

True Contentment

What do you believe about God? Do you believe that God is the Creator; that from nothing, he made the heavens and the earth? Do you believe that God is sovereign? Do you believe that he is the highest and the greatest authority, and that he alone is over all of creation (all the heavens & all the earth), all of the nations, all people, and all circumstances? Do you really believe that God is omniscient, that he knows all things? Do you believe that God is omnipotent, that he is all-powerful? Do you really believe that God reigns supreme? Do you believe that God is love? Do you believe that God has saved you from sin, by love, with purpose, so that he might show you the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness?

My hope is that every person here would answer, yes to every one of these questions, but here is a far more important question: does your life reflect these truths? The proof that these confessions are genuine is found in a life that is characterized by contentment. One of the most powerful and visible proofs of your salvation, one of the strongest witnesses before your spouse, your children, your co-workers, friends, family, and before a watching world, is a life that is satisfied and content.

To be content means that you believe that the LORD God will deliver what he has promised. It means that you truly believe the LORD God and take him at his word—that he will care for you, that he will meet all your needs, and that he will work all things and all circumstances for your good and for his glory.

No matter your circumstances or the trials that you face in this life, the content person is able to say, like Paul, in Philippians 4:11-13, Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. No matter your circumstances or the trials that you face in this life, the content person is able to cry out, like Asaph, in Psalm 73:25-26: Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. No matter your circumstances or the trials that you face in this life, the content person is able to worship, like Job, in Job 1:21 And he said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed by the name of the LORD. Though he slay me, I will hope in him; (Job 13:15).

Are you a content person? Are you really a content person? Do those who know you the most intimately, consider you to be a content person? Are you content with where you are at in life? Are you content in your marriage? Are you content with your spouse? Are you content in your singleness? Are you content with your school, with your friends, or with your parents? Are you content with your job, with your boss, with your paycheck? Are you content with your stuff, your house, your clothes, and your car?

Are you content with yourself, with your appearance, with your intellect, and with your health? Are you content when you lack any of these things?

Your answers to these questions, is your true confession about the LORD God. Your answers to these questions reveal what you truly believe about the LORD God, if he is really sovereign, if he is really omnipotent, if he really is love. The secret to being content is not rooted in your circumstances; it is not rooted in your present prosperity or success, or even in your present comfort. Being content is rooted in your knowledge and faith in the LORD God. It is rooted in your belief that God is in fact over all things; that God is in fact ordaining all things –that he is working all things for your good and for his glory. So to be discontent in your circumstances, is really to be discontent with the LORD God; to be discontent with his character, with his word, with his promises.

2 Peter 1:3, His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.

As Christians, we have been given everything that we need to be content; we have been given everything that we need to be satisfied –everything pertaining to life and godliness has been granted to us, so that regardless of the state of your finances, the state of your health, the state of your marriage, or any other difficult circumstance, you can be content because the LORD God reigns. You can be content because the LORD God is good. You can be content because the LORD God is faithful.

Unfortunately, in the lives of many professing believers the opposite is often true. The rare jewel of Christian contentment has been replaced by the dirt and mud of restless striving. And because you don't trust in the LORD God, in his provision, and in his goodness, you seek satisfaction elsewhere, you seek contentment elsewhere, but, believe me, you will never find it.

Please turn with me to the book of Psalms; our text is Psalm 23. In this very familiar Psalm, King David shows us that a life of contentment does not stem from the temporal blessings of this world, but rather, true contentment comes from knowing the Good Shepherd and from experiencing all the blessings that the Good Shepherd has graciously and abundantly provided for us. This morning we're going to look at four simple steps that will lead you to a satisfied life of great joy and great contentment:

1. You must know the Shepherd.
2. You must know the Shepherd's provisions.
3. You must walk closely with the Shepherd.
4. You must see the Shepherd's goodness in every circumstance and every situation.

Psalm 23: 1-6, A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The First Step to Contentment

The first step to contentment is to make sure that you know the Shepherd. Make sure that you are known by the Shepherd. The key to not wanting (v1), is to have the LORD Jesus Christ as your Shepherd. David's response is emphatically personal –the Lord is my shepherd.

It is important to remember, not everyone knows nor belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Good Shepherd is not the Shepherd of everyone. You may recall in John 10, the Jews were in suspense as to whether or not Jesus was the Christ, so finally they asked him, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

John 10:25-28, Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

In your search for contentment this is the first and most important question that you must answer –is the LORD Jesus Christ my Shepherd? Is he truly my Shepherd? Do I hear his voice? Do I obey his voice? Do I turn from my sin and follow him? Do I live for him?

Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Now I want you to really reflect, for a moment, on the reality of what this passage is saying: Imagine that you are living your life in obedience to LORD God, or so you think. You're serving the LORD God; you are serving others in the church, and in the community, or so you think. You're casting out demons; you're performing mighty miracles in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. You have seen, first hand the supernatural power of God; you have seen renewed and transformed lives. But at the end of your life, on that day, you are standing before the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the righteous judge, and after a lifetime of perceived devotion and service to him, you see him in his holiness, his majesty, and his splendor, and you proudly recount all that you have done in his name, and on his behalf. The Lord Jesus Christ pauses and looks down at you and proclaims "I never knew you." Now you start to panic; you're hearts pumping, sweat is pouring off your body, your mind is racing. How can this be? Everything I've done, my work, my service, my entire life, how can it of had no meaning? The answer is because you didn't really know the Shepherd, and the Shepherd didn't know you. Then from his glorious presence, because of your lawlessness, your pride, and your unbelief, you are cast into hell, to pay for every one of your transgressions. And there, in agony, in despair, and in utter darkness, you will forever exist as a monument to the holiness, justice, and the infinite wrath of God. This will be the terrifying reality for many, not just a few, but many. This will be the terrifying reality for some of you here today.

The questions that each one of you must individually answer: Is the LORD Jesus Christ truly my Shepherd? Do I truly know the Shepherd? Does the Shepherd truly know me?

I think it's significant that Psalm 23 follows immediately after Psalm 22. Psalm 22, is a Messianic Psalm, where we see a very clear picture of the Suffering servant, the Lord Jesus Christ being forsaken by God.

Psalm 22:1; 14-18, My God, my god, why have you forsaken me? I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet –I can count all my bones –they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

From Psalm 22, we see the immense suffering of the LORD Jesus Christ as he was mocked, and beaten, and nailed upon the cross at Calvary. Here we see Jesus Christ as our sacrificial substitute; we see him as our propitiation, as the one who absorbed the full wrath of God. Until you know Psalm 22 you cannot know Psalm 23. Until you place your trust in the LORD Jesus Christ, in his perfect life, in his perfect death, in his perfect resurrection, and in his perfect ascension, until you place your trust in the suffering servant alone, until you repent of your sin, and place your faith in his finished work, and follow after him, then, and only then can you say with David, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

The Second Step to Contentment

The second step to contentment is to make sure that you know the Shepherd's provisions.

Psalm 23:2-3, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

So often in our striving for contentment, in our striving for fulfillment and satisfaction in life, we forget the blessings that the LORD God has abundantly provided. We forget that the LORD God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet prophesied against the house of Israel and stated that they had forsaken God, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Looking for contentment outside of the LORD Jesus Christ is like a thirsty man who ignores and turns away from the fountain of fresh living water that is right in front of him, and he goes off into the distance, searching for water, and digs out an old broken cistern that won't hold water – that can't hold water. Looking and turning to anything other than the LORD Jesus Christ to find contentment is like ignoring that fresh fountain of water and searching out and drinking from a muddy puddle on the side of the road. Far too often, sheep ignore the abundant provision of the shepherd and they seek after a better substitution, a substitution which cannot satisfy.

What are some of these provisions that the Good Shepherd provides for his sheep? David mentions two things: Firstly, the Good Shepherd first provides his sheep with restful security, green pastures and quiet waters. Take another look at v2, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

In my life, I've had very little exposure to actual sheep. Most of my information about sheep, and the behavior of sheep, has come from books. One of my favorite books that deals with sheep is called, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23," written by Phillip Keller. For 8 years Keller made his livelihood as a shepherd and he has some very helpful insights about the manner and conduct of sheep. An interesting fact about sheep, according to Keller, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from hunger. It is only after the sheep are fed and satisfied, that they will lie down in peace and chew their cud. The Good Shepherd provides his sheep with everything they need to be able to lie down in perfect satisfaction and rest.

Ezekiel 34:14-15, [the LORD God states], I will feed them with good pasture...there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God.

I think that one of the main reasons why Christians often lack contentment, one of the main reasons why we struggle to lie down in restful security, is because we are hungry. We have not eaten; we need a healthy meal. But rather than filling up on a healthy portion of God's word, we fill up on other things; things that will not, nor cannot, satisfy our hunger. And so, we never lie down –we are fidgety, and restless, and we end up wandering away, looking for something, or someone else to fill us up. I would say that most Christians are under fed. Most Christians are malnourished, because they are not constantly feeding upon the word of God. There not hearing, not reading, not studying, not memorizing, nor meditating upon the sufficient word of God. Even though it is readily available, rather than taking in a healthy meal of God's word, a quick and easy substitute is sought; other things are sought-after for their contentment. They try to fill their hunger with their career, or with materialistic pursuits, or with pleasure, with comfort, with music, movies, books, exercise, or any other activity for that matter.

The word of God is milk for the baby and it is meat for the mature. It is God's provision for us, to make us healthy, so that we will be able to lie down in restful contentment.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Do not substitute anything for the hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, and mediating of God's word. Nothing else will fill you up; nothing else will satisfy you; nothing else will make you whole. In your search for contentment, don't pursue the poison of the world, but wait for the leading of the Shepherd, who will guide you to the green pastures and the quiet waters.

The second provision, that the Good Shepherd provides for his sheep is spiritual restoration and guidance. Take a look at v3, the Good Shepherd restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. If it weren't for the guidance of the shepherd, sheep would settle for dead, crusty stubble, and stagnant contaminated pools. Sheep are creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become ruts; they will graze the same hills until they turn into bare dirt; they will pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites.

Have you ever found yourself settling for that which does not satisfy; for that which you know will not satisfy, but its convenient, it is there, so you settle for it? As creatures of habit, do you ever find yourself following the same patterns of behavior, which results in the same miserable consequences? Do you ever make things worse for yourself? Have you ever dug yourself into a hole so deep that you have no possible way of getting out it? Where you multiply sin upon sin upon sin, until you can't even remember how or why you got to be in this place?

These situations are all too familiar to the children of God. But thanks to the guidance of the Shepherd, he leads us past the dead crusty stubble, he leads us past the stagnant contaminated pools, he leads us out of the holes that we dig, until we reach the grassy meadows with the quiet waters, and there our souls are restored.

Do you know how the Good Shepherd restores his sheep? Two ways: through his word, and through other sheep.

Psalm 19:7, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul..."

The word perfect here is the translation of the Hebrew word meaning to be whole, complete, or sufficient. It conveys the idea of something that is comprehensive, so as to cover all aspects of an issue. God's word is comprehensive; it covers all aspects of an issue. It also revives, or it restores the soul. God's word is so powerful and complete that it can transform the entire person; changing someone into precisely the person that God wants them to be. God's Word is perfectly sufficient to restore the most broken, and sinful, and mixed up life.

The other way that the Shepherd restores his sheep is through other sheep.

Galatians 6:1-2, Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

God has entrusted those who are spiritual to help restore his straying sheep. And who are the spiritual of Galatians 6:1? Paul actually qualifies the spiritual in the last verses of Galatians 5. Those who are spiritual are those who bear the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God has entrusted, you the spiritual, to go after and pursue straying sheep. This is what is referred to as church discipline. Or better yet, it should be called church restoration, because that is the goal, to restore a sinning brother or sister back into the body of Christ. Those in the church are called to lock shields with one another, to stand shoulder to shoulder with one another: I have got your back, and you have got my back. If I stray, you had better come

after me. If you stray, I had better come after you. This is what it means to be a member in the body of Christ. Church discipline, church restoration, is one of the greatest benefits to being a member in the local church.

The Third Step to Contentment

The third step to contentment: You need to walk closely with the shepherd.

Psalm 23:4-5, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

You see, on the way to the green pastures, on the way to the quiet waters, the shepherd will often need to lead the sheep through dangerous territory. God, our Shepherd leads us, when necessary, through bitter experiences and difficult trials. The Shepherd does not keep us from the valley of the shadow of death, he could, but rather, He leads us through it. You see it is the shepherd's presence that is our comfort—no matter how awful the circumstances—"I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

It is interesting, in vv1-3, David uses the third person "he" to refer to the Lord—the Lord is my shepherd; he makes me lie down; he leads me; he restores my soul; he guides me. Beginning in v4, when David starts to talk about times of trials, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, he shifts to the more intimate second person "you" to refer to the Lord. I think this is very significant. It is in the times of trial and distress; it is in the crisis' of life that we are drawn closer to our Father God. We have the tendency to talk a lot about God while we are in the green pastures, while we are beside the quiet waters, but when we are in the valley of the shadow of death, we do not just talk about God, we cry out to him; we rely upon him.

It is also important to note that the, "I shall not want," of v1 does not mean the absence of hardship. If anyone knew a life of hardship and sorrow, it was David. But David could say with integrity, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," because the LORD God was his portion, and the LORD God was with him in the valley of the shadow of death.

Romans 8:38-39, For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and nothing can snatch us out of his hand. If God is for us who can be against us? Who will bring a charge against God's elect. Who is to condemn? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? No one; we are protected; we are secure even in the presence of our enemies.

Take another look at Psalm 23:5, You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. In the presence of the

Shepherd there is no need to fear, there is no need to be anxious, because there is no lack of protection. The enemies of the sheep are helpless when the shepherd is present.

The picture here is of God as a gracious host, throwing a banquet, sparing no extravagance for the invited guest. The host provides him with abundance, an overflowing abundance so that David says that his “cup overflows,” and all of this in the presence of his enemies. For those who fear God (Psalm 34) there is no want, there is no want. Those who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing.

The Fourth Step to Contentment

The fourth and final step to contentment is you need to make sure that you see the Shepherd’s goodness in every situation.

Psalm 23:6, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Life can drastically change for the worse in a moment of time. Life can be very challenging and difficult. In the midst of difficulty you must remember God’s character, you must remember God’s word. Always remember what it is that follows the sheep of the Good Shepherd all of their days –it is the Shepherd’s goodness and his mercy.

God’s goodness, and God’s mercy, are like two sheep dogs. Sheep dogs are never far away from the sheep; they are always nearby, leading the flock, protecting the flock, and seeking the flock’s good on behalf of the Shepherd. The Hebrew word translated follow implies a very active kind of following, much like a pursuit. The Good Shepherd’s goodness and his mercy will pursue you all of the days of your life.

Imagine that you are driving in your car along the interstate, you pull over at a rest stop to get gas, you grab a few snacks, you get back in your car and you are back on the road. You are running a little late, you need to make up some time, so your driving about 20 mph over the speed limit. All of a sudden, a police car comes tearing up behind you flashing his lights and honking his horn. You panic for second and then take off; you try to outrun the police officer. Eventually you come to senses, and you realize its crazy to try to outrun a police officer – you’ve got no place to go and there is no way that you can outrun his car its just too fast. So you pull over. First, you were speeding and then you were fleeing. You know you’re in a mess of trouble. So, you wait for the officer to come to your window. He knocks on it twice. You sheepishly roll your window down and look up at the officer. He says to you, “You left your wallet at the rest stop,” and he hands it back to you. He then goes on to tell you, that while you at the rest stop, you won the \$10,000 door prize, but you left before they could give it to you, and he hands you a stack of cash.” You thought he was pursuing you to give you a ticket, but he was actually pursuing you with good, with mercy.

In a far greater way, our Father God is like that police officer. He actively pursues us with goodness and mercy, and our Father God will continue to pursue us all of the days of our lives. The heart of the LORD God, our Good Shepherd overflows with goodness, it overflows with mercy. When it comes to doing good for his sheep, he gives

us more good than we can handle; he gives us a super-abundance of good; he overflows our cup with good.

If you want to be content in this life –you need to make sure that you know the Shepherd, you need to make sure that you know the Shepherd’s provisions, you need to make sure that you walk closely with the Shepherd, especially during the hard times of life, and you need to make sure that you see the Shepherd’s goodness and mercy in every situation.

Why do you think our God shepherds us in this way? Why does God go to such great lengths to pursue fallen sinners like you and me? We wander; we stray; we flee from him. In our lives, we are not content, we are not satisfied with his provision. So why is it that the LORD God pursues us? What is the motive behind his pursuit and his provisions for us? Look at the second part of v3, for his name's sake. Beloved, God's motive is to display the honor and magnificence of his great and glorious name. And there is nothing that displays his honor, his character, his glory, and his all sufficiency more, than his overflow in goodness and mercy toward needy, sheep-like people, like you and me.

For his name's sake, for your restful security, for your guidance, for your protection, for your nourishment, for true contentment –know the Good Shepherd, know the Good Shepherd's provisions, walk closely with the Good Shepherd, and acknowledge his goodness and mercy in every circumstance and in every situation, no matter the difficulty. Be content with your circumstances, be content in your trial, be content in your suffering, by being content with your Good Shepherd. Follow the Good Shepherd; follow the LORD Jesus Christ, and if you do, you shall not want.