

Contentment and Rest

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] You might like to turn up Psalm 23, because I shall read that in just a minute or two's time, and that is going to be our subject over these Wednesday lunchtimes during the month of September.

But let us begin by turning to the Lord for a moment of prayer. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Our dear Heavenly Father, we turn our minds and our hearts up to you, and we thank you so much that you have shown us that you are our shepherd as we turn to you and place our confidence in you.

And we think of the way that you sent the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to look after the sheep. We think of his love and compassion for the great crowds of people in Judah in those days, when he looked out upon them and was moved with feeling and pity for them, because he said they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

So we thank you for sending him as the visible, wonderful, lasting demonstration of your shepherdly care. So today we look up to you.

We do pray that through the scriptures you will build up our understanding and our faith and indeed our joy. And we pray that in being here together as brothers and sisters, you will encourage our hearts to persevere and to stay with you and with the gospel.

[1 : 35] And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's open our Bibles then at Psalm 23. And I shall read this familiar psalm out.

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.

[2 : 40] Well, now, with Psalm 23, I think the immediate problem, if it is a problem, is that it is so well known.

And it may be that we think that because we know it so well, we somehow have it sewn up. We've often read it. We've probably seen it hanging up in people's houses. I'd be very surprised if there aren't a number here who had it hanging up in their house years ago.

Perhaps your parents or grandparents had it up on the wall of the kitchen. And you got to know it really well. And the consequence is that we can become deaf, or at least partially deaf, to Psalm 23. Familiarity leads not to contempt, but to lack of interest. It can become like motherhood and apple pie. Everybody loves it, and everybody agrees with it. But the consequence is that effectively it lies there covered with dust, unnoticed.

But it is full of comfort, full of truth and challenge, and we need all of those things. So just a few words first to introduce the whole of the psalm, and we'll look at just verses 1 and 2 today.

[3 : 47] Next week we'll look at 3, and then the following week at verse 4 and so on. But a few words to introduce the psalm. David himself is the author. And he writes here as a former and present shepherd.

He was a shepherd, and he is one as he writes. He used to shepherd a flock of sheep when he was young. But now that he's mature, he is shepherding another flock, a much more important flock, and that is the people of Israel.

So David knows about shepherds' work. For him to talk about the shepherd and his sheep is as natural as for a butcher to talk about topside or a tailor to talk about cloth. It is his nature. It's his element. So he writes with authority. And he writes this psalm surely out of the abundance of his heart and his thinking.

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

[4 : 51] When he danced, he danced like a Scotsman at Hogmanay. When he grieved, he wailed. Quite a number of his psalms are an outpouring of trouble and trauma, as you know well.

But we can be thankful that the Lord God chose such an irrepressible and articulate man to write all these psalms. And this psalm, Psalm 23, is an outpouring of his delight in the Lord.

It's a psalm of praise because everything he says here is an expression of how very good the Lord is and how good it is to belong to him. This is a very happy psalm.

In fact, the secrets of human happiness are wrapped up in these six verses. If an unhappy person will take this psalm and believe it and learn it and live by it, that person will become happy.

This psalm displays the happy human life, the kind of life that God intends for all of us to live. Well, let's turn to these first two verses. And I want to point out three things about them today.

[5 : 55] First, David shows us the disciplined life. He says, the Lord is my shepherd. And the shepherd, of course, brings discipline to the sheepfold.

He brings, of course, care and provision. But he brings discipline as well. Now, when I say discipline, I don't necessarily mean harsh discipline. That word discipline can remind us of sergeant majors in the army or perhaps an old fashioned head teacher that some of us may remember years ago who was more to be feared than loved.

The kind of head teacher who had a switch behind his desk and used it to good effect. Now, the shepherd looking after his sheep, of course, he cares for them. And that care will at times be very tender.

So, for example, Isaiah, in his 40th chapter, says this about the Lord. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

The shepherd knows his sheep so well that he's able to accommodate himself to their limitations. He deals gently with those who are weak. But he also has to discipline and rule the flock.

[7 : 08] Sheep notoriously stray. And therefore, they have to be controlled. I live out in the countryside in Ayrshire. And we have a few acres of pasture beside our house.

And a friend of mine regularly brings his flock of sheep to graze on my land. About 40 sheep are on there at the moment. And I remember the first day that the sheep came onto our fields, they found a hole in the fence and began to leg it for freedom.

So I had to get onto my friend as quickly as possible. And he came round because there's a main road not far from us. And we had to get the sheep back into the field and mend the fence. Those sheep had to be disciplined and controlled.

And it's no wonder that David uses the metaphor of the sheep to describe human beings. Because if sheep need control, if sheep love to bolt for freedom, how much more do human beings?

If you're a Christian, just look back to your pre-Christian days, which may be long ago. And you will acknowledge, surely, that in those days, you were not within the safety of the shepherd's control.

[8 : 13] You thought you were free. But actually, you were heading for the main road, if you like, in disaster. You understand that now, but you didn't understand it then.

But the truth is that we human beings were made to live under the loving discipline of the great shepherd, the Lord. We discover what human life is all about when we submit to his loving discipline.

His discipline brings security. It's a bit like the life of a young child living at home with his parents. That child will be secure and happy if it's under the kindly discipline of the parents.

But if the child breaks out from the parental discipline, it soon becomes insecure and unhappy. So we need to be under the control of the great shepherd. It's the only place where we will be able to grow up and keep growing in freedom and maturity.

And part of the secret of the happy life is found in the fourth word of verse one. That word, my. Now, King David could have written, the Lord is the great shepherd.

[9 : 23] 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, of course, possesses the sheep. But in a wonderful way, the sheep also possesses the shepherd. The Lord often says in the Bible, they will be my people and I will be their God.

The Lord is my shepherd. So to be in the shepherd's flock is to be disciplined by him, but also deeply loved by him. Now, this disciplined life leads, secondly, 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 verse one and the second half is surely obvious.

The sense is something like this. If the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. If I'm a sheep in the flock of this shepherd, I shall lack nothing that I need.

[10 : 32] It's a very simple truth. But once we've grasped it, it greatly changes our whole outlook on life. Now, the natural characteristic, or one of the natural characteristics of human life is to be discontented.

I won't ask you to put your hand up if you ever feel discontented, but I guess every hand would go up. It's a fallback position. We naturally feel discontented. We say, for example, if only this or if only that.

If only I had a bit more cash. You ever thought that? If only I'd been able to find someone to marry. If only the person that I am married to would be a bit more understanding and loving.

If only I lived in a better house. If only I had 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. Life would have been different. I guess the reason why modern advertising is so successful is that it plays upon this sense of discontent.

[11 : 37] We see, we're watching the television and a shiny new car comes up. And we feel discontented with the old pile of rust that we're currently driving about. Or we see a beautiful head of shiny hair.

You know that sort of thing that comes up on the television screen? Because you're worth it. You know, that kind of thing. All the gray hairs are covered up. And we think discontentedly of what we have up there.

And we feel that we've done badly. Now, David, you see, with this verse, he cuts across all of that. He says, if the Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing.

In other words, I'll become content with my old car and my rough old hairstyle and my odd-shaped nose. I'll learn to be content with my house and my job and my rather small income.

Why? Because I so much delight in being the Lord's sheep. I learn to see that everything I have is a gift of his gracious provision. 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 to other people's.

[12 : 47] Now, you might want to push me at this point. You might want to say, now, come on. What if you're lying in a hospital ward, desperately ill, and perhaps facing death in the near future?

Can you really say then, I want nothing? Wouldn't you desperately want a recovery of health if you're in that position? The answer is no.

Because of the first half of verse 1. If the Lord is my shepherd, I'm under the loving care and provision of the only one who understands my best interests.

The only one who sees my life from its beginning to its end. So if he allows me to be desperately ill and perhaps to die rather younger than I would wish, I can trust that he knows what he's doing.

He sees further than I ever can. He's the good shepherd. I remember hearing the story, reading the story of a pioneer British missionary who went to South America in the 19th century, a man called Alan Gardner.

[13 : 54] Well, his life came to a premature end in Tierra del Fuego. You know where that is. Think of the South American cone. It's right down there in the cold southern part of South America.

He was shipwrecked, apparently, and marooned, and he was on his own. And eventually, he had neither food nor water, so he died of thirst and starvation. But in those final days, as he lay dying in that very inhospitable place, he had enough strength to write up a journal, just a brief journal, which was later found beside his body.

And in that journal, he wrote with sweetness and delight of how kind and good the Lord had been to him throughout his life. When Psalm 23, verse 1, sinks into our minds and hearts, it will completely transform the way that we look at our circumstances.

We will come to see every aspect of our life as part of the Lord's kind 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.

The Lord is my shepherd. That's why I shall not want. He will transform our thinking so that where others might see deprivation and difficulty, we shall see blessing.

[15:16] Where other people might see problem, we shall see opportunity. Where other people cry out, it's not fair, we shall say, what a kind father and shepherd is looking after us.

It's surely good for us to get this first verse of Psalm 23 into our systems as deeply as possible. Christians who've really learned to live by verse 1 become sweeter and lovelier as they get older, whereas Christians 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.

So the disciplined life, the contented life, and now thirdly, the restful life. Restful. Verse 2. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. Now just notice how much it's the Lord who is taking the initiative at this point. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Lie down, he says. You're tired. I'm making you lie down. And then he leads me beside still waters. Come on, Charlie, he says. Follow me.

[16:32] This is the place to be. He's a very directive kind of shepherd. He doesn't just say casually and uncaringly, if I were you, I'd walk a mile or so up that road and you might find a nice spot to rest.

No. He takes the sheep there. He points out the very best spot and he makes that sheep lie down on it. Now at first sight, you might wonder if verse 2 is more about feeding and drinking than about resting.

After all, green pastures, especially in the arid Middle East, would be rare and much desired by a hungry sheep. And still waters suggest the place where thirst can be quenched.

But while feeding and drinking may well be in David's mind here, what he's really emphasizing is rest. Just look at the words. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

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

[17:39] Now that's not to do with quenching thirst. That surely is to do with tranquility and quietness. People who design gardens understand the value of a water feature.

A little fountain playing or a little waterfall. Just think of it. Just to think of it makes you feel better, doesn't it? Lazy goldfish blowing bubbles and looking up at the fountain.

Very restful. It has a calming effect on tired nerves. Verse 2 is about the shepherd making sure that the sheep are tranquil and calm. Now, why does the Lord inspire David to write this verse?

Because he knows that one of the deepest longings of all 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. That's why it's lovely to hear Jesus saying in Matthew's gospel, Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[18:40] And when we read that, our hearts respond with a big yes. Because his words exactly meet our needs. Is there a single individual here, younger or older, who doesn't long for rest?

Heaven is described in the Bible as the ultimate promised rest. Everybody needs rest. Some of you will know that I run the Cornhill training course.

We're about to start up with our new term in a few days' time. Our Cornhill training course students are amongst the most happy and energetic people that I know. But even they need rest.

In fact, I have known Cornhill students fall fast asleep, even in the midst of the most stimulating and fascinating lecture. But seriously, we do long for rest.

We have that feeling inside us, don't we? And it is promised to Christians in the world to come. Yes, wonderful rest. But this verse 2 is surely about a restfulness in this life, for those who live under the shepherd's rule.

[19:41] We're pointed on to eternity in verse 6. Where he says, Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But in verse 2, we're in Glasgow in 2016.

The Christian is able to enjoy a real restfulness deep inside, even when the surface of life is full of activity. On the surface, Christian people are often very busy.

Running a home, doing a job, rearing a family, looking after people in different ways, serving the cause of the gospel. And all that sort of activity is 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 Christians can enjoy this restfulness is because the most painful and exhausting questions of life have been fully answered for the Christian believer.

For example, Are my sins forgiven? Yes. Is my conscience clear? Yes. Because at the cross of Christ, every last one of my sins has been dealt with.

[20 : 59] Am I loved? Yes. Do I belong? Yes. Do I know the purpose of human life? Yes.

It is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, to trust him, to serve him, to delight in him. Is death to be ultimately feared? No.

Now, for those who are not yet Christians, those great questions are still unanswered, and they're painful, exhausting questions. They haven't, sorry, they haunt those who are not Christians.

But the Bible is the one place where those questions are answered fully and wonderfully. That's why the Christian soul is filled with a deep rest inside. So Christians will be busy, and sometimes we will be troubled by traumatic events.

But the underlying restfulness of our souls is a security which cannot be taken from us. So, friends, the Lord, says David, the believing David, the David troubled by pressures all through his life.

[22 : 09] The Lord, he says, is my shepherd, and for that reason I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

Let's believe these things, friends, because they're fundamental to a happy human life. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Dear God, our Father, we think of your servant, King David, with his many responsibilities as the King of Israel, often harried by enemies, often troubled by the pressures of being the ruler of a great people, but a people who were not always willing to submit to you, sometimes having to face rebellion and real difficulty.

But we thank you so much, dear Father, that he was able to turn his eyes up to you and to come to understand deeply that because you were his shepherd, he was able to live a life that was at rest and peace.

And in this moment of quietness, we think of our own lives. We do pray that you will help us, dear Father, to turn away from any kind of discontentedness and to rejoice in the way that you have provided for us and cared for us throughout our lives.

[23 : 42] And we pray that we will be able to, by your grace, to pass on this good news of your shepherd's care to other people. Please honor your name and the truth of the gospel in our lives, we pray.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.