and Romans 12:11, **“do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord”** – and Matthew 28:19, **“go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”** These texts seem to present a vision of the Christian life as a life of discipline, zeal, and even a certain kind of ambition.

How can discipline and rejoicing fit together? How does zeal live with satisfaction? How do ambition and contentment work together?

In other words, can a life be characterized by both a contented, satisfied rejoicing, and a disciplined, zealous striving? Can both be true of you at the same time? Or do we have to pick?

Contentment is difficult because contentment is one of those doctrines that the more you tug on it the more you realize that it's connected to everything.

Contentment has roots in the deepest domains of theology, and bears fruit in every branch and twig of practical living.

On the theological side, contentment hangs on the nature of God, what he is, who he is – is he good? Is he sovereign? Contentment tugs on the tension of human freedom and divine decree. Contentment pulls on the so-called problem of evil. Can I be content in the face of suffering and evil in the world? In my own life? Contentment touches on justification. Peace in life hangs on peace with God.

On the practical side, contentment is a weapon against temptation. Temptation first and foremost attacks your discontent. It whispers in your ear, “do this, and you'll finally be happy.”

Contentment is one of the best motivators that God has given us for kingdom service.¹

Contentment is one of the most clarifying lenses that God has given us to see our lives, and our families, and our work rightly. Often, we think that we aren't content – we aren't satisfied – because our work, or our family life doesn't feel meaningful. But in reality, our life doesn't feel meaningful because we aren't content.

So, contentment is a difficult doctrine because it is deep and wide. But it's also difficult because it is both a rich gospel comfort and at the same time a high creaturely duty.

Contentment is one of the sweetest gospel promises, gospel offers. Jesus says, **“come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”**

And 1 Peter 5:7 says, **“[Cast] all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”**

So, contentment is one of the things that God offers you. Turn to Christ, lay your burdens down. He will carry you. He will bear you up. You can find peace and rest in him.

But it's also a duty that God places on his rational creatures.

Psalm 50:23, **“the one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me.”**

First Thessalonians 5:16-18, **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”**

¹ Romans 14:17-18, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

So, gratitude, the core of biblical contentment, is something that justice requires of God's creatures, especially his redeemed.

Contentment is an act of love towards God as submission to his will. And an act of love towards our neighbor as the opposite of covetousness.

Contentment is hard because it meets some as a promise of comfort, and others as a rebuke for ingratitude. And this shouldn't surprise us. This is true for every important Christian doctrine. To the humble, see verse 2, it's a comfort, to the proud it's offensive. To the humble it's the aroma of life, to the proud it's the stench of death.

With that said, let's get into this text. Here David takes up the theme of contentment, and he describes it as the blessed state of experiencing God's goodness.

Psalm 34 here answers three questions. First, what heart posture do we need to have contentment? Second, what is contentment? And third, what about affliction? What about hardship?

I read verses 8-10 earlier, and that's the core. That's the high-point of the chapter. That's the big lesson. Everything before that leads up to it, prepares for it. And everything after it applies it and explains it.

This text has three major divisions with three major lessons. 1-7 is an introduction to the topic. The big lesson here is that contentment is theological before it is circumstantial. Contentment has more to do with what you think about God than it does your circumstances.

Second, 8-14 is the main lesson. This is the doctrinal and practical core of this Psalm. Aside from the definition of contentment, we'll also get our second lesson here, contentment leads to godliness.

Then third, 15-22 is basically a collection of clarifications. This last section is going to help us avoid a simplistic understanding of contentment. The lesson here is that contentment is not incompatible with hard circumstances – with affliction.

Contentment is Theological before it is Circumstantial

Ok, look at that first division, verses 1-7. Remember, this section is the on ramp. This section is getting us ready for the main point of this Psalm. These 7 verses are getting us into the right headspace and the right heart posture to receive the core teaching on contentment.

Here's the big idea, the first lesson, *contentment is theological before it is circumstantial*. In other words, contentment has more to do with how you think about God than it does your current circumstances.

These verses, very helpfully, present for us and order for us three key factors in contentment. Contentment has to do with how you order and relate three things: your circumstances, your inward heart posture, and God.

What these verses show us is that the first and fundamental factor is God. What you think about God needs to condition and drive what you think about the other two. What is true about God needs to shape your inward heart posture, and how you think about your circumstances.

We tend to get in trouble with contentment because we start with the wrong factor. We start with our circumstances, and let those condition our heart posture, and what we think about God. We look at our circumstances, and there's some really hard stuff going on. So, all of a sudden, we start to doubt God's goodness, or his sovereignty.

Or, worse, we start with our feelings. Basically, we're unhappy, so we start fishing around for a reason to justify our unhappiness. So, taking our feelings as the fixed starting point – as the bedrock truth – we start to grumble and exaggerate the very normal frictions of life.

Instead of being grateful for a job, we grumble that it doesn't satisfy our soul. Instead of being grateful for a husband or a wife, instead of being grateful for children to raise, we grumble that it takes a lot of work. Instead of being grateful for the opportunity to get a college degree, we grumble that we have a lot of tests coming up.

Sometimes, our discontentment simply comes from letting our feelings take the driver's seat. In our quest to validate our feelings we start to look with an ungrateful eye on all the mercies and gifts that God has given us.

One of the basic requirements of contentment is a conviction and an ability to discipline your feelings according to the truth.

Thomas Traherne makes this point really well. Traherne was an English writer and theologian from the 1700s. He had a fairly substantial impact on C.S. Lewis. Traherne says this, "*Can any ingratitude be more damned than that which is fed by benefits?... They despise [these benefits] merely because they have them: And invent ways to make themselves miserable in the presence of riches.*"² Sometimes we can grumble about our circumstances – job, marriage, children, whatever – simply as a way of justifying our discontentment.

Whatever we put first is going to shape how we think about the other two. If circumstances come first, then circumstances are the absolute that conditions our feelings, and our view of God. If we put feelings first, then feelings are the absolute that conditions our view of our circumstances and God. If we put God first, then God is the absolute that conditions our view of everything else.

And this is what David does. Verse 1, "**I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.**" All times, continually. Whatever comes, I will bless the Lord. This is the fixed point, this is the absolute that conditions everything else.

Next, comes the inward subjective experience. Verse 2, "**My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.**"

If God is the absolute, always worthy of praise, then I don't get to shake my fist at him when I don't understand his purposes. His righteousness is as firm as the mountains, Psalm 36:6. He is righteous in all his ways, and kind in all his works, Psalm 145:17. His wisdom is unsearchable, Romans 11:33. **The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.**³

Notice that David brings in humility. Contentment is a question of humility. This is in some sense the most piercing question that we have to ask. Does God have the right to do what he sees fit with my life? With your life?

First comes God, then our inward experience follows, then last comes our circumstances. Notice verses 4 through 7. Couple quick comments here. Notice the structure. It's testimony, promise, testimony, promise. And it's subjective first (fears and shame). Then objective second (troubles and deliverance).

I'll say a bit more about this in the last point, but for now just notice that David is here inviting us to plead with God to change our circumstances.

Biblical contentment is not the same as a stoic resignation to fate. We need a rock-solid conviction that God is good and sovereign. We need a firm commitment to humbly receive from God's hand whatever he gives us. But granted that, it is right and good to mourn evil circumstances, and to plead with God to deliver you from them.

Christ's example in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion is a good example of this. "*If there is another way, please deliver me from this, but not my will but yours be done.*"

God please take this cup away. God please don't let me lose my job. God please heal my daughter. God please help my marriage. God please let me find a job.

It is not discontentment to recognize that an evil circumstance is really evil – to mourn it, to ask for deliverance, to plead for deliverance. It is discontentment, and worse, to believe that God has no right to let you go through it.

Ok, that's the first lesson, contentment is theological before it is circumstantial. Contentment doesn't rest ultimately on your circumstances, and contentment isn't ultimately about what you may be feeling any given moment. Contentment begins, and rests ultimately on what you think about God.

Contentment is not the belief that your circumstances are good, but the conviction that God is good.

² Thomas Traherne, *Centuries*, 1.31.

³ Job 1:21.

Contentment Leads to Godliness

Look next at verses 8-14. I need to do two things in this second division. First, with verses 8-10 I want to spell out a definition of contentment. Then in 11-14 I'll show you the second lesson about contentment.

This section here, from 8-14 follows the standard Biblical pattern of doctrine and application. 8-10 is the doctrine, that the first seven verses set up. Then 11-14 is the basic application, that the rest of the Psalm then expands and clarifies.

So, first, I need to look at verses 8 through 10 and give you a definition of contentment.

Let's do that. It has three basic parts.

First, contentment is the conviction that God is good and sovereign. **"Taste and see that the Lord is good."** *Conviction* is meant to convey the fact that contentment isn't just an intellectual idea, neither is it just a good feeling. It's a belief about God *and* an emotional investment in that belief – a conviction. It's a belief on fire. It's an idea with a heartbeat.

Then second, contentment is the conviction that God will not withhold from you anything that is necessary for your ultimate good. **"Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."** This doesn't mean that you will have every pleasure and whim you ever come up with, but it does mean that anything that you need for your ultimate good, God will give it to you.

And this looks different for everyone. For some, wealth would destroy you, so God withholds it from you. For some poverty would destroy you, so God keeps you from it. For some God lets your plans succeed, so you will grow more righteous. For others, God frustrates your plans so you will grow more righteous.

This is where humility comes in. We don't know what we most need. We don't know what will tend to our ultimate good. God does.

Then third, contentment is the conviction that God will not put you through anything that will ultimately destroy you. Even death.

So, here's that all strung together. *Biblical contentment is the conviction that God is good and sovereign, that he will not withhold anything from you that is necessary for your ultimate good, and that he won't let you go through anything that will ultimately destroy you.*

In other words, contentment is a way of looking at your life through the lens of God's goodness, his power, his wisdom, and his love for you.

Now, before moving on from this, one clarification needs to be made. These promises have a condition. This isn't true for everyone without distinction. What does he say? **"Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him... Those who fear him have no lack... Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."**

Based on the way those are paralleled in these three verses we should see those as distinct but interwoven things. Think of it like a triple Venn diagram where almost all of the area of the circles is in the overlapping zone. They aren't the same thing, but practically speaking those who take refuge in the Lord also fear the Lord also seek the Lord.

"Take refuge," we looked at a few weeks ago, this is one of David's ways of talking about faith. David isn't trying to tease out the doctrine of justification here, he's just being descriptive of this blessed person, but even still, he gives the pride of place to faith. That's important. All of this rests ultimately on faith.

Then, "fears him" basically means lives a life committed to obedience to God. God's Word and will shapes and steers his life. The fear of God is the reverential respect that leads to obedience.

Then last, "seek him" explicitly ties in the heart. Obedience isn't just rule following, but an overflow of love for God. Worship isn't just a routine, but a deep conviction that God is worthy. Prayer isn't just a duty, but an overflow of a desire to lift my prayers and concerns to God.

Faith, obedience, and love.

David isn't making these promises to everyone and anyone. And he's not even making these promises to regular church attenders, or disciplined doers of religious things. These promises are true for the truly converted. The truly born again. Those who are justified by faith alone, but whose faith doesn't stay alone but flows out in obedience. Those whose faith works through love.

This the same message as Romans 8:28, **"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."**

So, friends, do you have this confidence? Especially talking to those who don't know Christ yet, do you want this confidence? Your wisdom and cleverness might fall short. Your strength and skill could fail you. Your wealth and resources might not be enough. Apart from Christ, you have nothing to look to but yourself. Can you give yourself sure and lasting hope and meaning and contentment?

This is an offer to you today. Turn to Christ and he will make you new. Turn to Christ and he will give you this contentment, this peace.

Ok, let's turn to the second chunk in this division. Verses 11-14. Here, David turns to drill down into some application. He's given us the doctrine, now he turns to application.

Of those three qualities, he chooses to focus on the fear of the Lord.

Notice verse 12, **"What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good?"** I appreciate this. Basically, this is a rhetorical flourish. "Who here wants to live a good life?"

He's saying, ok, I'm going to teach you the fear of the Lord, and if you want to live a good and happy life, you should pay attention.

I think this is really helpful because it's a good reminder that preaching, and even theology, isn't just about how to cope with a hard life. It's about how to actually live a life that is glorifying to God and good for you.

Ok, look at verses 13 and 14. Here's how he applies the fear of the Lord and contentment. Verse 13, a personal commitment to the truth, **"Keep your tongue from... speaking deceit."** And verse 14, a public commitment to the truth, **"seek peace and pursue it."**

And this makes sense. If contentment flows out of a high view of God's sovereignty and a humble reception of his will, then we should be willing to stand on and for the truth. Whether we're being pressured by society to cave on the truth, or simply tempted to fudge the numbers a bit to get ahead, contentment would rather suffer with the truth than get ahead with a lie.

So, contentment applied means in short that we should seek Christ's kingdom and his righteousness, or his justice. We seek Christ's kingdom by standing on and for the truth. And we seek Christ's kingdom by doing good, seeking peace and pursuing it.

Contentment receives Christ's will in our personal circumstances, and contentment seeks to establish Christ's will in every sphere we have influence. To seek peace and pursue it means to seek to order everything according to God's word. To seek to order your marriage by God's word, your parenting by God's word. Your work by God's word. As you are given influence, to order politics by God's word, art and entertainment by God's word.

A rejection of God's order always leads to chaos and suffering. God designed this world, he knows how it works best.

So, contentment doesn't lead to apathy, contentment isn't complacency. Contentment, through the fear of the Lord, leads to godliness, both in your own life, and so far as you have influence, in the world around you.

Contentment isn't Incompatible with Hard Circumstances

In the last division, verses 15-22 David turns to address some nuance. He's hinted at this already, but here he really digs into the main potential objection to this doctrine of contentment. How can you say that God is good and sovereign over everything when even the righteous and the godly suffer?

First, I just want to underline again that David is even addressing this. The Bible does not present a simplistic, one-dimensional portrait of God's sovereignty without regard to the very really ups and downs of life in this world. God is not ignorant of the kinds of suffering his people will go through. What God has to say here about contentment applies to you in the middle of whatever hardship you may be going through.

Here's the big idea of this last section. Both the wicked and the righteous will experience affliction. But that affliction is a very different thing for the two groups. For the righteous, God is near you in the affliction, he hears your cry, he delivers you, and in the end, it leads to your final redemption.

For the wicked, it's the opposite. Affliction is God's opposition and judgment that ends either in repentance or condemnation.

For the righteous, there is redemption and life on the other side of affliction. For the wicked, there is condemnation and death on the other side of affliction.

David is doing a few things in these verses. First, he's giving the clarification that what he said above about those who fear the Lord having no lack doesn't mean that those who fear the Lord will never experience affliction or hardship. God promises to supply you with every good thing, but he never promises to keep you from all hardship. In fact, in verse 19, he says "**many are the afflictions of the righteous.**"

So, it's not even, 'yeah sometimes some of you might have some afflictions.' No, in this fallen world in varying degrees and forms, "**many are the afflictions of the righteous.**"

Second, he's saying that the *presence* of affliction does not mean the *absence* of God. One of the temptations in the middle of affliction is to believe that God has abandoned you. That he isn't listening to you. That he's rejected you.

Christian, child of God, that just simply isn't true. In the middle of your affliction, verse 15, God sees you, God hears you. Verse 18, God is near to you. "**The Lord is near to the brokenhearted.**" God has not abandoned you. God has not turned his face from you, or closed his ears to you.

Then third, he's saying that for the righteous, all affliction will have an end. There will be a last day for this affliction. He will deliver you from it. Verse 17, "**the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.**" Verse 18, he "**saves the crushed in spirit.**" Verse 19, "**the Lord delivers him out of them all.**"

Often, that deliverance will be in this life. Sometimes our problem is that we simply move on too quickly. We are desperately praying for something, for God to deliver us in some way. Then he does, but we hardly notice, so we just move on. So, we forget about it.

But sometimes, deliverance comes through death. For some, affliction walks with you all the way into the grave. But affliction stays in the grave. You don't. Christian, you don't.

Again, the cross is our example and our hope here. Note verse 20, "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." John quotes this in reference to the cross in John 19:36. Jesus is the righteous one, whose bones were never broken. Even through death, by resurrection God delivered him.

Our hope doesn't end with the grave.

Our faith is a resurrection faith. And that doesn't take meaning away from this side of the grave. The resurrection *gives* meaning to this side of the grave. This life matters *because* death is not the end. If death is the end, then all of this is no more meaningful than a dream – when we wake up the story ends, and the meaning fades like mist – it was never real.

If death is the end, then suffering is meaningless, then virtue is meaningless, then accomplishment is meaningless. But if death is not the end, since we look to the resurrection, even our present suffering, our present affliction is just one chapter in a much larger story.

For the Christian, we can have contentment even in the face of affliction. Often God will deliver us in this life. But even if he doesn't, our God knows how to bring life out of death. Our Christ can walk with us all the way into the grave and back out again, because he's walked that path before.

Verses 21 and 22. **“²¹Affliction will slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. ²²The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.”**

Lord’s Supper

We’ll be celebrating the Lord’s Supper today. This Supper beautifully underlines this last point. In Christ, for the righteous, affliction gives way to hope. Death gives way to life.

In this Supper we proclaim our great hope and victory, and at the same time we remember the single greatest tragedy in human history. If God can turn even this, the suffering, mocking, and murder of the Righteous One to the good. If he can turn this tragedy into victory, he can do the same with your tragedy, with your affliction.

In this broken bread, we remember the one who was broken for us. Who knows what it is to suffer. Who knows what it is to plead for deliverance. This bread reminds us that the redeemer entered into our suffering to redeem us from suffering.

This cup reminds us of Jesus spilled blood, that washes us from our sin. Your affliction is not judgment. Your affliction is not wrath. Christian, your sin has been paid for. Christ’s spilled blood washes you from your sin. God’s face is not against you in wrath, but his eyes are on you in mercy.

True biblical contentment is nourished by this Supper. True biblical contentment is not a simplistic optimism, true biblical contentment is not stoic fatalism, true biblical contentment looks affliction and death in the face and says, “my God is the God who brings life out of death.” God is good. God is sovereign. Even through suffering, God’s good purposes will triumph. “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”