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CONTENTMENT

Psalm 23

By

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Lesson 7: Psalms

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 (2 Pet. 1:3), and 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 with 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 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 [Zondervan], for his knowledgeable insights into the psalm.

I am going to develop 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 (23:1).

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: "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." Jesus replied, "I told you and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish" (John 10:25-28).

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 (23:2-3).

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, "My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves 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.

"He makes me 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.

“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, “If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). 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 (John 3:5-8) and that He indwells every believer (Rom. 8:9). The Spirit empowers us to live holy lives as we depend on Him (Gal. 5:16-23). He gives us hope in the trials of life (Rom. 5:3-5; 15:13). He guides (Acts 13:2-4; 16:6-7) and teaches us (1 John 2:27); He prays for us (Rom. 8:26) and gives us help and comfort (John 14:16; 15:26). He gives us spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:7-11) and empowers us to bear witness of Jesus Christ throughout the world (Acts 1:8). 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 (pp. 56-57), 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 con-

tentment, 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.

"He restores 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, "The law of the Lord is perfect, *restoring* the soul" (same Hebrew word). His Word points out where we are off the path, and what we must do to be restored (2 Tim. 3:16-17). God has entrusted to those who are spiritual the ministry of using His Word to help restore His straying sheep (Gal. 6:1; James 5:19-20).

D. The Good Shepherd provides spiritual guidance.

"He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." We all need guidance to know how to live in this confusing world. 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, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness" (2 Tim. 2:19).

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. For His name's sake, He guides us in paths of righteousness.

Thus 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 (23:4-5).

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 in 23:1-3, David uses the third person ("He") to refer to the Lord. But when he speaks about times of trial (23:4-5), David shifts to the more intimate second person ("You"). 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").

Sometimes the Shepherd has to lead his sheep through some dark valleys. As Keller points out (pp. 84-89), 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 23:4) does not necessarily point to death, although that could be involved. Rather, it points to a fearful place of extreme danger and darkness (see Jer. 2:6, the Sinai wilderness).

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 (p. 86), "it is in the valleys of our lives that we find refreshment from God Himself."

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 (23:4). 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 to-night 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").

The Bible is clear that the Christian life is not free from conflict. Looking back from the end, Paul calls his ministry a fight (2 Tim. 4:7). 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.

During a time of intense conflict in my ministry, I was reading a biography of Luther. The author pointed out how Luther came to see from his reading of Scripture and history that life on this earth is never without conflict. But Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon, and many

others who have fought the good fight have known the abundant provision of the Good Shepherd, even in the presence of their enemies.

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

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. 5:22-23)! 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 (23:6).

Two “sheep-dogs” follow God’s sheep continually: goodness and love. The rest of the world pursues goodness and love, but we have God’s goodness and loyal love pursuing us! “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). With Joseph (Genesis 37-40), 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, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

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, though the world counts us as sheep for the slaughter, “we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:36-37)!

Conclusion

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 (from an Operation Mobilization newsletter, 10/91):

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!

Discussion Questions

1. Is it realistic to believe that a person from a difficult past can find contentment in Christ alone?
2. Agree/disagree: American Christians have an inadequate theology of suffering.
3. Is all conflict with others wrong? If not, how can we know when it's right and when it's wrong?
4. What's the difference between contentment and complacency? Is discontent ever from the Lord? Cite Scripture.

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