

Contentment

Psalm 23

Coming downstairs one morning, a British nobleman heard his cook exclaim, “Oh, if I only had five pounds, wouldn’t I be content!” Wishing to satisfy the woman, soon after he handed her a five pound note, then worth about \$25. She thanked him profusely. But after he stepped out of the room again, he overheard her say, “Why didn’t I say ten?”

How much do we need to be happy? Just a little bit more than we’ve got! A reporter asked the late oil tycoon, J. Paul Getty, “If you retired now, would you say that your holdings would be worth a billion dollars?” Getty did some mental calculations. “I suppose so,” he said. “But remember, a billion doesn’t go as far these days as it used to.”

Never content! You would think that Americans, of all people, with our many material comforts and high standard of living, would be content. But our discontent tips its hand in our constant striving after more things, in our living on credit, in our insatiable lust for sex, and in widespread restlessness. Even many of God’s people are not content, as witnessed by unprecedented numbers of believers flocking to psychotherapists and reading self-help books that promise to sort out the inner turmoil stemming from a difficult past.

But the Bible says that God has provided us with everything pertaining to life and godliness.

2Pe 1:3 According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:

The Bible also says that we are to be content with His provision.

Psalm 23 is the psalm of a contented heart. In it, David, the shepherd-King, shows that...

Contentment comes from experiencing all that our Good Shepherd has provided for us.

David compares his relationship to God to that of a contented sheep with its caring shepherd. It was a familiar analogy in David’s day. But I have to confess that the only times I’ve really been around sheep is when I’ve gone into the children’s section of the zoo. So I’m depending a lot on Phillip Keller’s excellent book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, for his knowledgeable insights into the psalm.

This morning I am hoping to relay the psalm as a spiritual history of the believer, describing the steps to experiencing the contentment that comes from God’s provision in Christ, our Good Shepherd.

1. The first step to contentment is to make the Lord your Shepherd.

Psa 23:1 A Psalm of David. **The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

The key to not wanting is to have the Lord as your Shepherd. Many people apply this psalm to themselves for its soothing effect, but they do not know the Lord as their personal Shepherd. But David is emphatically personal. He says: “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

Jesus made it clear that this is not a blanket truth. Not everyone has Jesus as his or her personal Shepherd. Some of His critics said, “If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” But Jesus replied,

Joh 10:25 ...I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me.

Joh 10:26 But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you.

Joh 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

Joh 10:28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

So according to Jesus, the way to become one of His sheep is to hear what He claimed, as verified in the things He did, and to believe it in the sense of following Him. At the core of what Jesus taught and did was the cross, where He took the penalty we deserve for our sins. It is significant that Psalm 23 follows Psalm 22.

In Psalm 22 we see the Messiah forsaken of God as he bears our sin on the cross. It is only after that that we read, "The Lord is my Shepherd." I must believe in Him as my sacrificial substitute, who died on the cross for my sins, before I can know Him as my good Shepherd who meets my every need. Without Psalm 22, there can be no Psalm 23.

If you know the Suffering Savior of Psalm 22 by trusting in His death on the cross for you, and you're seeking to follow Him, then you can say with David, "The Lord, the covenant-keeping, faithful God, is *my* personal Shepherd."

The nature of the shepherd determines the welfare of the sheep. Phillip Keller (pp. 28-29) tells about a tenant shepherd whose flock was kept next to his. The man showed no concern for his flock. To him, they were just a bunch of dumb animals fit for slaughter. His fields were brown and impoverished. There was insufficient shelter to protect the sheep from the storms. They had muddy, polluted water to drink. They fell prey to dogs, cougars, and rustlers. In their weak, sickly condition, they would stand at the fence, staring blankly at the lush, green pastures where Keller kept his sheep. If they could have talked, they would have said, "Oh, to be set free from this awful owner!" They're a picture of those in bondage to sin and Satan.

A little girl had learned Psalm 23:1 in Sunday School, but she slightly misquoted it as, "The Lord is my shepherd; I've got all I want." But even though she misquoted it, she got it right: If you have such a one as the Lord as your good Shepherd, then you can truly say, "I've got all I want." The first step to contentment is to know that the Lord Jesus is your personal Shepherd.

2. The second step to contentment is to know and enjoy the Good Shepherd's gracious provisions.

Psa 23:2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

Psa 23:3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

He has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, but many Christians are not content because they don't know what God has so abundantly provided. Or, as the Lord puts it in Jeremiah 2:13:

Jer 2:13 For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, *and* hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

If we turn from God and what He has provided to other things, we'll not be content. David mentions four things God has provided:

A. The Good Shepherd provides spiritual food.

Psa 23:2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

Sheep will not lie down until they've eaten enough. Then they will contently lie down to chew their cud. God's Word is the full banquet He has provided for His sheep.

I believe that the main reason we, as God's people, lack contentment is that we don't feed consistently on God's Word. Instead, we fill our minds with the poisonous weeds of TV, movies, and the daily newspaper, and then wonder why we're anxious and troubled. God's Word has milk for the babe in Christ and meat for the more mature. If we would feed on it daily and chew on it as a sheep chews its cud, we would find contentment in Christ Himself.

B. The Good Shepherd provides spiritual drink.

Psa 23:2 ... he leadeth me beside the still waters.

"He leads me beside quiet waters," or, "waters of rest," that is, waters by which the flock may rest because their thirst has been quenched. A sheep cannot be content if it is thirsty.

Jesus our Good Shepherd cried out,

Joh 7:37 ...If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.

Joh 7:38 He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

John explains that Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus would give to those who believe.

- The Bible teaches that we are born again through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The Bible also teaches that He indwells every believer.
- The Spirit empowers us to live holy lives as we depend on Him.
- He gives us hope in the trials of life.
- He guides us.
- He teaches us.
- He prays for us and gives us help and comfort. He gives us spiritual gifts and empowers us to bear witness of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

With such a full provision of living water from our Good Shepherd, why do we try to quench our thirst with the polluted, broken cisterns of the world?

Yet, as Phillip Keller points out, sometimes stubborn sheep will not wait for the clear, pure water that the shepherd is leading them to. They stop to drink from the polluted potholes along the trail, contaminated with the manure and urine of previous flocks. It satisfies their thirst for the moment, but it will eventually riddle them with parasites and disease. It's the price they pay for instant gratification and not following the shepherd to clear water.

Some Christians are like those sheep. They don't want to wait upon the Lord to fulfill their inner longings. They want a quick fix, instant happiness, so they go for the polluted potholes of the world. They shrug and say, "What can it hurt?" But they don't realize that the consequences of sin are often delayed. Seeds sown to the flesh take a while to sprout. Suddenly the person finds himself in deep trouble and then blames God for his problems! Don't be deceived! Whatever you sow, you will reap! If you want true contentment, you must learn to walk by the Holy Spirit, God's gracious provision to make you more like Christ.

C. The Good Shepherd provides spiritual restoration.

Psa 23:3 He restoreth my soul:

The Hebrew word "restore" means "turning back" or "refreshing." Perhaps the sheep has strayed off the trail to nibble on some interesting looking plant, little knowing that it is poisonous. Or perhaps it has gotten separated from the flock and a predator is ready to pounce. Sheep also can become "cast," where they roll onto their backs

and are not able to right themselves. A sheep left in such a position will die unless the shepherd helps it get upright within a few hours.

As God's sheep, we can stray from the path He has called us to walk in. Some enticing diversion in the world or some desire of our old nature lures us to separate ourselves from the rest of the flock and from the shepherd. Our enemy is waiting to pick off straying sheep. And so, when we start to stray, we're in grave danger and need restoration.

God uses two primary means to restore us: His Word, and His people. Psalm 19:7 states,

Psa 19:7 The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple.

Restoreth in Psalm 23 and Converting in Psalm 19 is the same Hebrew word. His Word points out where we are off the path, and what we must do to be restored.

2Ti 3:16 All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

2Ti 3:17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

God has also entrusted to those who are spiritual the ministry of using His Word to help restore His straying sheep.

Gal 6:1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Jas 5:19 Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;

Jas 5:20 Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

D. The Good Shepherd provides spiritual guidance.

Psa 23:3 ... he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

We all need guidance to know how to live in this confusing world. In the wilderness just as in the world there are many ways to get from point A to B. The difference in the journey is the risk involved and the cost to get there. Our Shepherd knows all of the paths and the absolute best way to get from point A to B.

Jer 6:16 Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where *is* the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk *therein*.

God's Word tells us, "Go this way! Don't go that way!" His paths are paths of righteousness. We need to be clear on this in our day of cheap grace. There are many who claim to know the Good Shepherd, but they don't walk in paths of righteousness. They excuse sin by saying, "We're under grace." But God's Word plainly states:

2Ti 2:19 Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Take a look back at our text.

Psa 23:3 ... he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

We've already seen that our Good Shepherd leads us in the paths of righteousness. But I also want to point your attention to the last portion of this verse, because it is often overlooked. It says, "for His name's sake."

Brother's and sisters pay attention for just a moment, don't miss this. We lift our voices and we lift our hands and proclaim that He is The Lord of our lives on Sunday, but sometimes we don't recognize Him on Monday. Does our walk throughout the week match up with our proclamation on Sunday. He didn't save us to be our Lord for a few hours on the first day of the week. He is our Lord 24/7/365. We need to get it plain, straight, and true this morning, that God's name is bound up with our walk as believers. He has chosen to identify His holy name with us. If we live just like the world, we cause His name to be blasphemed. Our testimony is rendered null. For His name's sake, He guides us in paths of righteousness.

So to recap, the first step to contentment is to make the Lord your shepherd. The second step is to know and enjoy the Good Shepherd's gracious provision for us: spiritual food, drink, restoration, and guidance.

3. The third step to contentment is to walk with the Good Shepherd through the hard times.

Psa 23:4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Psa 23:5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

The Good Shepherd does not provide contentment by keeping His flock from trials, but rather by providing His presence in the midst of trials. It's worth noting that inverses 1-3, David uses the third person ("He") to refer to the Lord. But when he speaks about times of trial in verses 4 and 5, David shifts to the more intimate second person ("Thou").

In a time of trial we need to draw closer in communion with the Good Shepherd, not to pull away in anger or hurt. Three types of trials are pictured here:

A. Times of fear ("the valley of the shadow of death").

Psa 23:4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

Sometimes the Shepherd has to lead his sheep through some dark valleys. As Keller points out, the valley is usually the most gentle route to the higher summer feeding grounds. Also, valleys have the best source of water and thus provide the best feeding spots on the way to higher ground.

But there are dangers involved. The Hebrew in this verse doesn't necessarily point to death, although that could be involved. Rather, it points to a fearful place of extreme danger and darkness. For example the Sinai wilderness was such a place.

Jer 2:6 Neither said they, Where is the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt?

Sometimes Christians express a desire to walk on a higher plane of Christian experience. But we often mistakenly think that God airlifts His flock to such a place! He doesn't! The only way to higher ground is to

walk with the Good Shepherd through some fearful valleys, where you despair at times even of life itself. But, as Keller points out, “it is in the valleys of our lives that we find refreshment from God Himself.”

Psa 23:4 ...for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Two things give contentment to the sheep when they walk through valleys of fear: The Shepherd’s presence; and, the Shepherd’s rod and staff.

Many missionaries have testified that at terrifying times, when they thought they would be killed, the Lord’s presence was especially real to them.

One night David Livingstone, in the heart of Africa, surrounded by hostile, angry tribes, was strongly tempted to flee. He read the Lord’s words, “Go therefore and teach all nations, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” He wrote in his journal, “It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor, so there’s an end of it! I will not cross furtively tonight as I intended.... I feel quite calm now, thank God!”

Years later, when receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow, he said, “Would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude towards me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this: ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world!’ On those words I staked everything, and they never failed!” The presence of the Good Shepherd makes us content even in a time of fear.

The second thing that gives contentment in the valley of fear is the Shepherd’s rod and staff. The rod was a symbol of authority, used to ward off predators and to discipline wayward sheep. It’s a comfort to know that God is in charge and to be subject to His authority in a time of fear. The staff was a symbol of concern, used to draw the sheep to the shepherd and to guide them on the right path. The sheep could be comforted by the rod and staff, knowing that they would be used for their own benefit, even if it might hurt at times.

B. Times of conflict (“in the presence of my enemies”).

Psa 23:5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

The Bible is clear that the Christian life is not free from conflict. If you stand for God’s Word of truth, you will have enemies and conflict. Nobody likes conflict. But the Good Shepherd takes care of His own by preparing a table for them in the presence of their enemies.

Life not only involves work, but also conflict. Our enemies are numerous, powerful and cruel. The fight is fierce, prolonged and exhausting. Yet, spread by invisible hands is the table in the wilderness, in the presence of our grim-visaged enemies who, while looking on, are restrained by some irresistible spell from harming. Unlike the soldier on the battle-field, who, if he eats at all, snatches a hasty meal and, wearied and but half refreshed, hurries again to the fight, the Christian warrior pauses to rest and feast. There is no hurry, no confusion, no fear, though the eyes of his enemies flash upon him with vindictive glare, the presence of the Divine host is an impenetrable shield about him. So is it ever in the progress of spiritual life. There is always the conflict, always the foe; always the guardian, always the banquet.

C. Times of irritation (“anointed my head with oil”).

Psa 23:5 ...thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Shepherds anointed sheep with oil to heal their wounds and to keep the flies and bugs off. Sheep cannot lie contentedly if insects are swarming around their nostrils or ears or open wounds. So the shepherd would pour oil on them.

It's often the little irritations that rob us of our contentment. To cope with frustrating circumstances and people, we need qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Where do these come from? The Holy Spirit.

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,
Gal 5:23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

In the Bible, oil is often a picture of the Holy Spirit. Our Good Shepherd has given us the oil of the Spirit to keep irritations from bugging us. Contentment comes from walking with the Good Shepherd in the hard times of fear, of conflict, and of irritation.

4. The fourth step to contentment is to see God's goodness in every situation, both now and in the future.

Psa 23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Two "sheep-dogs" follow God's sheep continually: goodness and mercy or loving-kindness. The world pursues cheap counterfeits that bring momentary pleasures and give the sense of goodness and love, but we have God's goodness and loyal love pursuing us!

Rom 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.

Like Joseph, we may go through horrible trials which we don't understand at the time. But also with Joseph, we can always look back and say,

Gen 50:20 But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, ...

And our future is secure. We will always be in God's fold, in this life and in eternity! He loves and cares so much for us! We are the most blessed sheep in the world, so why go elsewhere?

The thought in the phrase "dwell in the house of the Lord" is that of actual communion with God as a member of His household. As Paul put it:

Rom 8:36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Rom 8:37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

Rom 8:38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

Rom 8:39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As I close this morning, let me ask, Are you a contented sheep in God's pasture?

Do you walk each day in the conscious joy of all the spiritual riches that are yours in Christ?

Or, could it be that you've gotten so caught up in the world and all of its pressures that you complain and gripe a lot? A grumbling spirit means that you're not enjoying the gracious provision of the good Shepherd. You're lacking the contentment He wants you to have.

A 14-year-old wiser than his or her years wrote this poem:

It was spring, but it was summer I wanted—
The warm days and the great outdoors.

It was summer, but it was fall I wanted—
The colorful leaves and the cool, dry air.

It was fall, but it was winter I wanted—
The beautiful snow and the joy of the holiday season.

It was winter, but it was spring I wanted—
The warmth and the blossoming of nature.

I was a child, but it was adulthood I wanted—
The freedom and the respect.

I was twenty, but it was thirty I wanted—
To be mature and sophisticated.

I was middle-aged, but it was twenty I wanted—
The youth and the free spirit.

I was retired, but it was middle-age I wanted—
The presence of mind without limitations.

My life was over—but I never got what I wanted!

Real contentment comes from experiencing all that the Good Shepherd has provided for you. It's available in Christ, for every one of His sheep. Don't miss it!