

# CONTENTMENT

## Genesis of an essay

This morning, Sunday, June 10, 2007, I woke up in my Sky View bed at about 8:15 with the most wonderful thoughts swirling around in my head. I was in a comfortable position and would not be getting up for at least three more hours, so I had plenty of time to see where my thoughts would take me. What a privilege! My musing began with a passage from Hebrews 11 that I had used in the service at Sky View three days ago. Suddenly I saw in my mind the answers to a couple of questions that I have been pondering for a long time. The questions may seem to be on two entirely different subjects, as they did to me before today. Now I know they are very much connected! Here they are:

1. What is there about the prosperity message of so many otherwise sound television preachers that disturbs me so much? (Note: It was not until I moved to Sky View that I had the time to become acquainted with the current TV preachers.) I have long believed that God did not promise his people wealth, good health and continual happiness on earth, but something else was also wrong. What was it?
2. Am I “giving up” because I accept my crippling neurological disease (PLS) rather than fighting to be cured? Specifically, why don’t I ask God to perform a miracle by healing my body, ridding it of PLS?

I knew this would be something I would have to write about, but where? In the current issue of my journal? And then my mind exploded as it went from one Bible passage or incident to another until I had a full sermon mentally formulated. Far too much for the journal, I decided to make my thoughts into an essay that I would call “Contentment,” for that is the new point of view from which I am now looking at the old familiar Scriptures that I have loved for so long. Contentment (or rather, lack of it) also plays a large role in the answers to both questions. That said, I am eager to begin!

## Background for the essay

In May, for the monthly worship service that we call “Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends,” I wrote a commentary on the story of one of the thieves who died with Jesus. After reading the paper, Cliff, our moderator, introduced a new theme with this: “The crucifixion story clearly tells us that life does not end with our death. For believers, Paradise lies ahead! There is a song that expresses a desirable attitude for us to have on earth: ‘This World Is Not My Home.’” And then, for the first time at Sky View, we sang that wonderful song. My intent was to turn our eyes from this world where we are temporarily living to the Permanent Heavenly Place where we are heading.

The service continued with a reading by Leo of Hebrews 12:22-24, beginning with this: *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.* A few comments led us to our next hymn: “Come, We That Love the Lord (We’re Marching to Zion).” For the sermon Cliff read the first half of my essay “Oh, Wow!” which is all about Heaven. With the promise that, Lord willing, the essay and the theme would be continued next month, the program was ended.

On June 7 (for we meet on the first Thursday of the month) we again sang “This World Is Not My Home” to re-enter the theme from May. Then Cliff read “On a Journey,” a meditation I had written for this service. The piece was divided into three sections, each with a major Scripture passage read by Leo. The third passage, from Isaiah 35, talks of a highway for God’s people and says, *They’ll sing as they make their way to Zion.* This, of course, led into our singing once again “We’re Marching to Zion.” Then Cliff read the second half of “Oh, Wow!”, added some wonderful commentary of his own, and concluded the service.

Realizing that, among other things, my thoughts about contentment came from a convergence of part 1 of "On a Journey" and Cliff's comments, I will now reproduce both of them in this essay, so you can go through my thinking process with me. Here is the first section of "On a Journey":

As a child, I longed for adventure. I wanted to go places, to see sights, to do things, and these desires caused a restlessness, a discontent within me. In time I did do some traveling and had many interesting experiences, the memories of which nourish my soul to this day. Now, because of my neurological condition, my traveling days on this earth are over and I don't mind at all! I am quite content to stay here at Sky View with limited physical mobility and I'll tell you why. It's because I've come to see that all of life for a person with faith in God is an adventure, a spiritual journey that doesn't end until we arrive at the place our Lord has prepared for us. I am enjoying THIS trip so much that I don't miss the other trips. The best is yet to come!

My attitude has been shaped by the Bible stories and passages that I read repeatedly throughout my life. One of my favorites is found in Hebrews 11. Listen:

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

*By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.*

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

The patriarchs knew that this world was not their home; they were just passing through on their journey to the heavenly country that would be their permanent abode. Their faith in what was yet to come affected their lifestyle in interesting ways, such as being willing to move around a lot with tents as houses; living with unfulfilled promises; and living as strangers and foreigners on this earth. They set a fine standard for all of God's people on the move.

And here are Cliff's comments, entitled Buelah Land:

What Verna has had to say today about our journey and about those glimpses of heaven that we are given in scripture has had a special resonance with me because the Bible Study at my church has just finished reading John Bunyan's classic allegory of the Christian life, The Pilgrim's Progress. And in that book Bunyan paints a picture of what the Pilgrims see as they approach their heavenly home.

What Bunyan envisions is a beautiful green land called Beulah set next to a river, and on the far side of the river a hill, Mt. Zion, rises up to the Celestial City, their final destination. I'm sure you will have no trouble seeing that picture in your mind! It's what you see every time you look out the windows here at Sky View.

But Bunyan's picture is meant to show us the final stages of our spiritual journey, when we near

our spiritual home. That river we must cross to get to our heavenly home is death, but what inspires me is the picture Bunyan gives of that land on THIS side of the river, in other words while we are still here on earth. That land, Beulah Land, is one we can and should live in now, as we near the end of our spiritual journey. And it is a land that is particularly relevant to those of us who have a little gray in our hair, or just a little hair, because it is much closer for us than for those who are younger. Bunyan pictures it as a land where the birds are singing and beautiful flowers grow, a land where it is always daytime, and the air smells sweet. And it is this way because of its proximity to that heavenly land across the river. It is the light reflecting off that city made of gold that banishes darkness from Beulah Land. And what Bunyan calls the Shining Ones, ministering angels, often walk in Beulah Land. And best of all for those who have reached Beulah Land is that they catch frequent glimpses of that heavenly city across the river, with its gates of gleaming pearls and its streets of gold.

Now Verna has given us a beautiful glimpse of heaven, and I think I know why that is so. I'm certain that she herself is a resident of Beulah Land. We've gotten an eyewitness account of some of what it's like to live there. And the thing is, we can all live there along with Verna. Right now! In a place that is a little bit of heaven right here on earth! To which I say, "Oh Wow"!

The "other things" I mentioned as influences for this essay include several Scripture passages about contentment that have been in my mind for a long time. Here are these well-known verses in their context (all underlining mine):

*I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:10-13).*

*[Some] have been robbed of the truth and ... think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the truth and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:5b-10).*

*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can human beings do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5,6).*

### Thoughts on the way to the answers

In this section I am going to assume that you are familiar with the basic story of Abraham as told in Genesis. If you are not, please read it. Begin with chapter 11, verse 10, where we are given information about his ancestors, stemming from Noah's son Shem, and read at least until 25:11, where his death is recorded. It is fascinating reading! (Although he had a different name at first, I am going to call our main human character Abraham throughout this essay.) An interesting fact disclosed later in the Bible is that Terah, his father, was an idol worshiper. There were no Scriptures for Abraham to read and his home environment, while religious, was not God-centered. But Abraham was different in that he believed in the one true God. Not only that, but he made faith in God his way of life. God began to speak to him, laying the groundwork for a deep friendship between the two. Abraham showed his reverence for God by his obedience, the sign of true lifestyle faith. A remarkable story emerges when we read the Genesis account along with Hebrews and other New Testament passages, more than I want to put in one essay. In this

one I will focus on Contentment and, Lord willing, I'll write one later focusing on Obedience.

Although I now think otherwise, as I will explain soon, in the Genesis account it sounds like the total extent of God's first interaction with Abraham was to bring him a difficult order coupled with a magnificent set of promises: *"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the place I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* The story continues: *So Abraham left as the Lord had told him.* What a basic example of faith: the Lord said "Leave" – so he left! He took with him his wife Sarah, who was barren; his nephew Lot, whose father had died; and his father, Terah.

On the way to the land of Canaan, which we know to be their destination, the group settled in Haran long enough for them to accumulate possessions and to enlarge their group. Two other things of note took place in Haran: Terah died and Abraham turned 75. He was one year older than I am now – how encouraging! Inside myself I find a sense of adventure stirring as I write this. Thank you, Lord, for recording Abraham's age.

When they arrived in Canaan, the Lord both APPEARED to Abraham and SPOKE to him. The message he received was, *"To your offspring I will give this land."* His response is made to seem perfectly normal by the word "so": *So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.* Abraham was EXPERIENCING God in a very personal way, yet he never forgot his position in relation to God. Everywhere he moved, he built an altar and worshipped, calling on the name of the Lord.

As well as I knew Abraham's story from Genesis and as much as I loved Hebrews 11, I had missed clues to his deep faith that seem obvious to me now. To help me stay on track and to let you follow my thinking, I'm going to reprint here part of the New Testament passage that is already in this essay (my emphases):

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. FOR he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who SAY such things SHOW that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. INSTEAD, they were LONGING for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, FOR he has prepared a city for them.*

The main clue I missed is the prominent effect that the heavenly city had on the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Look at the sentences that begin with FOR and INSTEAD. Don't they indicate that knowledge of a spiritual realm, better than the earthly one, was the motivating force behind the attitudes and actions of these three men? Abraham obviously passed the news on to his off-spring, but how did HE find out about this special country with its wonderful city? And when? Here's the way I now see the interaction between God and Abraham at the beginning of the story:

Back in Ur of the Chaldeans, when God was telling Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his family, God told him much more than what was going to happen on earth. I picture Abraham paying rapt attention as the Lord unveiled to him a heavenly country and city that FAR surpassed anything seen on earth! Not only would his descendants be formed into an earthly nation, but all believers through the ages would be called children of Abraham in the spiritual, holy, eternal nation that God was forming. Indeed God WAS going to make the name of his friend great! No wonder their total number would be uncountable! Abraham's head was spinning with excitement, especially with thoughts of the heavenly

country which contained the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God! And just think: he was a CITIZEN of that country! After this revelation, it no longer mattered where, among whom, or in what kind of dwelling he lived while he was temporarily on earth. After all, he was just an alien and stranger anywhere on earth, even in the country where he was born and grew up.

I wonder how many of us are thinking of something as solid as a country and a city when we think of the place where we will spend eternity. Does the word “Heaven” sound substantial to you? In recent years I have capitalized Heaven whenever I’ve written the word. That makes sense to me. Since I capitalize the names of the temporary countries on this temporary earth, why not do the same to the permanent place where my citizenship lies? Yes, I do think of myself as a true citizen of a real country where God is King and I am a grateful servant. I function on earth as an ambassador for my King; therefore I am subject to reassignment at any time, for short periods or long. Once I was sent to Arizona for nine months; another time to Florida for one week; and in 1996 on two trips to Cairo, Egypt, first for three days and then for fourteen! On each of these occasions the assignment definitely came from God; my job was simply to obey and go. And each produced eternal results for which I can only say, “To God be the glory!”

Lying in bed on June 10, I began rethinking my second trip to Cairo, and that’s when I first saw part of my life meshing with the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I had been invited by the Christians in Cairo, whom I had met during my three day visit, to come and hold a two week series of evangelistic meetings among the women in their fellowship. There was an apartment in the building where the meetings were held, where visiting speakers sometimes stayed. My hosts had decided to let me use the apartment rather than have me live with families. I was glad! I needed time alone to prepare for messages and to write. The next day one of the men asked me if the apartment was suitable for me. When I told him I was pleased with it and quite comfortable, he said the women would be so happy with the news. They had been worried that, since I was from the USA, I might expect living conditions that they could not supply! No, I was CONTENT – just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were CONTENT to live in tents, even though they could have afforded more permanent quarters. I saw then that CONTENTMENT is a byproduct of FAITH, which is the point of view from which I had always looked at Hebrews 11. (I had seen the obedience, too. Lifestyle faith and obedience surely do go together.)

Then I also saw the connection between contentment on earth and the heavenly city. If you were absolutely certain that an incredibly wonderful inheritance awaited you as soon as you arrived in that city, wouldn’t you be content with less, even with imperfections, on earth? The patriarchs were. According to the Hebrews account, they were all LONGING for the heavenly realm; it was SO desirable in their eyes! I would say they were living in what John Bunyan called Buelah Land! A challenging statement follows the one about their longing: *Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.* That certainly shows what God thinks of our attitude toward Heaven! God really WANTS our hearts and minds to be set on things above! In what direction do YOUR longings lie? I wonder if God is ashamed of us? I hope not!

How can we know if we are dwelling in “Buelah Land”? Besides checking our level of contentment and discovering what we are longing for, we can check our relationship to earthly nations and to the people of those nations. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob not only WERE aliens and strangers on the earth, but they freely ADMITTED the fact; that was how they viewed themselves. Notice that they were not thinking of Ur as their home and themselves as aliens because they were away from their home country. It seems as though Ur was not on their minds at all. If it had been, they would have had opportunity to return. No, they considered themselves aliens and strangers ON THE EARTH. This is similar to thinking of ourselves as ambassadors for Christ. In both cases, we are seeing ourselves as belonging to the heavenly country with the whole world as a foreign land. If we truly felt this way, I think all feelings of extreme patriotism for any nation on earth would be gone. I can’t imagine those who dwell in “Buelah Land” thinking that God prefers their earthly country or their kind of people to others. Can you?

I learned so much about my own thinking during my stays in Egypt! Let me tell you briefly how they came about. In New York, in the summer of 1995, I met a man from Cairo who was visiting family

members here. In a few minutes we knew that both of us were Christians. All barriers came down then and we spent a marvelous two hours talking about Christianity in Egypt, getting acquainted, and worshipping our Lord Jesus. Before we parted, he invited me to come to Cairo and speak to the ecumenical society of which he was a part. I had never traveled overseas and had no great desire to do so, but I was the Lord's servant; I would go wherever God sent me. In September I received a brochure in the mail advertising a five day trip to Israel for women. Scheduled for February, 1996, it combined study and worship sessions with tourism. Normally I would have thrown the brochure away, but this time I kept reading. I remember saying to my husband, "I think I'm supposed to go on this trip!" "Then go," he said. I was stunned when I noticed that one of three options for extending the trip was to spend two days in Cairo. "This is how I'm going to get to Egypt!" I marveled, totally in awe of God.

I had seen my Egyptian friend a few more times during his visit and Leo and I had met and developed a friendship with his sister and her husband, permanent residents of the USA. At this point I phoned him, now back in Cairo, and asked if I should come to Egypt in February. "Yes, come," he said, "and I will arrange to have you speak one night at the society." And just that quickly I was booked for a trip to Israel and Egypt!

In my hotel room the first morning in Cairo, I received a telephone call from my friend with surprising news: I would be speaking twice – that night and the next! I went with the tour group to see the pyramids and the Sphinx that day, but turned down the ride on the Nile and the shopping so I would have time to prepare for preaching. On the second day the leaders asked me if I would stay one more day and hold a third meeting the next evening. They promised to make all the arrangements with the tour group, the airline, and my family, and I would stay in the home of a Christian family. The Spirit was moving, and I said yes. On the first night, I gave a gospel message centered around my testimony, allowing the people to get to know me. My second message was about Adam and Eve, a story I never get tired of telling, as it explains the gospel so clearly. It didn't take me long to figure out what my third subject would be: Heaven! The leaders enjoyed that message as much as I did, and before they took me to the airport, they asked me to come back soon for a two week visit.

That's how I came to be in the apartment supplied by my Egyptian friends in October, 1996. What an adventure I was having with God! I brought with me a notebook in which I had listed ideas for gospel messages, as well as props for illustrating some of them. This was the fulfillment of a burning desire I had been given more than twenty years earlier to have a two week gospel campaign! After an introductory message the first night, my first sermon was about being an ambassador for Christ, an image I had cherished since it was brought to my attention during my college years. I remembered, too, while lying in my Sky View bed, what I said the last time I was with my Egyptian brothers and sisters: "I'll see you again, either in Cairo, in New York or in Heaven!" Yes, all three places were real to me, and had been throughout my Christian life.

But there was more. It was while living among the Egyptians in Cairo that I realized I could be content anywhere in the world God wanted me to be. We are all human beings, created by God in his image. In every nation on earth, God's holy nation also exists, with the Spirit overflowing the boundaries, binding us together, making us ONE. And in every nation there are residents of "Bueh Land," calling to the believers, "Come up higher!" and to unbelievers, "Come on over! There's room at the cross for you!" When I returned to New York, I was so exhilarated that my daughter Marty said she wouldn't have been surprised if I had moved permanently to Cairo! As you know, that did not happen. Instead I brought my Egyptian friends here with me in my heart, grateful for all I learned while living among them.

#### A brief look at DIScontent

The evidences of discontent are so painful, I hate to even list them; that's why I intend to keep this section brief. Yet looking at contrasts is a good point of view from which to understand a subject. In the lives of discontented people, some of these characteristics are sure to be found: grumbling and

complaining; lack of gratitude; envy; jealousy; greed; dissatisfaction (always wanting more); lack of peace; living in the past; even idolatry.

These Bible verses come immediately to mind:

*Proverbs 30:15,16 – The leech has two daughters. “Give! Give!” they cry. There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, “Enough!”: the grave; the barren womb; land, which is never satisfied with water; and fire, which never says, “Enough!”*

*Ecclesiastes 12:12 – Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.*

And these Bible stories:

– The children of Israel in the wilderness. For forty years the vast majority of those who had been delivered from bondage by God through Moses grumbled, complained, were ungrateful, and lived in the past to such an extent that they could not imagine anything good awaiting them in the future. As difficult as these incidents are to read, and as severe as God’s actions might seem to be, it is important that we know them well. *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us*, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. *So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!* Yes, we all have the potential of becoming discontented. Let’s take heed!

– The story of Abraham and Lot parting company (Genesis 13). This incident was sparked by quarreling between the herdsmen of the two men, both of whom were wealthy. The land simply was not adequate to support their large flocks plus those of the native inhabitants. Abraham, a peaceful man whom we know to be content, gave Lot the choice of which direction to move, because it really didn’t matter to him. That’s a sign of contentment! It did matter to Lot, however. He chose the direction that he felt was advantageous for his animals, pitching his tents near the wicked city of Sodom. Before long Lot abandoned his tents and moved into a house in Sodom where, according to the New Testament, he was not a very happy man. I believe we choose whether to be contented or discontented. That will be the subject of another section of this essay. But now it’s time for ...

### The answers

1. What is there about the prosperity message of so many otherwise sound television preachers that disturbs me so much?

By “otherwise sound” I mean the preachers know and teach that salvation comes by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to pay for our sins. By “prosperity message” I mean the teaching that God wants his children to be materially wealthy and physically healthy on earth. Before now, I concentrated on the verses being offered as promises, and found that most of them (generally from the Old Testament) were not only taken out of context, but they also were being interpreted in ways that contradicted the plain teaching of other parts of the Bible (especially the New Testament). Certainly I believe in finding secondary meanings in Bible passages and in making personal applications; that’s what makes Bible study so exciting! But in so doing, we must never violate the total message that God has given us in his written Word.

Through the years I also saw the pain and confusion of sincere believers who were following the formulas of their spiritual leaders without getting the desired results. Was something wrong with their faith, they wondered. In my opinion, something was wrong with offering the formulas. After all, God is GOD and we are merely PEOPLE. How do WE know what God has in mind for a certain individual or a given situation? Why not trust that God knows best how to promote his kingdom through us?

And then all of a sudden on June 10 I understood what else was wrong with the prosperity message:

it promotes DISCONTENT, a DISSATISFACTION with the way things are now! In all the weeks since then (it's now August 18) this thought has been confirmed many times. The message has nothing to do with our heavenly country or city! Its total focus is on the earth and is contrary to so much of what Jesus and the New Testament writers said. Prosperity teaching is the link between my two questions, as the second one assumes that God wants me well. In further answering question 1, I am going to concentrate on the material wealth prong of the message, while question 2 will contain my thoughts on physical health.

Concerning money, I heard a preacher say that God doesn't want us to be broke and disgusted. I agree with part of that. God wants us to be content, not disgusted, even if we happen to be broke. The preacher said there was a time when he didn't have much money, and he was not happy then. His attitude is sad and so is the assumption that other believers would feel as he did in the same circumstances. How contrary to Paul, the apostle who learned to be content whatever his situation and inspires others to do likewise! A preacher recently announced that a certain large number of believers were about to become millionaires as a blessing from the Lord. I can only imagine how many people hoped they would be among that number! And wouldn't they all be expressing discontent with their current situation?

On television it is clear to see that thousands upon thousands of people regularly drink in the prosperity message. I'm sure most of them are upright, sincere believers who would do anything the speaker requires of them, including fasting for 21 days or giving sacrificial amounts of money away, calling it seed, expecting that God will reward them with much more money in return. Like the people of whom Paul wrote to Timothy, they think that godliness is a means to financial gain. Paul says they have been robbed of the truth, which is that godliness with contentment is great gain! I wonder if our current prosperity preachers would invite Paul to give his message on money in their pulpits? Let's imagine what part of the sermon might say:

Jesus said to his followers, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can be a slave to two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve to both God and Money." Yes, money can easily become an idol in our lives, vying for the attention that belongs to God. God wants us to love him with all our heart. If we make the accumulation of money and material things a priority in our lives, we are in danger of losing the close personal relationship that God wants to have with us. How much better it is to lay up treasure in Heaven's bank than in one on earth!

Once a young man asked Jesus what he must do to get eternal life. The man declared that he already kept the commandments, yet he felt that something was still missing. Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come, follow me." The young man couldn't bear the thought of parting with his great wealth, so he walked sadly away. What a choice! What would you have done if you had been that man? As he was leaving, Jesus said to his disciples, "It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." Does that shock you? It really shocked the disciples! So Jesus further explained that, while this is impossible with humans, nothing is impossible with God.

I can't understand why so many believers aspire to be rich in spite of both the teaching and the example of Jesus. Our Lord didn't even have a home of his own on earth. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the truth and pierced themselves with many griefs. I know some of them, and their stories are heartbreaking! Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake

you.” Now that’s a gift that money can’t buy! The continual presence of God in my life is an asset I wouldn’t trade for any amount of money!

Personally speaking, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength, and if I can do it, so can you. Meditate, for example, on this truth: We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. Then decide what it would take to make you content. My co-workers and I decided that if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that, and our conclusion has freed us from worry. Jesus said our heavenly Father knows we have these basic needs. Our job is to seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness and these things (that is, food and clothing) will be given us as well.

And that’s the way I live my life: promoting the kingdom of God, getting to know Christ, setting my affections on things above, not on earthly things like money and what it can buy. And my God truly does supply my needs. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

What do those who preach the prosperity message do when they come upon the passages used in Paul’s “sermon”? Do they love old hymns, as I do, that have words such as these: “I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold ... I’d rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.” Whenever I hear that hymn, I think of Hiram Gingrich, my childhood pastor in the Annville Church of the Brethren. Mentally, I see him standing behind the pulpit, wearing his brown suit with the plain standup collar, singing with tears streaming from his eyes, “I’d rather have Jesus than riches untold ...” That had a profound effect on me! We cannot serve both Jesus and Money. Hiram and I chose Jesus. What is your choice?

2. Am I “giving up” because I accept my crippling neurological disease (PLS) rather than fighting to be cured? Specifically, why don’t I ask God to perform a miracle by healing my body, ridding it of PLS?

The short answer to the first question is “yes and no,” depending on how you define “giving up.” And a quick answer to the second question is that I believe it is God’s plan for me to advance his kingdom through having PLS, and I am content with that. If I were to wake up some morning and find all symptoms of PLS gone, I would think God’s plan for me had moved on to a new phase, and I would be content with that, too. A few people have commented about the glory that would come to God if I were to be miraculously cured. I think God receives just as much glory when his children peacefully and joyfully serve him no matter what their physical condition!

Those who tell me not to “give up” certainly mean well. They want to encourage me by saying God is going to restore my ability to speak and use my limbs, either through the prayers of God’s people or through contact with someone with a healing ministry, so that I will go about preaching as I did before PLS struck my body. To them my answer is, “May God’s will be done.” But I find nothing within my spirit that confirms the message of my well-meaning friends. Please know that I am NOT discouraged with my condition and that to me, the term “giving up” means failing to do what God wants me to do concerning PLS. Again, I have no inner indication that my attitude and beliefs are wrong. I have written about this before in other places, for the issue keeps recurring, but I have never done so comprehensively. Just last week another woman asked me if I believe in healing. I knew she was referring to a miraculous event and that my answer would have to be complex, not simple. Here, now, is my attempt to explain what I believe about healing:

- a. Believing as I do that God never changes; knowing that the miracles recorded in the Bible are true; recalling stories of healings that I have heard or read; and knowing that nothing is impossible with God: yes, I believe that God can and does heal through miracles today. But as I said earlier, I do not believe God has promised his people perfect health on earth; therefore, I do not feel that God owes me a healing when I become ill. Warren Wiersbe says, “God does not owe me anything; I owe God everything!” I agree. I might ask the Lord to heal me, but I cannot insist on a healing, as I have heard others

do. On the other hand, I know there HAS been divine intervention at critical times in my life, and I'm grateful.

b. I believe that God often heals through doctors and medicine. I have been healed many, many times over my lifetime, because I have had many illnesses. Usually doctors and medicine were involved in the cure and sometimes surgery as well. At least twice I was very close to dying, once in early childhood and once in the delivery room of a hospital. It is amazing to me how often the body can bounce back from serious injury and disease. Surely our Creator designed us well!

While there is no known cure on earth for PLS, this disease is not permanent. I will be healed as soon as the trumpet call of God is heard or I go through the experience we call death. Knowing this gives me a patient endurance that I might not otherwise have. Meanwhile, I do take medication to regulate spasms and to control drooling, plus two other medicines that doctors think might help. I also have a feeding tube to lessen the chances of aspiration and choking. I get some physical therapy (passive resistance) three times a week plus more from my husband during his visits. This summer Andrea, a former member of my Bible seminars, began giving me weekly reflexology treatments on my hands and feet. I consider the way I am now to be normal for me. Perhaps that's why I don't feel sick!

c. "Giving up" can also be viewed as surrendering, and living life totally surrendered to our Lord Jesus Christ, our Commander-in-Chief, is an ideal to which all God's people should aspire. We who have made total surrender our goal practice this discipline incident by incident through our lives until we can sing with heartfelt sincerity the old hymn "I Surrender All". So in this sense, yes, I have given up.

My attitude of acceptance toward PLS is not at all passive or negative, however; it is aggressively active and positive. I realize and admit that I am not my own; I've been bought with a price. I belong to my Lord Jesus and will let him decide how he wants me to glorify him. I can truly say that I am CONTENT, another attitude I consider to be aggressively active and positive. The light that I see at the end of my tunnel is so bright that the tunnel itself seems light, not dark. My Lord is holding my hand as I travel through it, and I am at peace.

d. The witness of Scripture. Because of what I have already written on this subject in essays such as "In Sickness and Health"; "Chosen"; "The Answer Is Yes; What Is the Question?"; and "Welcome!", I will use only a few Bible references here. In the book of Romans, where Paul gave such a complete, methodical presentation of the gospel and the Christian life, he says nothing about a promised healing for diseases. That was not an oversight! Rather, Paul knew from personal experience that God made no such promise. He told Timothy to take medicine for his chronic stomach problems, with no mention of seeking a miracle cure.

I like to think about Gaius, John's dear friend to whom he wrote a letter we know as 3 John. Let's read part of the letter together: *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy to have some believers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the believers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love.*

Because of the wording of John's prayer for him, I believe Gaius was not healthy at the time of the letter and that there were problems in his circumstances as well. But his focus was not on these things at all. He was such a loving man, so faithful in his service to God and the Church that his soul was satisfied. He was content! To your "How are you?" Gaius would have truthfully answered, "I'm fine!" He brought joy to those he served and to his absent friend, John; he brings joy to me also! If I could write to him today, I would say, "Thank you, Gaius, for setting a wonderful example for me. I'm fine, too!"

After a Sky View service recently, my friend Vallie said to me, "You never give up!" She meant, of course, that I continue to serve my Lord no matter what my circumstances. That's because opportunities keep

opening up for me. I made a vow a long time ago that I would teach the Bible as long as the Lord gave me breath and people asked me for teaching. What a privilege! I am blessed!

e. The witness of the Spirit. I believe the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit on many subjects besides the ones specifically mentioned, as in Romans 8:16, and that when the two are in agreement, we have inner peace. That is what Paul felt, I'm sure, when he stopped asking God to remove his "thorn in the flesh" and, instead, decided to live with it by God's grace; and that is what I feel concerning my decision not to pursue a miracle healing. I do remember a time in the 1940s when my family did seek a miracle cure. My father's sister Sara, with whom I increasingly identify, was never able to walk and could not talk normally. Sitting in her wheelchair day after day, she could only imagine how wonderful it would be to walk. Then a traveling evangelist, who also had a healing ministry, came into our area to hold services. With the approval of our family, Grandpa took Aunt Sara to a meeting for healing. Her condition remained unchanged, however. In 1967, in her late 50s, Aunt Sara left her body and her wheelchair behind to enter Heaven, never again to be hindered in any way!

Faith is a spiritual quality. There are several definitions of faith besides "believing God enough to act," the definition I used to describe lifestyle faith in my teaching. I like the one in Hebrews 11:1 – *Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*. The writer then gives an example that serves as a test for all of us: *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible*. People of faith are certain that God made the universe and everything in it, including us, out of nothing but his word; that is, as far back as they can see – even to the beginning – God is there. These same people are just as sure about the time to come, about what we hope for; that is, way into the future – far beyond their death – they see the eternal God, still interacting with his people. This glimpse into the future allowed the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 to obey God and be content with their situation on earth while simultaneously longing – yearning – in their spirits for their heavenly home. May the same be true of us today.

### Learning to be content

A staff member at Sky View approached me a few weeks ago and said, "You really are content. I've been watching, and contentment is written all over you." Then he added, "I would like to be more content. How can I begin?" I thought a few moments and then said, "Try not to complain." He liked that and said he would take the challenge. That's only one side of the coin, to be sure, but it's a start.

I like the fact that Paul said he had learned to be content. This tells me that contentment is not a quality you are born with, so that you either have it or you do not; nor is it a spiritual gift, given to some believers but not to all. While it may be easier for some than for others, according to their personalities, I believe all members of God's family (with the help of the Holy Spirit) could learn to be content if they wished.

Only God knows if we have traveled far enough on the road to contentment or whether we still have more to learn. Rather than trying to devise a formula for learning to be content, I'm going to stop now and let our Master Schoolteacher decide if anything further is needed for us as individual students in his school. My job, to write this essay, is now complete. If it has helped you to think about the subject, perhaps in a new way, I am glad.