

PART I
THIS IS WHO I AM.

SURPRISINGLY SATISFIED



A resolution to be content



Every Bite Counts

“This is going to be a good year for you, my friend. Thirty-six is a great age.”

Thirty-six.

It was the end of December, and that’s how old I was about to turn. I sat across the table from a friend who’d long since passed that decade of her life and watched her brown eyes glimmer with a tinge of remembered excitement.

I’m not sure why, but something about what she said really got to me. Maybe it was just the way she said it. Maybe it was the expression in her eyes as she looked at me. Maybe it was the little smirk that curled up at the corners of her petite lips. Whatever it was, it drew me in, got my attention, and settled into my mind and heart for consideration.

I thought about this birthday of mine from her perspective. On occasion we’d discussed the happenings of her twenties, the surprises that interrupted her thirties, and the settledness that had held her hand, gratefully escorting her into her forties. She’d now been married for twenty-five years, raised three incredible children,

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dealt with the unexpected twists and turns of life that most any person standing on the cusp of her fiftieth year has probably lived through. She'd seen disappointment, experienced incredible joy, and was now living a full life complete with deep friendships and an even deeper faith.

And here at a Christmastime restaurant table adorned with a delectable molten chocolate cake that we were ravenously sharing, she sighed the full breath of a woman satisfied. She swept her blonde bangs off her eyelids, cocked her head slightly, and told me that the season I was about to enter was a good one, that I should face it with expectation and enjoy its blessings. The kids are a bit more self-sufficient, marriage a few years more mature, the body still pretty much pointed in a northerly direction.

Yup, recalling that year in her life made her smile. It had been good.

And with that simple comment spoken, she went back to her eating—fork to mouth dripping with chocolaty goodness.

She must not have noticed my reaction. Didn't notice the weight of her comment hitting me with a full blow, like a baseball player swinging and connecting with the pitch. With one abrupt flick of the wrist, she had sent my heart sailing into the outfield of conviction. The thing she was suggesting, implying in so many words—the way she was proposing for me to approach this next phase of life I was entering—was exactly opposite of what my proclivity had been.

I'm the type of person, you see, who rushes ahead, who often just goes through the motions of any current activity on my way to the next one. My heart and my body haven't always been good about sharing the same space. Instead of relishing each moment, each year, each opportunity, each step on the journey, I'm constantly overeager to get to the next thing, which always looks more enticing than what's currently before me. I'm rarely satisfied in full with my present station.

A quick mental inventory revealed the facts, presenting ample evidence to support the claim that I hadn't really been in attendance for large portions of my life. As a teenager, I'd impatiently rushed

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toward young adulthood full throttle. As a single university student, I couldn't wait to be in a committed relationship and out of college so that life could "really begin." Then with a loving mate promised for life, I enjoyed our first years of marriage, but during some of them I secretly harbored discontentment with our childlessness. And when the kids started coming, the nights were long and the days even longer, and I prayed through each of them that bedtime would come more quickly today than I'd remembered it coming the day before. I was *present* for all of those years of my life as a student, a wife, a mom—a woman—and yet there was so little I could really remember, few emotions I could recall that accompanied some of the events of life. Why? Because I'd been there, but I hadn't really *been there*.

And with my thirty-fifth year coming to a close, it occurred to me that I hadn't engaged fully in *that* one either. Oh, I'd enjoyed it for the most part, but I hadn't soaked in it, relishing it, cherishing it, celebrating it, appreciating it for what it was—the only thirty-fifth year my life would ever know. Now it was nearly over, and before me stretched another year, populated with all the things, people, events, relationships, and milestones that would make it a once-in-a-lifetime experience—my only chance to fully be the person I'd be at this age and in this season. Only for the coming year would my husband be exactly like *this*. Only for these fleeting moments would my children talk, look, and act exactly like *this*. And if I chose to hurry through them in an attempt to avoid the parts I didn't like, I'd simultaneously miss all the things I *did* like about this season.

I recognized that by rushing through life, I'd been subtly devaluing those around me and the experiences I was involved in, not appreciating the importance and significance they bring to my life at this very moment, not grasping my responsibility for holding dear and treating well these gifts God has entrusted to me. Instead of embracing the privilege of being a blessing to my husband, my children, my friends, and others, I'd been quietly communicating that I wanted them to change and speed up, to get busy being somebody else, someone who's more in line with what I want and

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need, to hurry along to a place where they could make me happier than they currently do.

That's been me. Always looking toward the next moment, the next month, the next event, rarely allowing myself the privilege of fully participating and embracing the happenings that were right before me for that day.

And with one final bite of the most eye-opening dessert date I may have ever had, I realized this feeling had a name: *discontentment*. He shows up at your doorstep just like mine, eager to step inside and make himself at home. But instead of only coming for short visits on rare occasion, he refuses to leave, spreading his baggage everywhere, filling up corners of your space that you thought you'd locked up to this odious intruder. He comes. He lingers. He robs you of your years. Then before you know it, you've missed out on the joys in the journey, the growth that comes from battling through the difficulties, the sweet and savory experience of creating the memories.

I snapped out of my momentary trance and looked down at my plate. No more full bites left. Just chocolate syrup lacing the bottom, along with tiny crumbs of spongy cake dotted with miniscule dollops of whipped cream. With new resolve I started scraping up everything I could salvage, not wanting to leave behind any part of this delicious experience. Mmmmm. It had been worth all the hard work. Tasted just as good as the first.

Glad I didn't miss anything on my plate.

Promising never again to miss anything in my life.



- *Carefully consider what the Bible says about contentment:*
 - “True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth.” (1 Timothy 6:6 NLT)
 - “If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content (satisfied).” (1 Timothy 6:8 AMP)

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- “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.’” (Hebrews 13:5 NASB)
- *What have you been hurrying through?*
- *What have you been hurrying to get to?*
- *What are some of the good parts of your experience that you’ve missed in your attempt to rush through the more difficult ones?*
- *What can you do differently today to “scrape the plate”—to gather up all the good things around you and begin enjoying the journey of your life?*



The Secret

My boys like secrets. In fact, we have a whole game we play that's centered around them. Sometimes when their friends come over, we'll all stand in a single-file line. The person in front whispers a secret to the one behind him, and then the mysterious dialogue is sent from one to another until it reaches the end. Almost always by that time, whatever was shared between the first two participants has become misunderstood, misinterpreted, or otherwise manipulated along the way. Somehow the message just never gets translated clearly all the way back.

And judging from our current position in line as women today, in this culture, the same thing has happened to us. What we hear described as the secret of our satisfaction sounds a lot different than it did when it was first spoken and handed down many centuries ago.

Today we hear a philosophy of happiness that's actually been training us for a long time *not* to be happy. It says there's always something else, something more, some additional requirement we need before we can really enjoy life the way it was meant to

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be enjoyed. So the advertisements bombard us with suggestions, dripping with recommendations intended to whet our appetites and tantalize our taste buds, encouraging us to get rid of the old and acquire the new, to be dissatisfied with what we already have.

If you're single, you should have the security of marriage.

If you're married, you should have the freedom of singleness.

If you live in an apartment, you should own a home by now.

If you own a home, it should be bigger than the one you've got.

Getting the message?

Your clothes should be from *this* vendor.

Your appearance should look like *that* trend.

Your kids should be more like *those* kids.

Your standard of success should be measured by *these* standards.

The fallout from this is inevitable. Fed by such a steady diet of unclaimed desires, we can hardly help but develop a level of disdain for our current circumstances. Caught in this vicious cycle, we consequently feel incomplete and substandard. Unhappy. Uncontrolled. Unfulfilled.

Dissatisfied.

This is precisely why a satisfied woman is such a surprising woman. She is shockingly noticeable to a world that lives on a watered-down version of the secret—a secret that she obviously got the truth about. You can tell it by her peace and serenity, by her solace and restfulness, by the mysterious sense of ease that accompanies her. Her presence alone delivers an air of refreshment to any setting she enters, to anyone she's around.

The rarity and uniqueness of a woman who has chosen to be satisfied with what she has, with who she is, and with where she lives is as uncommon and worth celebrating as a Texas snowfall at Christmas. She's caught the faint whisper of a secret passed down through the ages, and she's chosen to trust its wisdom and to frame her life according to it. She's a woman of substance because she's a woman of satisfaction, a woman who's chosen contentment over displeasure.

Just like the person who first put the secret into words.

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Contentment wasn't some unique gift the apostle Paul had been given. It wasn't an automatic facet of his personality. It was a skill he had chosen and adopted, then had mastered and applied to his tumultuous life experience. As a result, he could say with biblical assurance, "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am" (Philippians 4:11).

He'd learned.

Come to realize.

Acquired the skill.

Developed the discipline.

Honed the ability.

And it all started with a "secret" (4:12)—a mystery that held strong and true even when his external circumstances were hardly conducive to living with a relaxed sense of well-being. He was well acquainted with disappointment and lack. He'd been beaten, stoned, and hounded by his enemies. In fact, when he wrote these words in a letter to Christian believers in the ancient Macedonian city of Philippi, he was in prison facing death, enduring some of the most extreme circumstances a person can imagine. Nothing was going well for him.

He wasn't in denial. He readily admitted that things looked bad. Neither was he playing the persecution card, acting like a martyr, trying to draw some measure of satisfaction from knowing he was going through more than everyone else.

He just knew a secret. And the secret gave him peace and serenity in the teeth of his ominous difficulties—the same secret we also can reach out and grab and hold on to when things are as bad as they can get, or perhaps when they're simply just not what we prefer. It's the key to unleashing a flood of joy into our hearts, the kind that rages within no matter what is raging without.

Paul's secret was this: he had *resolved* to be content.

I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well

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fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11–13)

The Greek word he originally penned in verse 11 to communicate our word *content* referred to an inner sufficiency—a satisfaction found through the depth of one’s own life with God, independent of our surroundings. When unearthed and put to use, this “secret” sufficiency is able to bring a full measure of enjoyment and emotional stability to any kind of life experience, no matter how dull or distressing.

Not just for Paul.

For you. For me.

And that puts women like us in a position to be amazingly free.

When you’ve concluded that what you already have on hand is enough, that it’s adequate—that it’s been deemed by God as *sufficient*—then you’re equipped and empowered to participate fully in the tasks set before you during this season of life. Paul described it like this:

God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work.

(2 Corinthians 9:8)

One thing leads to another. The more you believe that God’s grace to you is overflowing, the more you’ll be convinced that you will always have everything you need. And the more certain you are that you’ll never lack, the more willing and able you’ll be to give of yourself and your resources when called for because you’ll be certain God will always replenish your supply.

You can just bank on that. Your God can be trusted to grant you the supply you need to excel at His purposes. So if you don’t have *it*—whatever *it* is—it’s because you don’t need it. You may *want* it, but it’s not necessary in order to accomplish what He knows is most important for your life today. Otherwise He’d have given it to you.

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He loves you too much to “withhold the good from those who live with integrity” (Psalm 84:11).

Whatever He’s given or not given, He’s done for a specific reason—a reason known only to Him perhaps but one you can trust with full confidence, sight unseen. Every decision you need to make, every task you need to accomplish, every relationship you need to navigate, every element of daily life you need to traverse, God has already perfectly matched up with an equivalent-to-overflowing supply of His grace. If you don’t agree with that, then you either lack a proper appreciation for what you have, or you are doing things that you’re not supposed to be participating in right now.

You can always tell people who operate from a position of perceived lack and deficiency. They’re stingy with their time. They’re selfish with their resources. They’re tight fisted with their energy. They’re reluctant to sow of themselves into the lives of others because they’re afraid they don’t have enough to do it with and still have enough left over for themselves. Not enough time, energy, talent, money, skill, patience. They’re like my two-year-old, unwilling to share with his friends for fear he’ll run out of what he’s got.

But whenever we operate that way, the “every good work” that Paul outlines—the truly important tasks and relationships of life, the ones that promise blessing to us as well as to others—go unattended and undone. We’re not able to fully participate, much less excel in something, when we don’t feel like we have the proper amount, the proper brand, the proper type of resources with which to participate in the first place. So the “work” misses out on our touch, and we miss the many ways the “work” could touch us—the impact, the memories, the lessons, the experiences that God is knitting together to become a key part of our story.

God has already given enough. He always does.

And when you and I choose to recognize this and trust in His continued supply, we’ll be able to engage in life in a way we never have before. We’ll finally be living life to the fullest.

You’ve found the secret.

Now you can pass it on.

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- *A woman of contentment is aware of her needs and what God has already supplied to meet them. Begin your journey to contentment by making a list. Label one side “My Needs.” Label the other “God’s Provision.” Then match up your needs with the way God is currently meeting them. Place your list in a handy place for the times you are tempted to lean toward dissatisfaction.*
- *What might God be trying to grow in your character or cement in your relationship with Him by keeping you separated from some of the things you want but don’t yet have?*



Overflowing Blessing

Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back. (Luke 6:38 NLT)

“Use *exact measurements*.” That’s what my recipe card says. Emphasis on the word “exact.” I was given this list of instructions by a friend who not only shared her technique for baking the best bread I’ve ever tasted but also a jar of bread “starter” for me to keep in the refrigerator. Now I had the chance to see if I could match her abilities. To amaze my family with homemade bread. *That* kind of homemade bread. Like hers.

Once a week I go to the refrigerator and pull out the starter—a bubbling liquid concoction that serves as the foundation for this fabulous bread. Then I unfold the tattered piece of paper she gave me, and I carefully follow the written guidelines. These are extremely important, she told me.

Boy, was she ever right.

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This bread is moody. It has a bit of an attitude problem. You're never quite sure what sets it off, but one little bobble in the preparation process can keep the dough from rising properly or baking to a perfectly golden brown. You have to be careful.

As time has gone along, my kids have begun to help me with this, pulling their stools over to the counter, eager to dirty their hands in the kneading process. But before kneading, the flour must be added. Six cups, to be exact. And "exact" those scoops must be. I can now entrust this step into the hands of my six-year-old, who's seen with his own eyes the kind of mood swings a loaf can exhibit when fed with too much or too little flour. He's gotten this down to a science—a Luke 6:38 science: "a good measure—pressed down, shaken together."

He reaches the utensil down into the airtight flour bin and collects "a good measure." Nothing skimpy about the serving he's gathered. Thankfully he's still holding the measuring cup over the container because flour is spilling from the sides of his scoop. But knowing the need for just the right amount to be added to the ingredients, which are already poured and waiting in a nearby bowl, his tiny fingers secure a good grasp on the handle, and he gently "shakes" the cup.

I've explained to him that this shaking action eliminates the air pockets that can form underneath, occupying space that can still be filled with flour. By shaking it enough, he can be sure that every square inch of measuring cup is being used for his purpose.

Finally he puts his other hand on top of the mound and pats gently to make sure it is "pressed down." Inevitably he finds that the cup can now hold more than before. So he continues to add flour, leveling it off until he determines it's as full as possible. Then he pours the scoop into the mixing bowl.

Six times he does this. Scoop, shake, press down. Scoop, shake, press down. There's only one part of the biblical directions his illustration is lacking. And it's the part that compels us to choose contentment over discontentment every day: "a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and *running over*."

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It appears there's nothing exact about God's recipe of return to us. His gifts are overflowing. He's not stingy with His goodness or ungenerous with His supply. When you choose to give, He promises you'll have enough—more than you think—filling you back up with even more than you had to begin with. Not just a good measure, not just one that's been pressed down and shaken together—not even one that's fair, equal to what you deserve—but one that is brimming over, unable to be contained by its recipient.

Now, by no means am I suggesting that you should always and without question give of yourself at the expense of the relationships and purposes that should be prioritized in your life. Sometimes the best, most empowering word you can learn to utter is *no*. But on those occasions when you do feel genuinely led by God to give, you needn't be worried about what appears to be a dwindling amount of personal resources to suit the task. If He has endorsed your involvement, you can proceed with complete contentment and willingness, knowing He will always give back far more than you ever expended. The contented woman, when required to give of her time, her love, her resources . . . herself . . . is secure in the knowledge that she possesses enough to do it. And she looks forward to experiencing the promise of an outlandish return on her investment.

I can imagine what you may be thinking because I've thought it too . . .

- My energy level is so low.
- My “love tank” is running so close to empty, I'm sure I'm about to stall.
- It's only Tuesday, but my patience quota has already been used up for the week.
- My wallet is even emptier than I remember, and my financial needs aren't going away.

Yet just when you feel as though you're completely void of anything worthwhile to offer, or when your situation makes you feel

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justified in not being the one to participate, you'll often hear Him whispering . . .

“Give, and it will be given to you.”

And when He scoops up the dividends that He'll be sending back your way, He won't be short and scanty about it. He won't skim off the excess or be bound by an “exact” measurement. He will supply you a portion that is abundantly good and beyond what is warranted. He'll shake and press, shake and press, to make sure no pockets of air are taking up space reserved for His blessing. And then He'll pile up His favor and grace into such a rounded heap that it will spill off the sides, more than you can hold. Your hands and heart will try to grasp every morsel that falls from your full container, but there will be too much coming, far too fast.

Good thing you've got a lap. For on it will fall the abundance you cannot gather any other way, the surplus for which there is no more space. And it just keeps coming and coming.

This is the reward for the woman resolved to contentment.

So “give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap.”

It appears that the best way to get more of what you need is to give away the little you think you have left—at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way. Yes, the best way to be surprisingly satisfied is to be irrationally released to respond to God's promptings to serve, even when doing so seems impossible because of your perceived lack.

So make the resolution—the resolution to be content. Then look toward heaven with holy anticipation, and sit with your long skirt gathered up in folds and draped loosely across your lap, prepared to catch the overflow in the welcome pockets of room you've created. Live this moment. Pour yourself out. Drain the experience of each precious day. And be prepared for God's overflowing blessing.

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- *When you consider your level of willingness to give of yourself, does it reveal more contentment or discontentment residing in your heart? In what way?*
- *Based on God's provisions that you listed at the end of the last chapter, what is one thing you could close this book and go do for someone else out of that resource?*
- *Record your thoughts regarding this statement: "Sometimes the best, most empowering word you can learn to utter is no."*



The Balancing Point

Hopefully your eyes have been opened to realize how many needs God has already met in your life that you've been discounting. Yet I'm fully aware that your list of unmet wants may still be extensive as well. So possibly this clarion call to live satisfied with what God has already given feels almost like admitted defeat—a resignation to the status quo, a life of mediocrity. Maybe it feels as if choosing contentment is a simultaneous choice to quell your desires and silence your future aspirations, to quit ever hoping for more.

On the contrary, contentment is the equilibrium between the enjoyment of life now and the anticipation of what is to come. Contentment serves as a guard against desires gone wild. It is the key to unlock you from the bondage of unrestrained longing that wells up within your heart and inevitably begins to control your life, making you a slave to what you *don't* have instead of a fully engaged participant with what you *do*. It is the faith-filled belief that what God has bestowed now is worthy of gratitude and appreciation, not merely because it is enough but because it is *good*.

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By choosing contentment, you're not getting rid of your desires; you're just demanding that they assume an appropriate, humble position in your life, not bossing you around like a tyrannical dictator forcing you to submit to his ever-growing and ever-changing list of demands. It means you no longer allow your yearnings and aspirations to control you, to rob from you the full use of and gratitude for what you've currently been given, leaving you unable to enjoy *this* because He hasn't seen fit to give you *that*.

Making this resolution of contentment will offer you an opportunity to look forward to tomorrow with peace and ease and an appropriate level of anticipation instead of the frustration and hurriedness that often accompanies our glances toward the future. It will be your ticket to live with goals and ambitions inspired by His expansive, mind-blowing will, without having to sacrifice today's blessing.

In staying *surprisingly satisfied*, you actually receive the best of both worlds. You give yourself permission to enjoy fully the things you have, the person you are, and the life you're currently living while continuing to harbor the dreams that keep you growing and stretching into the future.

So the businessperson gets to relish today's accomplishments while at the same time having high expectations for tomorrow. The homemaker learns to thrive on the joyful chaos of today's tasks while calmly, patiently looking forward to the slower pace her future may hold. The single woman is actually able to enjoy her independence—not just pretend she does—and yet be equally excited about what sharing life with a future mate may be like. She neither has to abandon hope of marriage nor cave to those depressing tinges of self-pity and emptiness.

It's a balance. A holy equilibrium. A genuine gratitude for what the day brings, all the while maintaining a controlled anticipation for what tomorrow may offer.

That's the safe, healthy place where contentment allows you to take root and take up residence. Instead of being manipulated by unrestrained discontent, instead of allowing restlessness to hustle

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you into decisions, relationships, and opportunities that you're unable to recognize as being faulty from the outset, contentment keeps your mind clear. Peaceful. Settled. Undisturbed. Happy to be *here*, and when God determines the time is right, happy to be *there*.

It's a resolution to be satisfied.

It's a resolution that will change your life.



- *Go back and reread your answers and comments from the questions in this section. Then read the resolution you are about to make. Pray about it. Sit with it a while. Rest in it. Even if you're exhausted from life's challenges and demands, make this a moment to breathe deep and savor what God is inviting you into, what He's asking you to give and what He's promising to supply you in order to do it. When you're ready, make this resolution out loud, maybe even in the presence of someone who can help hold you accountable to it. Then sign your name below it.*

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I do solemnly resolve to embrace my current season of life and will maximize my time in it. I will resist the urge to hurry through or circumvent any portion of my journey but will live with a spirit of contentment.
