

The Life that Frees From Anxiety

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Introduction

Often our lives are like a two-sided coin. The positive side is stamped with emotions like contentment, peace of mind, happiness, and joy. The opposite, negative side contains stress, anxiety, worry, discontent, and incessant restlessness. In the past few decades, the negative, life-sapping leeches have increasingly filled our world and they show no signs of abating. Their mushrooming presence in the Western Hemisphere has been in direct proportion to these four factors:

- (1) The general public's acceptance of the evolutionary hypothesis
- (2) The corresponding abandonment of belief in God and the rejection of the Bible as the Word of God
- (3) The malignant growth of materialism and secularism
- (4) The resultant breakdown in Biblical morality, which has destroyed homes and families by the millions and sent crime statistics soaring.

Demonstrations abound through history and all about us to prove that to have all the world's gold and gadgets possible does not at all bring one contentment or freedom from anxiety. Conversely (and ironically), the very elements (i.e., freedom from restraint, blatant immorality, materialism, etc.) in which mankind has been seeking peace of mind are the **causes** of their increase! God wants His creation to be happy and to enjoy peace of mind and good mental health while we struggle through this life. I believe that the abundant life that our Lord came to bring (John 10:10) includes this, although it certainly does not exhaust it. When the Christ had cast the demons out of the Gerasene demoniac, he was found to be "in his right mind" (Mark 5:15). The "fruit of the Spirit" includes "joy" and "peace" (Gal. 5:22). Paul also wrote: "For the mind of the flesh is death; but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom. 8:6). The Greek word for "joy" (*chara*) appears over fifty times in the New Testament. As Jesus tried to prepare the apostles for His departure from them, He told them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful" (John 14:27). I do not believe that a single principle of wholesome psychiatry, psychology, or mental health exists, but that it can be found in the Bible.

If this is so, what are some of the keys to contentment, the pointers to peace, and the principles that will liberate one from anxiety?

Godliness

Godliness translates a Greek word (*eusebeia*) which means devout, pious, reverent toward God, or behavior that is God-pleasing. It therefore refers to one who has put his ultimate faith and trust in God. This is the very foundation of a life free from anxiety. Without it, one must have grave fears about each tomorrow, or worse that he will have no tomorrow. The fear of death and the gnawing worry that God, the Judgment, and Hell might be realities after all must bear down on the ungodly incessantly. To be without God is to be without hope (Eph. 2:12). Where there is no hope anxiety descends like the darkness of midnight.

The Lord Jesus had no place to call His own nor to lay His head (Mat. 8:20), but He gave us the example of trusting His Father implicitly and not worrying about having food to eat, clothes to wear, or a place to live. He also plainly taught such trust in God. The last ten verses of Matthew 6 are devoted to this very precept, and they begin with the words, “Be not anxious . . .” (v. 25). After using birds and lilies and God’s care for these lesser creatures to argue the futility of worry, He twice more in this context repeated the prohibition of anxiety over food and clothing (vv. 31, 34). The antidote for anxiety which He set forth consists of two principles:

- (1) Our Heavenly Father knows our needs.
- (2) He will see that these are provided if we will seek His kingdom and His righteousness first (v. 33).

The Lord reinforced this teaching by reminding us that our Father gives good gifts to His children who ask Him, even more so than do earthly fathers their children (Mat. 7:7-11). The key to this freedom from anxiety is the fear of and trust in God.

Paul taught a similar principle in the familiar words of Romans 8:28: “And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose.” Notice that the working together of things for our **ultimate** good—for our salvation (for such I believe is the meaning dictated by the context)—is predicated upon a pair of conditions:

- (1) One must love God.
 - (2) One must be “called according to his [God’s] purpose” (i. e., he must have heard the call of God through the Gospel and must be living according to God’s will revealed therein).
- Once more we see that the only hope for peace of mind is a God-loving, God-obeying life.

Paul made some remarkable statements on this subject in his letter to the Philippians. Although he was not in the most enviable circumstances when he wrote those much-beloved brethren (he was a prisoner in Rome [Phi. 1:13-14, 17]), he repeatedly urged them rejoice in the Lord (3:1; 4:4), even as he rejoiced (4:10). He further said that he had “learned to be content,” free of worry and anxiety, regardless of his outward circumstances (vv. 11-12). He told us the means by which we may overcome anxiety and find wonderful peace of mind:

In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto to God. And the peace of God that passeth all understanding, shall guard yours hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus (4: 6-7).

Paul also told us his secret of learning to be content: “I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me” (v. 13). Once more notice that rejoicing, freedom from anxiety, peace of mind, and contentment are rooted in a deep and abiding faith in God and His Son. Timothy was to teach the wealthy brethren in Ephesus not “. . .to have their hopes set on the uncertainty of riches, but on God” (1 Tim. 6:17). If one leaves God, Christ, the Bible, and the church out of his life or even places them in a secondary position he will now and forever seek in vain for peace of mind and freedom from anxiety.

Proper Attitude Toward Things We Do Not Have

Much worry and turmoil in the lives of men are caused by covetousness for things which one does not have, envy of everyone who has more, and the childish demand for instant gratification of every desire. Paul’s peace of mind and contentment lay to some degree in the fact that he had learned how to get along without things he might have wanted or even needed. He knew how to be abased, hungry, and in want and still to be content (Phi. 4:12). We have already noticed that the Lord owned nothing but the clothes on his back as far as we know but worry over things which He did not have did not deter Him from His work in the least. Contrast the Lord and Paul with the childishness of wicked King Ahab in 1 Kings 21. He had more land in his kingdom than he could explore in a lifetime, yet one day he entered his palace pouting and like a spoiled brat threw himself on his bed, turned his face to the wall, and would not eat. What was his problem? One of his subjects, Naboth, owned a vineyard which he coveted, but Naboth would not sell it. All he could think of was what he **did not** have.

Modern men, including many Christians, are little different. Jim may be content with his house until his friend, Jack, buys some acreage in the country and begins building a new house. Then an envious eye begins to grow in John and his house suddenly begins to be too old, too small, and not nice enough. Little Billy may be happy with his almost-new five-speed bicycle

until his best friend, Joe, gets a new ten-speed. Jane may be satisfied with her wardrobe until her jogging partner, Sue, gets two or three new outfits. Some are so covetous that they cannot go window shopping without coming home sick due to seeing all the things they **do not** have!

Benjamin Franklin, the colonial statesman, made a true observation when he said, "Discontent makes rich men poor." Paul warned the Hebrews (and us) of the monster of covetous discontent that prevents one from having the proper attitude toward things not possessed:

Be ye free from the love of money; content with such things as you have: for himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee. So that with good courage we say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear: What shall man do unto me?" (Heb. 13:5-6).

He wrote similar words to Timothy:

But godliness with contentment is great gain: for we brought nothing into this world, for neither can we carry anything out; but having food and covering we shall be therewith content. But they that are minded to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil: which some reaching after have been led astray from the faith, and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

Note that in both of these last-cited passages the emphasis is upon placing one's trust in God and in godliness as the antidote for covetousness and discontent. Peace of mind, contentment, freedom from anxiety ever eludes the covetous heart. We cannot waste our time and energy fretting over the things we do not have if we hope to find contentment.

Proper Assessment of the Things We Have

Have you ever looked through the bars of a prison to someone who has irreparably ruined his or her life? Have you ever tried to help someone who has become a slave to alcohol or some other addictive drug? Have you ever offered counsel to a husband and wife whose home is almost Hell on earth? Have you ever thought of your many acquaintances, friends, neighbors, and loved ones who are struggling through this life without Christ and without hope? Have you thought of the millions who are in physical agony due to terrible disease or tragic accident that has befallen them? Have you thought of what it must be like to see young and old all about you starving to death every day and to know that this will likely be your fate also? If you have thought about any or all of these and other such tragic circumstances of other people, have you also paused to reflect, "There, but for the grace of God, go I"?

We desperately need to stop thinking about and wishing for the things we **do not have** long enough to consider the things we **do have**. When our children or grandchildren murmur

that they do not have a certain toy, item of designer clothing, or some other thing they covet, how do we usually respond? We remind them of the many blessings and things they already have and we urge them to be thankful for them. We would do well to heed the advice we give them!

When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you his wealth untold.
Count your many blessings, money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.

Count your blessings, name them one by one.
Count your blessings, see what God hath done.
Count your blessings, name them one by one.
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

Are you a child of God, do you have reasonable health, do you have a loving family and/or group of friends and brethren, do you have sufficient food, clothing, and shelter, do you have freedom to come, go, think, and speak? The majority of those who have ever lived have not had such rich blessings. If we have no shoes, we need to remember that there are those who have no feet. An unknown observer well-said, "If we fasten our attention on what we have, rather than on what we lack, a very little wealth is sufficient."

To learn the lesson of contentment and to enjoy the blessing of freedom from anxiety we must learn to be free from the love of money and what it will buy to appreciate the things we have (Heb. 13:5).

Proper Direction of Our Contentment

Not all contentment is good. Many people have reached a deeply settled contentment, but their contentment is sorely misplaced. Many are anxious about the things that should not worry them and are totally carefree about matters which should be grave causes of worry. Most people are contented with religious error, but this is misdirected contentment. If we receive not the love of the Truth we cannot be saved, for it is the knowledge—including obedience thereto—of the Truth that sets us free (John 8:32; 2 The. 2:10). All who believe not the Truth but have pleasure in (are contented with) unrighteousness and error will be condemned (2 The. 2:12). A large number of people seem to be contented with immorality, fornication, and dishonesty, but such is misdirected contentment:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18).

We are not to be contented or have fellowship with the “unfruitful works of darkness,” but “rather even reprove them” (Eph. 5:11).

Even the Lord’s own people who are not contented with religious error and immorality are frequently satisfied with their own shallow knowledge of the Word. They may not be satisfied with their knowledge of their golf game or of their cross stitching, so that they eagerly study and practice them. The far greater concern of each of us should be our knowledge of the Book. We cannot ever be contented with our knowledge of it, but we must ever “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord” (2 Pet. 3:18), whether we ever learn how to correctly swing a golf club or make a stitch!

Many of those in the church of the Lord think they are fulfilling all the service due Him when they attend a worship assembly once or twice a week. They are perfectly comfortable with their little smidgen of devotion to the kingdom while the world is going to Hell all about them. Such folk seldom, if ever, think of visiting the sick, helping some helpless person, talking to a wayward brother, or teaching a sinner. They may not be contented with their service in their Kiwanis Club, a Girl Scout troop, or the garden club and may be always trying to do more for those organizations. As good as those things may be, the first emphasis in our service must be to the Lord in His church:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the **work of the Lord**, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58, *emph., DM*).

An anonymous writer correctly observed: “It is right to be contented with what we have; never with what we are.” Remember: not all contentment is good. There are some things about which we should never be contented.

Proper Estimate of Material Things

Men have always had the tendency to over-estimate the value of material things. The greater part of mankind has concluded that material abundance is the apex, the grand objective, of life. To all such, success is measured only in terms of material prosperity. It is because of this almost universal proclivity of mankind that the Bible has hundreds of warnings pertaining to money, wealth, riches, and the pursuit thereof. Jesus exposed this flaw in the clearest of terms:

Take heed and keep yourselves from all covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

Again, in warning us not to be anxious about our food and clothing, He said, “Is not the **life more than the food** and the **body more than the raiment?**” (Mat. 6:25, *emph., DM*).

Worldly, secular people (including such in the church) say that **all** of life revolves around material plenty. Christ says there is more--**much** more--to life than mammon.

The generally prosperous society of our time and nation demonstrates the truth of the Lord's teaching. Never have so many had so much and yet have apparently enjoyed it so little. As already noticed, instead of an easing of problems with increased prosperity, the suicide rate, the crime rate, the anxiety rate, the immorality rate, and the dishonesty rate have all risen. The venerable Paul warned of this very occurrence in a passage already cited:

But they that are minded to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil: which some reaching after have been led astray from the faith, and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

He further instructed us about how to properly consider material things:

Charge them that are rich in this present world, that they be not highminded, nor have their hopes set on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they be rich in good works, that they be ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on the life which is life indeed (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

In these two passages we not only have inspired admonition about proper evaluation of material things, but a listing of the grave dangers of failing to do so:

- (1) Material things become a temptation and a snare (v. 9)
- (2) They make one vulnerable to foolish, hurtful, and destructive lusts (v. 9)
- (3) They lead people astray from the faith (v.10)
- (4) They bring great sorrow (v. 10)
- (5) They tempt one to be proud and haughty (v. 17)
- (6) They tempt one to trust in riches rather than God (v. 17)
- (7) They breed ingratitude and forgetfulness that God is the source of our blessings (v. 17)

When Paul wrote to the Colossians from his first imprisonment in Rome, he sent greeting to those brethren from several companions who were standing by him and assisting him, among them, a brother named Demas. Sadly, the next and last time we read his name in Scripture is in Paul's final letter from what is believed to be his second and last imprisonment there. To Timothy he wrote, "For Demas forsook me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:9). It appears that this brother failed to keep material things and worldly concerns in their proper perspective and was thereby led astray from the faith, precisely as Paul had earlier described and warned.

Reportedly, no comparable space has as many people of fabulous wealth as Beverly Hills, California. According to worldly philosophy, they should all be perfectly adjusted, enjoying the maximum peace of mind and total freedom from anxiety. However, in one recent year that small geographical area had 193 psychiatrists, not counting perhaps hundreds of psychologists and other counselors besides. This equaled 1 psychiatrist for every 170 residents, many times above the national ratio.

Our world had been likened to a hardware store into which pranksters entered in the night and changed all the price tags. They took the \$1,000.00 tag off the riding lawn mower and put it on a \$9.95 hammer and vice versa. They placed the \$59.95 price tag that was on the electric drill on a box of tacks which cost \$1.29, and so on. Millions of people, at the instigation of Satan, have so done with far more important things. They have placed an exceedingly high value on money and the things it will buy and have counted God, the Bible, the church, and all the other precious spiritual verities as all but valueless.

Until a person learns that the **real** values of life are not material and that material things must be viewed as merely a **means to the real end**, rather than the end of life, one will maintain a miserable discontent.

Proper Estimate of Spiritual Entities

Men perpetually tend to make spiritual things secondary, even if they give lip-service to doing otherwise. The "price tags" have all been confused in this area, also. Modern men seem to count such things as God's Law concerning self-control, marital fidelity, and purity of life as of little or no worth, while valuing the fulfillment of sexual lust so highly that they are willing to pay any price, including terminal disease, destruction of their marriages, and the damnation of their souls, to have it.

The Lord gave us the true perspective. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven..." "But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mat. 6:19-20, 33). He later added:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? or what shall a man give in exchange for his life (16:24-26)?

Paul also taught us to properly estimate spiritual things. “Be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom 12:2). Clearly, he not only told us in this passage not to behave like the world, but also not to think like the world, not to evaluate things the way the world does. His own noble example stands before us:

Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ ...Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phi. 3:7-8, 13-14).

Where should spiritual values be in our thinking? “Set your mind on the things that are above, not on things that are upon the earth” (Col. 3:2). It really matters little what we lose if we save our souls and it really matters nothing at all what we gain if we lose our souls. There is no way to be free from anxiety until we place a premium upon spiritual things!

Conclusion

While everyone naturally desires peace of mind, contentment, and freedom from anxiety, most everyone is seeking these in the wrong places and ways. Freedom from anxiety is not something that comes with wealth, as demonstrated by so many who have vast wealth, yet who are extremely miserable. It is not found in instant gratification of every desire. It is not found in being able to buy everything one covets.

Freedom from anxiety is far more than mere loud-talking, back-slapping behavior that often proves hollow and superficial in a vain attempt to mask serious problems of inner turmoil. It does not cancel healthy ambition and desire for improvement of oneself or one's circumstances if these stem from the proper motive. It is not a happy-go-lucky, foolhardy approach to life that fails to look ahead and to anticipate needs and challenges of the future. A worry-free life is not found when sought as an end itself, but rather, it is the by-product of placing one's total trust in God and in keeping spiritual and material things in their proper perspectives.

This freedom from anxiety is the only mature approach to life, and one who has achieved it can find peace even in the midst of crisis, sorrow, and adversity. It does not depend upon outward circumstances for inward tranquility. Achieving it requires a “funeral.” There

must be the death and burial of self before it can live! May we all find this blessed state of being that the Lord intended us to have as a part of the abundant life He came to bring.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the twelfth Southwest Lectures, hosted by the Southwest Church of Christ, Austin, TX, April 11-14, 1993. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Abundant Life*, ed. Perry Hall (Austin, TX: Southwest Pub., 1992.)

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