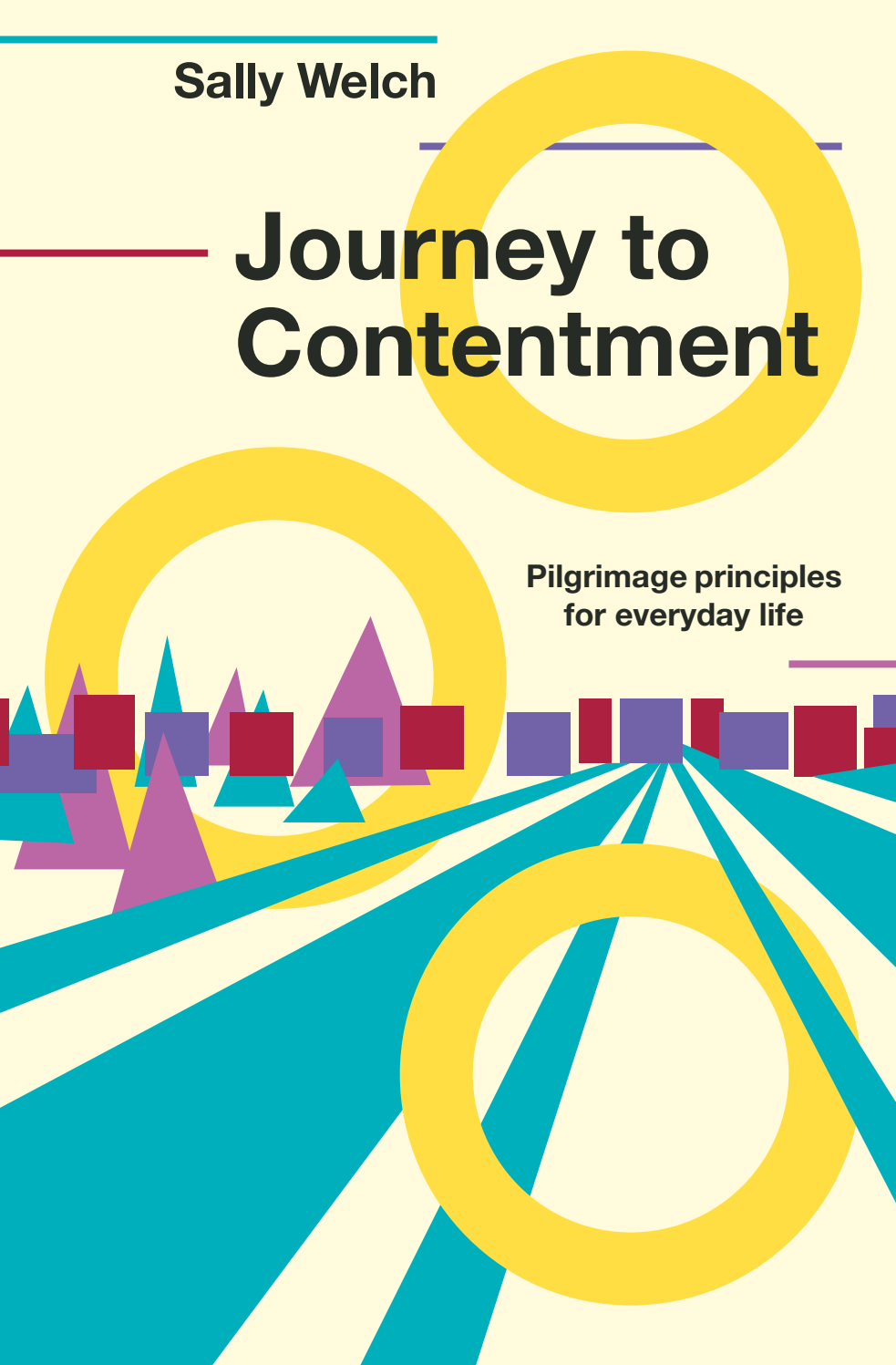


Sally Welch

Journey to Contentment

**Pilgrimage principles
for everyday life**



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Introduction

One of the most joyful parts of my ministry is leading pilgrimages. These journeys are usually for one day, although occasionally I lead them over a number of days. Before they begin, I will have worked out the route and walked it at least once. I will have planned what I want to say once we are on the pilgrimage: where to stop, when to eat, how to pray and what sort of conversations and reflections I want to encourage. On the day of the pilgrimage itself, I will pray for the events of the journey, for my travelling companions and for myself, that through this activity we might learn more about ourselves, about each other and about God. To this extent, I am the leader of the pilgrimage, the guide. Once on the journey, however, I am also a fellow pilgrim. I may walk at the front, to help lead the party along the chosen route, but I also walk alongside, sharing insights, experiencing the highs and lows of the journey and growing in knowledge and wisdom.

In writing this book, I have taken the responsibility of leading the party of readers; I have undertaken the research, reflected on the scripture and mined my own experience and that of others for insights and wisdom. However, I am also on the journey myself, a fellow traveller along the route to contentment. When I told my family I was writing a book about contentment, they looked at me askance and the silent question appeared in their eyes: 'What authority do you have to write this?' I answered them out loud: 'I am writing this book because I too seek contentment, and I want to share my findings with others as I share my journey with them.'

I hope you will find help and support for your journey in this book; I pray that your experience of contentment will broaden and deepen; I ask your forgiveness for the ways in which I will fail,

even as I struggle to teach; I rejoice in the invisible companionship of others, held together in their engagement with this book, as we travel together, accompanied by one another and by Christ, who is the beginning and the end and the companion of all our journeys.

This book is divided into 52 sections of a journey, beginning with the preparations necessary before setting out, then exploring the obstacles which might be put in our path and sharing ways in which the journey can be made easier and more productive. At the end of each reflection, there is a suggestion for an activity or a prayer. Not all these exercises will suit everybody – some will want to try every one; others will prefer to select only those they feel are most helpful.

As I wrote this book, the image that returned to me again and again was that of one of the most famous pilgrims of all time – Christian, the main character of John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Written at the end of the 17th century, the book tells the story of Christian, who, bearing the knowledge of his personal sin as a pack upon his back, feels impelled to make the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. As he travels, Christian encounters many characters, some of whom help and others who hinder him on his journey. He makes his way through the allegorical places of the Slough of Despond and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, learning more about himself and his faith, before he finally arrives at the Celestial City.

In my mind's eye, Christian is a lonely figure, plodding steadfastly on, eyes fixed firmly on his goal, facing bravely the dangers and adventures of the road, confident that his final destination is the right one. Although often distracted and sometimes deterred, he never ceases on his journey, and it is this determination which encouraged me during the writing process and which I hope will be part of your journey also. You may choose to study a section of this book every day; you may find you need more time to reflect or you have less time for study, and therefore must leave a gap of two or three days or even a week between each section. But in order to

benefit most, you must persevere – perhaps, like Christian, finding the way difficult at times, but never ceasing to strive towards your destination.

God of green pastures and still waters, rocks and wilderness –
you show me the path of life.

Help me to follow in your ways,
trusting in your merciful goodness and purposes for me,
alive in the knowledge and love of your Son,
who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Amen



Section I

Before we begin

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian begins his journey in great haste. Told by the Evangelist the direction in which he must travel in order to escape 'from the wrath to come', Christian sets off at a run, not heeding his wife and children and various neighbours who follow after him, trying to dissuade him from his course.

Our journey to contentment should have a more measured start. A journey of any significant length, whether spiritual or physical, requires some preparation before setting off, not only so a good start can be made, but so the journey can be continued and finished satisfactorily as well.

This first section introduces some things which will hopefully help you on your way – prayer and study habits, a right attitude of mind and a determination to gain as much as possible from the journey ahead.



I have learned

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13

My eldest daughter is an enthusiastic amateur actress – and fortunately her talent matches her enthusiasm. When she was only 13, I promised her that she could have her ears pierced if she won the leading role in the school play, thinking that this was highly unlikely given the number of older, more experienced pupils who were also auditioning for the main part. Two days later we were choosing ear studs! Since then, she has gone from Cordelia to Lady Macbeth, Helena to Portia (she has a passion for Shakespeare). My husband and I watch as many of her plays as we can, marvelling at the way that the tiny bundle of energy we brought home from hospital on Boxing Day has grown into a woman who can get inside the nature of so many characters, transforming herself with such apparent ease into an old crone, a young girl or a sick and bitter woman. But we know that the ease with which she takes on the personality and character of another is not without effort, for we have also been witnesses to the hours of patient learning of lines, the evenings spent

in draughty rehearsal rooms and the painstaking activity of working out who will move where and when on stage. The work is repaid as her audience is transported into another world, there to discover more about people and relationships and perhaps also themselves.

I could have used the example of a musician whose joyful notes hide the hours of solitary practice, a footballer whose skill at placing the ball is the reward for hours of work on cold pitches or the linguist whose fluent conversation is the result of learning verb declensions by heart. All these skills, so admired by the rest of us for the ease with which they are performed, hide much effort and hard work. Sometimes the learning is a joyful process, but there will inevitably be times when willpower is all that prevents the learner from giving up in despair. And it seems to me that for us the process of learning becomes harder – we are more secure with what we do know and perhaps less willing to embark on the adventure of the unknown, with its promise of uncertainty. Skilled at some things, we are reluctant to start right back at the beginning again, experiencing once more those first faltering steps on the way to gaining a new accomplishment. Our brains, too, it seems, have become less flexible, our time more limited – we like to be certain of results before we invest in a new endeavour. So it is not surprising, perhaps, that we read those three words of Paul with some trepidation: ‘I have learned.’ We know that what follows is the result of some effort, of hard work, of failures as well as successes, of slow progress as well as sudden inspiration. But we also know that because of those three words, what is being shared with us is of great value, because Paul considered it worth the effort: ‘I have learned to be content with whatever I have.’

Contentment is not a secret, but it is a mystery. The state of contentment is achieved with grace, but it is not given as a gift – it is learned, and the lessons can be hard work. Contentment is not something which can be assumed or faked, and we quickly spot those who merely seem to have achieved it. The glib assertions that a person ‘doesn’t need much to be content’ or is ‘happy with only

a little' are betrayed by an anxious restlessness or a half-hidden yearning. They show, too, a misunderstanding of the nature of contentment – it is not merely a willingness to be happy with what one has been given, however meagre that amount is. Contentment is a profound spiritual act, a way of living and being which combines an acceptance of all that God provides with a desire to move ever deeper into relationship with the creator. Contentment is born of an attitude of trust in the purposes of God for each one of us and a willingness to step out boldly into the unknown for the sake of his kingdom.

We must begin our journey to contentment with an attitude of humility, willing to learn – however challenging that act of learning will be. We must be prepared to work hard and suffer setbacks, but with the knowledge that such setbacks are not the end of the journey, only obstacles along the way, and that the prize is truly worth the effort.

Exercise

Spend some time reflecting on the things you have learned over your life. Try to make a list of them. It might help to divide the list into different areas – things you have learned about the way other people behave, skills you have acquired, experiences you have had which have led to wisdom or insight. Choose one or two, and try to remember what it felt like to be a beginner, just setting out on the path to learning. Remember the successes and the setbacks, and the feelings that each brought. Try to recapture that attitude of determination and excitement which heralds the start of a new project – and put it towards this new venture of learning contentment.



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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches and provides a professional education service to primary schools.

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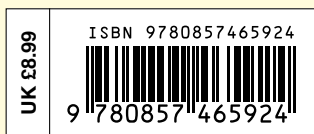
Why is contentment important in the Christian life? Why should we strive for it? Is it just about happiness, or is it something more?

Using the metaphor of pilgrimage, Sally Welch walks alongside us as leader and guide, but also fellow traveller, to explore how we can understand the biblical principle of contentment and make it our own.

This book is divided into 52 sections of a journey, beginning with the preparations necessary before setting out, then exploring the obstacles which might be put in our path and sharing ways in which the journey can be made easier and more productive. At the end of each reflection, there is a suggestion for an activity or a prayer to enable the reader to apply the learning to their own life.



Sally Welch is the editor of BRF's *New Daylight* Bible reading notes. She is vicar of Charlbury with Shorthampton and diocesan spirituality adviser in the Diocese of Oxford. A writer and lecturer on spirituality, she has made many pilgrimages in England and Europe.



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