

Invitation

Jesus said: Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:29)

Prayer

Gracious Father, Lover of my soul,

Thank you for the invitation to come to you where I find rest and contentment. You are the Good Shepherd who comforts me with your rod and staff.

May this time of worship be a hallowed hour, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture Readings:

- 2 Kings 4: 8-17

One day Elisha went to Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to eat some food. So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food. And she said to her husband, "Behold now, I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small room on the roof with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there."

One day he came there, and he turned into the chamber and rested there. And he said to Gehazi his servant, "Call this Shunammite." When he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, "Say now to her, 'See, you have taken all this trouble for us; what is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?'" She answered, "I dwell among my own people." And he said, "What then is to be done for her?" Gehazi answered, "Well, she has no son, and her husband is old." He said, "Call her." And when he had called her, she stood in the doorway. And he said, "At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your servant." But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her.

- Philippians 4:10-13

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Hymn: *by Edward H Bickersteth (MHB 501)*

1. Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.
2. Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

3. Peace, perfect peace, 'mid suffering's sharpest throes?
The sympathy of Jesus breathes repose.
4. Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.
5. Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.
6. It is enough: earth's struggles soon shall cease,
And Jesus calls us to heaven's perfect peace.
© public domain

Godliness and Contentment

Contentment! Do you have it?

The media and particularly the advertising media, does all it can to convince us that this desirable trait we call contentment remains within reach but is never reached. We have a natural tendency, it seems, to be dissatisfied. Like the two daughters of the leech, there is the continual cry "give me". Scripture recognises the unsatisfied nature of things. It lists four things that are never satisfied: Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, "Enough."¹

Contentment? Yes, it can be realised, but not by Harvey Norman, BMW or MetriCon.

Some of us will remember the Covenant Prayer that used to be repeated at the beginning of each year. It included these words: *Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or demeaned for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and whole-heartedly surrender all things to your glory and service.* "Whole-heartedly"?! Actually, that sounds like contentment. This prayer is a confession that a complete surrender to the will of the Living God brings with it a level of satisfaction and contentment that was unexpected. "Surprised by joy" said CS Lewis.

Apparently Paul had it. He said "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content". I reckon many would be prepared to pay a lot of money to be able to say that. Contentment. Can I have it? Can you have it? As stated already: Yes.

When Jesus, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, effects change in the heart of an individual, the extent of that change is comprehensive. Everything is different. It may not be immediate but as time goes by, and the journey through life in the company of the Saviour continues, an awareness of a new and better paradigm becomes more and more evident. The peace of God becomes a reality. Hope is built up. The future, unknown as it is, holds no fear. The circumstances of life become manageable. Yes, the way is sometimes difficult and painful, and challenges remain. But desires have changed. Expectations have changed. The promises of Scripture are read and understood, they are beginning to be realised and they provide reassurance. The mind is being renewed and there is a new and better perspective of things. The Lord God is in control. Life, and death, health and

¹ Proverbs 30:15-16

sickness, are all in His hands. It all leads to being content. Like Paul said, contentment is learned.

In the account of Elisha and the land owners that we read about in the Scripture reading, we came across a wealthy married couple who were generous and supportive of Elisha's ministry. There already is a lesson for us, a lesson repeated in the NT². This couple were not evangelists or prophets or missionaries. We are not told if they had a prominent role in the religious establishment, but probably not. They were wealthy farmers with servants³. But they supported a man of God who was outspoken, who put himself in the way of danger and who lived an austere lifestyle. I call their support cup-of-cold-water ministry⁴. If you can't, or don't, do the work yourself, at the very least support those who do.

It is a common misconception that it's easy to be generous when wealthy, but wealth and generosity seldom coexist. I heard it said by door-to-door collectors for a certain charity that you will collect more in Elizabeth and Salisbury than St Georges or Burnside. But this couple were both wealthy *and* generous. And they supported God's worker, providing a comfortable place for Elisha to stay.

The Scripture tells us the couple were "wealthy". We are not told exactly what that meant, but I would guess that if that couple could be transported to an average home in Adelaide in 2024, they may not consider themselves so wealthy. We have the biggest houses in the world. We spend huge amounts on heating and cooling. We are the largest market for online fashion spending, in fact we are amongst the highest spenders in the world.⁵ Relative to the world generally today, the vast majority of us are wealthy. So, are we content? Anecdotal evidence suggests "no". But when Elisha offered this couple some form of gift in gratitude for their support and generosity, it was politely refused. The woman said "I dwell among my own people". On first reading this seems a strange reply, but she could have just as well said "Thank you for your kind offer, but really we have all we need – we are content". These two were relatively wealthy, generous and supportive of God's worker, but significantly, and certainly not automatically, they were content.

But Paul was able to say that he was able to be content in *every* circumstance. And this is one area, amongst many, where the gospel has such broad application. It applies to the slave and the king, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the employee and the business owner, the retired and the apprenticed. But a misunderstanding of this also leads to the assertion that, as Karl Marx put it, "religion is the opiate of the masses", suggesting that if you can make the poor content you can also keep them oppressed and suppressed. Scripture and history, however, puts paid to that assertion. Godliness in society brings hard work, wealth and prosperity to all⁶. This is not to deny the suffering experienced by many Christians. That is real, tragic and difficult. Most in Australia do not experience that kind of

² 1 Timothy 6:18

³ 2 Kings 4:18-19

⁴ Matthew 10:42

⁵ Source: Weekend Australian 27-28/1/24 "Yacht envy and the insidious curse of relative deprivation" by Virginia Tapscott

⁶ Jeremiah 29:7

suffering, so while we remember and pray for those who do⁷ we trust that the Holy Spirit will help us should suffering be our experience.

Scripture encourages us to “learn to be content”. Contentment does not come naturally. It is a wonderful reality accessible to all God’s people, learned through the hearing and application of God’s word, the encouragement of fellow believers, past and present, and a reliance upon the help of the Helper, the Holy Spirit. May we all learn to be content in Christ through all the circumstances of life.

Amen.

Prayer for Suffering Christians: (Barnabas Prayer for 3/02/2024)

Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd,

We are so thankful to be part of Your flock, wherever we are in the world.

Please work through those You have called to lead Your people, especially in places of poverty, discrimination and pressure. Give them wisdom and courage, especially as they can expect to be main targets for persecution by those who are hostile to You.

We pray You will help them follow Your example, as the Chief Shepherd, so that they may be a channel of blessing to Your suffering people and will receive an unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:4)

Hymn: *by GC Nuemark. tr, by C Winkworth. Tune: My hope is built on nothing less ...*

1. Leave God to order all thy ways, and hope in him whate’er betide;
Thou’lt find him in the evil days thy all-sufficient strength and guide;
Who trusts in God’s unchanging love [builds on the rock that naught can move. *repeat*]
2. Only thy restless heart keep still, and wait in cheerful hope, content
To take whate’er his gracious will, his all-discerning love, hath sent;
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known [to him who chose us for his own].
3. Sing, pray, and swerve not from his ways, but do thine own part faithfully;
Trust his rich promises of grace, so shall they be fulfilled in thee;
God never yet forsook at need [the soul that trusted him indeed].

© public domain

Benediction

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your heart and establish you in every good work and word. Amen

This service was prepared by Warren Mack for HopeNet SA

⁷ Hebrews 13:3