

Great Expectations

Charles Dickens was born in 1812, one of eight children in a navy pay clerk's family. He was small, sickly and plagued by spasms, dying in 1870 at 58, and buried in Westminster Abbey.

Dickens' famous GREAT EXPECTATIONS was published in 1860-61 as our Civil War was firing up. The setting is the post-Industrial Revolution period of Victorian England. His hero, a young idealist/blacksmith's apprentice named Pip, demonstrates that love, loyalty, and right living are more important than achieving his own personal great expectations of acquiring social standing and wealth. Ultimately he learns that self-improvement is overrated and overshadowed by the quality of one's character.

Webster defines "expectation" as "grounds upon which something excellent is anticipated to happen." Its synonyms are anticipation, confidence, and trust.

Each of us, to some degree, feeds off of our expectations. When they aren't realized, we react in a variety of ways, many of which we travel so often that they become ruts in which we may be "expected" to travel!

As I look back at my life from the vantage point of my age now, I recall some of my expectations: to be raised in a happy home, to graduate from college in my

hometown of Memphis, later to become a nationally known radio-TV personality, to be independently wealthy, to be a spiritual giant, to be able to play a leading role in choosing my children's mates, to have my wife and I and our children enjoy good health always, to have influence and stature, to live a life of doing good.

Many of those expectations have been shattered or drastically revised along the way. Other wonderful developments which I'd never dreamed of have occurred which have been some of the greatest blessings of my life.

Someone along the way clued me in to the difference between a Goal and a Desire. A Goal, they said, is an outcome over which I have control. But a Desire is an outcome that requires the cooperation of someone else.

Tonight's "big question" is this: what great expectations are you struggling with that are not turning out as you'd hoped....and how are you handling that realization?

Phil 1:20, Psalm 57:5

John 9:1-2 (The Message) "You're asking the wrong question."

Romans 7 (from the paraphrase, The Message)

What Is True Freedom?

21 It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. 22 I truly delight in God's commands, 23 but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

24I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

25The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

Romans 8

The Solution Is Life on God's Terms

5 Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them--living and breathing God! 6 Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. 7 Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. 8 And God isn't pleased at being ignored.

9 But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the

Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. 10 But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells--even though you still experience all the limitations of sin--you yourself experience life on God's terms.

26 ... the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. 27 He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. 28 That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

29 God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son.

31 So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? 32 If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? 33 And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? 34 Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us--who was raised to life for us!--is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. 35 Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture ...

37 None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. 38 I'm absolutely convinced that nothing--nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, 39 high or low, thinkable or unthinkable--

absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Philippians 4

Pray About Everything

4 Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! 5 Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

6 Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. 7 Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

8 Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious--the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. 9 Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Content Whatever the Circumstances

11 Actually, I don't have a sense of needing anything personally. I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. 12 I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. 13 Whatever I have,

wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.

23 Receive and experience the amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, deep, deep within yourselves.

Last Sunday someone informed me that Satisfaction and Contentment are not synonymous. Satisfaction, he said, is built around me and my needs....whereas Contentment comes when we build our lives around Christ.

Contentment, said Paul, is something to be learned. It comes from making right choices, godly choices. It's a sign of mature faith, of trust in God's timing, God's plan, God's purpose.

Contentment, contrary to what we Type A controllers believe, is, he said, NOT the spiritual equivalent of complacency.

Dickens' will ended thusly: "I commit my soul to the mercy of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and I exhort my dear children humbly to try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there."