

1. Contentment and Rest

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[0 : 00] Turn to Psalm number 23, and if you have one of our big Bibles, you'll find it on page 458. Page 458. 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.

This is the word of the Lord, and may his blessing be upon it to us today. Well, now, the reason why I've chosen this 23rd Psalm for us to read together over these four Wednesday lunchtime services is simply that I was preaching on it about three or four Sundays ago here at the Tron on a Sunday evening, and I realised how very much there is in it.

[1 : 38] In fact, I think I said to the congregation on that Sunday evening, this psalm contains so much which is of such importance and interest that it really needs a series of sermons on it rather than just one sermon.

So I thought to myself, I've got these four Wednesday lunchtimes now in late October and early November, so I'll try and tackle it, God willing, in four sections to see if we can dig into its treasures a little bit more deeply.

So God willing, I want to take verses 1 and 2 this week, then verse 3 on its own next week, verse 4 on its own the following week, and then finally verses 5 and 6.

Now the immediate problem with Psalm 23 is that it's so well known, and therefore I think we can be tempted to think that we've somehow got it well understood and sewn up.

We've so often read it, we've seen it as we've walked into people's homes, there it is hanging up in the porch way, or granny's done an embroidered version of it, and it's sitting up in the kitchen, and it's been there for the last hundred years, and the children have been reading it in every generation.

[2 : 39] We know it somehow so well that we can become somewhat deaf to it. Familiarity has bred not contempt, but perhaps a certain lack of interest. It's become a little bit like motherhood and apple pie.

Everybody loves it, everybody agrees that it's wonderful, but the consequence is that effectively it can lie covered with dust, almost unnoticed. But it's full of comfort and strength and truth and challenge, and we need all of those things.

So a few words first to introduce the whole Psalm before we look at verses 1 and 2. King David is writing as a former and present shepherd.

He was a shepherd, and he is one. He used to shepherd a flock of sheep when he was a youngster, and now, now that he's a mature man, he is shepherding the great flock of the people of Israel.

So David knows about shepherd's work. For him to talk about the shepherd looking after the sheep is as natural as for the butcher to talk about topside, or the tailor to talk about cloth.

[3 : 47] He's in his native element when he writes like this, and therefore he writes with authority. And he writes this Psalm surely out of the abundance of his heart and thinking.

David was the sort of man who had to speak, and had to sing, and had to write. He was a most expressive, articulate man. He was the opposite of your silent, stiff, upper-lipped Englishman.

So when David danced, he danced like a Scotsman at Hogmanay. And when David grieved, he wailed. And there are several wails, as you know, in some of his Psalms.

Some of his Psalms are an outpouring of trouble and trauma. Now we can be very thankful that God chose such an expressive, articulate man to write all these Psalms. And Psalm 23 is an outpouring of his delight in the Lord. How delightful he is saying it is to belong to a God such as this. It's a Psalm of praise. Everything that he says here is an expression of how good the Lord is.

[4 : 48] And it's a happy Psalm. In fact, I would say that the secrets of human happiness are wrapped up in these six verses. If a person is unhappy and yet will take this Psalm and read it, study it, take it on board and then live by it, that person, over time, will become a happy person.

This Psalm displays the happy human life, the kind of life that God intends for all of us to live and to enjoy. So let's turn now to verses 1 and 2 and I want us to notice three things about them.

First, David shows us the disciplined life. The disciplined life. The Lord, he says, is my shepherd. Now the shepherd brings discipline to the flock of sheep as well as care and provision and tender love.

Now when I say discipline, I don't necessarily mean harsh discipline. That word discipline can remind us of army sergeant majors or maybe the kind of head teacher that some of the older ones here had at school 50 or 60 years ago who knew what it was to use the cane and all that sort of thing.

It doesn't happen now, does it? But some of you will remember that kind of discipline. Now a shepherd looking after his sheep does care for them and love them tenderly. So for example, Isaiah in chapter 40 says, he will tend his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

[6 : 17] So the shepherd accommodates himself to their limitations. He deals very gently and tenderly with the weaker ones. But he also has to rule the flock. Sheep notoriously tend to stray and therefore they have to be controlled.

My family and I live out in the country and I have a few acres of land attached to our house. And a friend of mine who lives a mile or so away grazes his sheep on my fields, my little fields.

And the very first day that my friend put his sheep on my fields, in the evening I thought, I'll go out and have a look at these sheep. They're here as my guests for the next year or whatever it is so I'll go and have a look at them.

So I walked out into the field and the sheep who didn't know me took off into one corner of the field and one of them found a hole in the fence. And immediately he was through there and all the others went straight through.

They legged it for freedom. But freedom happened to be very close to a busy main road. So I had to get onto my friend and ring him up and the two of us were running around getting these sheep back in and mending the fence very quickly.

[7 : 19] We realized that these sheep had to be controlled. They had to be disciplined. Now it's no wonder that David uses the metaphor of the sheep to describe human beings.

If sheep love to bolt for freedom and love to throw off the shepherd's discipline, how much more do human beings? Isn't it true that your middle name by nature is anarchy?

I have four children. Each one of them has anarchy as their middle name. They must get it from their mother. Now just think, if you're a Christian now, just look back to those days before you had come under the safety of the shepherd's crook and the shepherd's control.

In those days, before you were a Christian, you thought that you were free. But actually, you were heading for the main road and for disaster. You understand that now, but you didn't really understand it then.

But the truth is that human beings were made to live under the loving discipline of the great shepherd, the Lord. We discover what human life is intended to be as we submit to his lovely discipline.

[8 : 28] His discipline brings security. It's rather like the situation at home where you have a young child living with his parents. That child will be secure and happy if it is under its parents' kindly discipline.

But as soon as the child begins to break away from the parental discipline, it becomes insecure and unhappy. So we need to be under the control of the great shepherd. That's the only place where we will be able to grow up into true freedom and maturity.

And part of the secret of a happy human life is found in the fourth word of the psalm, the fourth word of the first verse. And that's the word my. David could have written the Lord is the great shepherd. And that would have been perfectly true. But he writes the Lord is my shepherd. And in that little word my, David opens up a whole world of intimate, delighted companionship and love. The shepherd possesses the sheep. And in a wonderful way the sheep also possesses the shepherd. Do you know how the Lord often says in the Bible they will be my people and I will be their God.

[9 : 37] It's a mutual possession. So to be in the shepherd's flock is to have the safety and security of discipline, the Lord's discipline but also to be deeply loved by him.

Now second, this disciplined life leads to the contented life. And the contented life is summed up in the last four words of verse one.

I shall not want. Now the link between the first half of the verse and the second half of the verse is clear. The sense is if the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.

If I'm a sheep in the flock of this great shepherd I shall lack nothing that I need. Now friends, this is a very simple truth but once we've grasped it it will greatly change the way in which we naturally look at life.

because the natural characteristic of human life is to be discontented. How do people normally express their sense of discontentment? Let me give you a few examples.

[10 : 37] We say if only. It often starts with if only. If only I had a bit more cash. If only I had been able to find somebody to marry.

If only the person that I am married to were a bit more understanding and loving. If only I lived in a better and more comfortable house. If only my job was a more interesting job.

If only my health were better. If only I were 20 years younger. If only my nose had been a different shape. Now the reason why modern advertising is so successful is that it plays upon our sense of discontentment.

So we watch our television screens and we see a shiny car up on the screen and we feel discontented over the pile of rust that we are currently driving about. Or we see a beautiful head of shiny hair in one of these advertisements for shampoo because you are worth it.

She shakes her head like that. And all the grey hairs have been covered up. They are not called grey hairs they are greys now aren't they? Extraordinary isn't it? And then we discontentedly look at the dowdy old mop of stuff that we have on top and we feel unhappy about it.

[11 : 49] Now David here he cuts across all that nonsense. If the Lord is my shepherd he says I shall lack nothing. In other words I'll be content with my old car and my rough old head of hair and my oddly shaped nose.

I'll learn to be content with my house and my job and my not very big income. Why? Because it is all that I need to be in the Lord's flock. I delight in being the Lord's sheep.

I learn to see that everything I have is a gift of his gracious provision. So I learn to see my car and my income and my job and my nose as kind gifts from him rather than second rate assets because I'm comparing them with other people's and other people's look better.

Now you might want to push me. You might want to say now come on Edward what if you're lying in a hospital ward desperately ill and possibly facing death in the very near future.

Could you really say in those circumstances I want nothing? Wouldn't you desperately want recovery of health if you were as ill as that? The answer is no because of the first half of verse 1.

[13 : 02] If the Lord is my shepherd he hasn't suddenly left off shepherding me for a while. I'm under the loving care and the provision of the only one who understands my best interests.

The only one who sees the whole of my life from its beginning to its end. So if he allows me to become desperately ill and perhaps to die rather younger than I might wish I can trust that he knows what he's doing because he sees very much further than I can see.

He is the good shepherd. I remember hearing the story of a pioneer missionary an Englishman in the 19th century whose name was Alan Gardner. Alan Gardner went to South America as a missionary and his life came to a premature end.

I'm not quite sure how old he was. I think perhaps in his 40s. But he was right down at the far tip of South America in Tierra del Fuego. And he was shipwrecked. He and a number of other people were shipwrecked and he was marooned on a small piece of land where there was neither food nor fresh water.

So he died after a week or two of thirst and starvation. But in those days as he lay dying in that very inhospitable place he had enough strength and energy to write up a journal.

[14:17] And this journal was later found beside his body. And in the journal he wrote with sweetness and delight of the overwhelming sense that he had of the Lord's goodness towards him. When Psalm 23 verse 1 sinks into our minds and hearts it will completely transform the way we look at our personal circumstances.

We will come to see that every aspect of our life is part of the Lord's kind loving provision for us. Even our hardships and our sufferings will be transformed for us because we know that our shepherd knows what he is doing.

If the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He will transform our thinking so that where other people might see deprivation we shall see blessing. Where others might see problem we shall see opportunity.

Where other people say it's not fair we shall say what a kind father we have who is looking after us. I think it's good for us to get verse 1 deep into our systems as early as possible in life.

Christians who have really learned to live by verse 1 become sweeter and lovelier people as they get older. Whereas Christian people who have not taken verse 1 to heart can end up rather grumpy and even bitter feeling that somehow the Lord has not dealt them a fair hand.

[15:45] So the disciplined life first, the contented life and now from verse 2 the restful life. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.

Now let's notice here how much the Lord takes the initiative. He's the one who's doing things, he's the subject of the verbs isn't he? He makes me lie down, he leads me. So it's as though he takes me to the pasture and he says to me, lie down there, you're tired, I'm making you lie down.

And he leads me beside still waters. Come on Charlie, he says, follow me, this is the place to be. He's a very directive shepherd. He doesn't just say casually and uncaringly, look, what I suggest you do is go up over that hill there and in a mile or two you might find a comfortable place to rest and lie down.

Not at all. He takes the sheep to the spot, he points out the very best place and he makes the sheep lie down in it to rest. Now at first sight you might look at verse two and wonder if it's a little bit more about feeding and drinking than about resting.

After all, green pastures in the very dry Middle East would have been an attractive spot for a hungry sheep and still waters would suggest a place where thirst can be quenched.

[17:05] Now while feeding and drinking may well be in David's mind here, what he's really emphasising surely is rest. Just look at the way he writes it. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Now a sheep lies down to rest, not to eat. Sheep always graze on their feet. They never graze as they lie down. And in the next phrase David emphasises the stillness of the waters.

Now that's not to do with quenching thirst, that's to do with tranquility and quietness. People who design gardens understand the value of having a water feature. I imagine some of you have designed gardens in the past.

Almost certainly if you can afford it and there's enough space, you'll put a little pond in there, won't you? Because it's lovely to look at the lazy goldfish blowing bubbles at the surface of the pond. Very restful, isn't it? It has a calming effect on tired nerves. So verse 2 is about the shepherd making sure that the sheep are tranquil. Now why does the Lord inspire David to write this verse too?

[18:09] Because he knows that one of the deepest longings of men and women is for rest. Even the most energetic people long for rest. Weariness is one of the consequences of the fall of man.

And that's why it's so lovely to hear Jesus saying at the end of Matthew chapter 11, come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. And when we read that verse our heart responds with a big yes because those words of his exactly meet our needs.

I wonder if there's a single individual here who doesn't long for rest. Heaven is described in the Bible as the promised rest. So everybody needs rest.

Even our Cornhill training course students, you know I run this training course, they need rest as well. They are amongst the most happy and energetic and very intelligent people that one could ever hope to meet.

But they need rest. In fact, I have known Cornhill training course students fall fast asleep even in the midst of the most stimulating and fascinating lecture. But seriously, we do long for rest and it is promised to Christians in the world to come.

[19 : 18] But verse 2 is surely about this life, isn't it? Life in this world for those who live under the shepherd's rule. We're pointed on to eternity when it gets to the end, to verse 6. But verse 2 is about being in Glasgow in 2009.

The Christian is able to enjoy a real restfulness deep inside, even when the surface of life may be filled with all sorts of activities. Now on the surface of life, many Christians are very busy and that's right and proper.

Running a home, doing a job, rearing children, looking after people, being stuck into the local church and serving the cause of the gospel, all that activity is very tiring. You drop into bed like a stone night after night and you don't need rocking.

But the restfulness deep within is real and it brings happiness. And the reason why Christians can enjoy this restfulness is because life's most exhausting and painful questions have been answered once we come to put ourselves under the rule of Christ.

So for example, are my sins forgiven? Yes. Is my conscience clear? Yes. Because of the cross of Christ, at the cross of Christ, every last sin, including the worst ones, have been dealt with.

[20 : 38] Am I loved? Yes. Yes. Do I belong? Yes. To the Lord and to the Lord's people. Do I know the purpose of human life?

Yes. The purpose of life is to enjoy God, to glorify him forever, enjoy him forever, to love him, to delight in him and to serve him. Is death ultimately to be feared?

No. Now for those who are not yet Christian believers, those big questions have not yet been answered. And they are painful, exhausting questions.

They haunt those who are not Christians. Those are the big questions of life. But the Bible answers those questions fully and wonderfully. That's why the Christian soul is filled with rest.

So Christians will be busy and at times Christians will be troubled by trauma and stress, difficulty. But the underlying restfulness of our souls will be secure.

[21 : 43] Let me read verses 1 and 2 again. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. Friends, let's believe these things because these are fundamental to the happy human life. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

It rejoices our hearts so much, dear Father, that you have said these things to us in your word through the pen of David.

We thank you that he discovered the truth of them and has passed them on to countless generations who have held them fast and have greatly benefited from them. So we pray now that you will write these things deep in our hearts, that you'll help us to discover increasingly the glory and the joy of living a disciplined life, a contented life, and a life that is filled with an underlying rest and peace.

And we pray too, dear Father, that you will enable each of us to bear witness to this wonderful change that you bring to those who come to Christ so that others too will be drawn to him as they see our lives.

[23 : 08] And all these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.