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CALM  
— *my* —  
ANXIOUS  
HEART

*a woman's guide  
to finding contentment*

LINDA DILLOW

TEN-WEEK BIBLE STUDY INCLUDED

Over ten years ago, *Calm My Anxious Heart* revolutionized my perspective and my priorities. Each chapter was laced with spiritual insight and practical wisdom that awakened my heart to a lifestyle of contentment and peace. I am so grateful to Linda Dillow for giving us this new edition. It will be an incredible tool for anyone seeking to find rest in an anxious and ambitious world. Her wisdom, faithfulness, and integrity has been a gift to me. I know it will be a gift to you as well.

PRISCILLA SHIRER, Bible teacher; author

I have never met a woman who would not be surprised and blessed by this timeless treasure, *Calm My Anxious Heart*. Whether you are in a season of great stress or navigating the normal challenges of everyday life, allow Linda to guide you to a new level of resting in God's sovereign hand. This is a book that I will return to again and again throughout my journey with the Lord.

DR. JULI SLATTERY, psychologist; cofounder of Authentic Intimacy

In a world full of women seeking to make peace with our circumstances, Linda Dillow reminds us of the power of our everyday choices: to trust, to hold a grateful perspective, to dwell on truth. This book is for any woman who needs to understand how contentment is rooted in our response to our Creator.

AMY SIMPSON, author of *Troubled Minds* and *Anxious*

Now more than ever, when stress, worry, and fear are at an all-time high, Linda Dillow's classic Bible study breathes peace into the anxious woman's soul. In *Calm My Anxious Heart*, Dillow extends a holy invitation, not to do more but to allow Jesus to have more space in our hearts, souls, and minds.

AUBREY SAMPSON, author of *The Louder Song*; church planter; senior pastor; contributor to Propel Women

What keeps you up at night these days? Is it hard to turn your brain off as you contemplate all the realities of our tumultuous world? Linda Dillow's *Calm My Anxious Heart* is filled with timeless and timely words for those of us who battle anxiety. Dillow does not deny the truth of our times—more of us struggle with anxiety than ever—but she offers a Truth that is deeper than our times. We have a Resource. We can turn our hearts and minds toward the One who promised rest for the weary, peace for the troubled. Pick up this book if you've never read it or read it again if you've read it before. It is medicine for dislocated men and women. *Calm My Anxious Heart* sends us to the place where everything fits together.

SHARON HERSH, author of *Belonging* and *The Last Addiction*

Calm My Anxious Heart



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NavPress 

A NavPress resource published in alliance  
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*Calm My Anxious Heart: A Woman's Guide to Finding Contentment*

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ISBN 978-1-64158-300-8

Printed in the United States of America

26	25	24	23	22	21	20
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

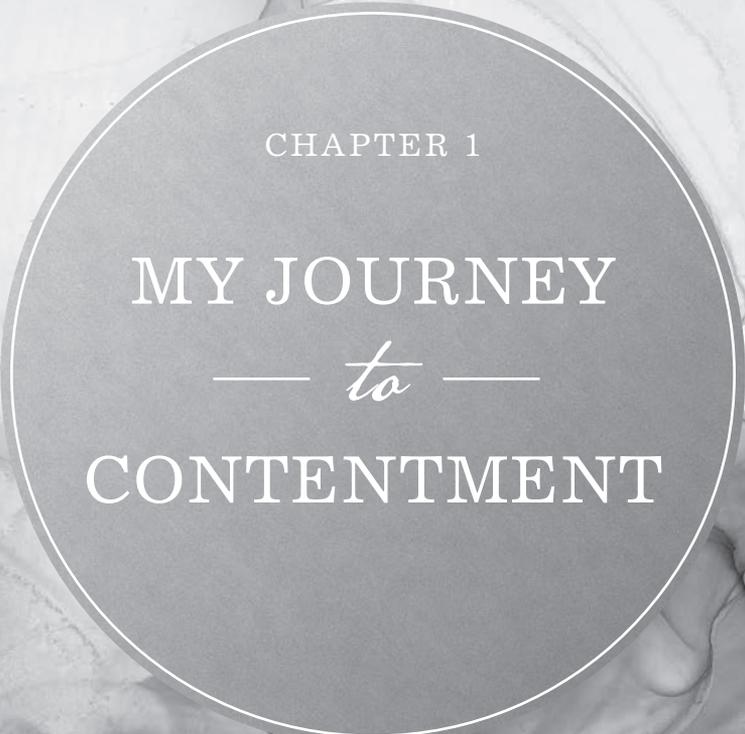
*To the women in Eastern Europe  
who lived contentment before me.*



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CHAPTER 1

MY JOURNEY  
— *to* —  
CONTENTMENT

As MEREDITH SLUMPED into a chair in my kitchen, I prepared myself for yet another litany about her tragic life. She had asked to meet with me to talk about how she could become more content. But without a doubt, Meredith was the most negative person I'd ever met. She even looked negative!

What we are on the inside, what we continually think about, eventually shows in our words, actions, and even on our countenances. Meredith's posture and facial expression plainly revealed that she lived her own private reinterpretation of Philippians 4:8: "Finally, Meredith, whatever is untrue, whatever is not noble, whatever is not right, whatever is impure, whatever is unlovely, whatever is not admirable—if *anything* is not excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Meredith's life was a living translation of her negative thinking.

Ironically, many women would have traded lives with Meredith in an instant. Her life was far from tragic. She was blessed with good health, a petite figure that stayed that way without effort, a husband who loved her, two adorable children, and even new furniture her husband had recently purchased to make her happy.

I asked Meredith why she was so unhappy when God had given her so many good things. Without hesitation she spouted off her complaints: First, God hadn't given her a house. She wanted her own home. She deserved it. And her husband—yes, he loved her, but he had so many faults. Yes, her children were adorable, but they were also negative and complained all the time (I didn't have to guess why!).

Meredith was like a horse with blinders on, only seeing the dirty road straight ahead. She never raised her gaze upward to God or counted her blessings. She had a blurred perspective, an unholy habit of discontent.

### **Contentment Begins with an Eternal Perspective**

While Meredith was convinced her easy life was difficult, Ella's life was *truly* one long series of hardships. But Ella had a "holy habit" of contentment. Her vision was clear, and she lived with an eternal perspective.

What do I mean by *perspective*? According to Webster's Dictionary, the term suggests "look[ing] through; see[ing] clearly" and "the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance."<sup>1</sup> I like to think of perspective as a way of seeing. An eternal perspective, then, is God's way of seeing. When we have God's perspective, we view our lives and evaluate what is important from His viewpoint. That's what Ella did.

Along with her husband and children, Ella worked as a missionary with tribes in Central Africa for fifty-two years. She had left her country, her family, and all that was familiar. *Challenging* didn't begin to describe her living conditions in the scorching heat and humidity of the African bush. Electricity, air-conditioning, and other modern conveniences were only a dream. Some days it was so unbearably hot that she had to bring the thermometer inside because it couldn't register past 120 degrees without breaking.

Ella's daughter, Mimi, is my friend. Mimi wondered how

her mother had done it—how she had lived a life of contentment when her circumstances would have caused the hardiest to complain. Recently Mimi unearthed a treasure, a much more significant find than gold or silver. In an old diary of her mother's, she discovered Ella's prescription for contentment:

- Never allow yourself to complain about anything—not even the weather.
- Never picture yourself in any other circumstances or someplace else.
- Never compare your lot with another's.
- Never allow yourself to wish this or that had been otherwise.
- Never dwell on tomorrow—remember that [tomorrow] is God's, not ours.<sup>2</sup>

Her words overwhelm me; they shame me. How could Ella not complain of the weather when the perspiration dripped off her, when the stale, humid air kept her from sleeping? What made her everyday focus so different from Meredith's? The secret is in Ella's last statement. Her eyes were fixed on eternity. Her tomorrows belonged to God. She had given them to Him. And because all her tomorrows were nestled in God's strong arms, she was free to live today. One day at a time she could make the right choices and grow to possess the holy habit of contentment. Ella's focus was eternal, and her focus led to an internal contentment.

## Contentment Happens on the Inside

Ella possessed *a soul sufficiency, a peace separate from her circumstances*. Most of us base our contentment on our circumstances, on our feelings, or on other people. True contentment is separate from our circumstances, however. Contentment is a state of the heart, not a state of affairs.

In *Henry VI part 3*, Shakespeare poetically described internal contentment. A king is wandering in the country and meets two gamekeepers. He informs them that he is a king. One of them asks, “But, if thou be a king, where is thy crown?” He replies:

*My crown is in my heart, not on my head;  
Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,  
Nor to be seen; my crown is call'd content  
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy.<sup>3</sup>*

How many women do you know who wear this crown called “content”? You can probably count them on one hand. But if I asked how many women you know who have an anxious spirit or a spirit of discontent, you would probably run out of fingers and toes counting! Contentment is rare, but it is possible.

## The Secret of Contentment

The apostle Paul makes an amazing statement in the book of Philippians:

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 4:11-13

A look at Paul's life reveals how amazing these verses are. His life was full of anything but positive circumstances. He wrote them while imprisoned in a dark, dreary dungeon. This prison wasn't like the ones we have in today's world—Paul didn't have sanitation, heat, or exercise equipment. He was chained to a guard. He was lonely. I'm sure he wondered if all his work for Christ really mattered.

Paul lived an extremely difficult life. He was beaten almost to death, constantly misunderstood, deserted by friends. His life was anything but perfect and controlled; yet he said, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Incredible! In other words, contentment can be *learned*. This means you and I can learn to be content.

Paul followed his extraordinary declaration about having learned to be content in all circumstances with the secret of how (Philippians 4:13). This often-quoted verse is translated literally from the Greek as "I am able to face anything by the one who makes me able [to do it]." Have you ever wondered why this verse immediately follows Paul's bold statements about contentment? As Charles Kelley noted, "Paul

recognize[d] that the source and strength of all Christian contentment is God Himself.”<sup>4</sup>

My favorite translation of Philippians 4:13 is from the late Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest.

I am strong for all things in the One who constantly infuses strength in me.<sup>5</sup>

At all times, in all circumstances, Christ is able and willing to provide the strength we need to be content. Contentment occurs when Christ’s strength is *infused* into my weak body, soul, and spirit. *To infuse* means to pour, fill, soak, or extract. Every morning when I dip my herbal tea bag into boiling water, I witness infusion.

How does God enable us to be content? He infuses contentment into us through His Word. As it seeps into our minds, it transforms us. Just as a cup of tea gets stronger when we give it time to steep, so we become more content when we spend time in God’s Word and allow it to seep into our lives, transforming us to be like Him.

### **From Control to Content**

My journey to contentment began fifteen years ago when all my masterful methods of control evaporated. They quit working because life was out of control. Two of my children were on an “adolescent advance” in the wrong direction.

I had become a Christian as a college student and was excited about rearing my children in a Christian home. I

had the mistaken perspective that if I pumped all the “right” things (God, His Word) into my children, they would automatically love and obey God. When it looked like my plan wasn’t working, my heart was anxious, and I became depressed.

When I told a friend about my fears, she observed, “Linda, you like control, and there are too many ‘uncontrollables’ in your life.” At the time, I didn’t understand what she meant. After all, I trusted God. I was a missionary—I was paid to trust God. What did she mean, “You like control”?

Looking back, I realize I did desire to trust God, but sometimes He was very slow. When He was moving at what I thought was a snail’s pace, I unconsciously decided He needed my help. I know that sounds blasphemous. God doesn’t need our help. Yet when I stepped in to massage (the truer word is *manipulate*, but *massage* sounds better!) the circumstances or to organize the people, my actions were saying, “God, You’re not doing what I think needs to be done, so I’ll help You out.” It’s our “helping God out” that leads to an anxious heart. When we take over and try to control what happens, we take our focus off the One who is in control and put our eyes on our circumstances instead.

Two verses guided me through those days. I memorized them, wrote them on my heart, and made a commitment to live them. First:

God . . . is the blessed controller of all things, the king over all kings and the master of all masters.

I TIMOTHY 6:15, PH

I meditated on the truths in this verse: *Who controls my life? God. What kind of a controller is He? Blessed.* In the words of the well-known theologian J. I. Packer, “Contentment is essentially a matter of accepting from God’s hand what He sends because we know that He is good and therefore it is good.”<sup>6</sup>

The second verse was Psalm 16:5:

LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;  
you have made my lot secure.

Speaker and author Elisabeth Elliot made this thought-provoking statement about Psalm 16:5:

I know of no greater *simplifier* for all of life.  
Whatever happens is assigned. Does the intellect balk at that? Can we say that there are things which happen to us which do not belong to our lovingly assigned “portion” (“This belongs to it, that does not”)? Are some things, then, out of the control of the Almighty?

Every assignment is measured and controlled for my eternal good. As I accept the given portion other options are cancelled. Decisions become much easier, directions clearer, and hence my heart becomes inexpressibly quieter. . . .

A quiet heart is content with what God gives.<sup>7</sup>

Ella, the dear woman who was a missionary in Africa, knew that someone had to be “in control” of her life in this

out-of-control world. Because she chose to let God be in charge instead of herself, she was a woman of contentment.

## Teacup Theology

Let's go back to our tea analogy. God has lovingly assigned each of us to be a uniquely special teacup. Perhaps we're an antique cup, painted with dainty roses set in gold. Maybe we see ourselves as an everyday cup—useful, but a little chipped around the edges. Or we could be a heavy-duty mug—rugged, unbreakable, and able to hold much.

Then God fills our cup with our portion, what He determines best. Our portion is our physical and emotional being, our abilities, circumstances, roles, and relationships.

Sometimes we don't like what's been poured into our cup. Remember the Lord Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane? When He saw the suffering He was about to endure, He pleaded, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Christ grasped the handle of His cup and lifted it to God and said, "I accept my portion. Infuse me with Your strength, that I may drink."

Every cup—whether dainty china or rough-hewn pottery—has a handle. God has placed our portion in our cup. We either choose to grasp it by the handle and lift it to Him, saying, "I accept my portion; I accept this cup," or we choose to smash our cup to pieces, saying, "God, I refuse my portion. This cup is not the right size for me, and I don't like what You've put in it. I'll control my life myself."

## My Contentment Journey

Contentment is accepting God's sovereign control over all of life's circumstances. It was humbling for me to have to say to God, "I've tried to trust You, but too much of my own strength has been mixed with that trust."

A story of two monks helped me to put my control versus God's control into perspective:

"I need oil," said an ancient monk; so he planted an olive sapling. "Lord," he prayed, "it needs rain that its tender roots may drink and swell. Send gentle showers." And the Lord sent gentle showers. "Lord," prayed the monk, "my tree needs sun. Send sun, I pray Thee." And the sun shone, gilding the dripping clouds. "Now frost, my Lord, to brace its tissues," cried the monk. And behold, the little tree stood sparkling with frost, but at evening it died.

Then the monk sought the cell of a brother monk, and told his strange experience. "I, too, planted a little tree," he said, "and see! it thrives well. But I entrust my tree to its God. He who made it knows better what it needs than a man like me. I laid no condition. I fixed not ways or means. 'Lord, send what it needs,' I prayed, 'storm or sunshine, wind, rain, or frost. Thou hast made it and Thou dost know.'"<sup>8</sup>

I had failed to make God my trust because I tried too hard.

You may be like me or you may be at the other end of the spectrum, failing to make God your trust by default. Your life is out of control, so you give up. It's impossible to make sense of life, beyond impossible to be content, so you give up and give in. Most of us either try too hard or quit trying. In both cases, we miss God. We miss His infusion of strength that leads to contentment. This book is the story of my journey with God. How He took a first-monk woman and grew her into a second-monk woman. I am still on the journey. It is an exciting adventure! God has become my breath, my joy, my worship, my total strength. Daily He infuses His power and strength into me. He has calmed my anxious heart.

I invite you to come alongside me on the journey, to grow in your understanding of what true contentment is and how your perspective of your circumstances, yourself, your roles, and your relationships can change; to see how the barriers of anxiety, greed, and a faulty focus can keep you from possessing a heart of contentment. And, finally, I invite you to discover the bridge of trust that carries you over the barriers to contentment. Ella is not the only woman who could learn contentment. Discouraged Meredith, who thinks contentment is impossible, can learn. I can learn. You can learn too.

And when you do learn the secret of contentment, you will see God in a new way. You will know in your heart that He is the One who is the Blessed Controller of all things, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords!