

Question – what do you think is the secret to contentment?

Have you ever wondered how many clothes shops stay in profit and operation year after year, new lines of clothing, new shoes, new products – it's because people need the next thing to make them content and yet they never are. Mick Jagger from the Rolling Stones wrote the song, "I can't get no satisfaction, though I've tried and I've tried, I can't get no satisfaction". I wonder is this because people can't find contentment or is it that they are never content with what they have?

Psalm 23 comes at a time when David the writer understands that God has and will provide everything he needs. Down through the years, this Psalm 23 has provided much comfort to so many people with its words but I wonder how often do people stop at the first line to consider that when the Lord is MY shepherd, that's all I need. I am content.

READ – PSALM 23

It's important at the beginning to acknowledge the placement of this psalm and where it is. It is after Psalm 22 and why not read the opening words now. The Psalmist cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And we all know these are the very words which Jesus cried out to God on the cross. So it's only after these words that we read Psalm 23 that the Lord is my shepherd and in him I lack nothing. Remember that David is pointing us to Jesus. And so as we acknowledge what Christ has done for each of us on the cross, we then realise the Lord as our Shepherd, our carer, our protection, and therefore through the cross and his resurrection we can say we don't need anything else.

So in the psalm David compares his relation to God with that of a contented sheep with its caring shepherd. We are the sheep and he is the shepherd.

Question – what's your experience of sheep? And let's think of sheep in all kinds of ways – their behaviour, what they provide for us etc

What would sheep have been used for in David's day?

So the picture which David is presenting here is not of a sheep that is going to be slaughtered, it's a sheep raised for wool. The Good Shepherd cares and loves his flock.

David understands the comfort of the Shepherd, not just from his experience on the hills with sheep, but also at how his achievements could only come out of a reliance and utter dependency on God.

- 1. So if we are thinking about that desire for true contentment, the first thing we need to do is make the Lord our Shepherd.**

Let's consider that David says the Lord is his Shepherd. He doesn't say the Lord is our Shepherd. The Lord cannot be your Shepherd if you don't know him. John 10, which we are

going to be thinking about on Sunday, Jesus says in Verse 25 in reply to the Jews asking if he was the Messiah, he says, ““I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me”.

Ray Stedman in his book, ‘Psalms – folk songs of faith’, says ‘God wants to bring us to the place where He is our all-sufficient supply, the place where we need nothing but Him. My friend and colleague in ministry, David Roper, once put it this way

There are really only two options in life. If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want. But if I am in want, then it is obvious that the Lord is not my Shepherd. If there’s emptiness, loneliness, dissatisfaction, and frustration in our lives, then the Lord is not our shepherd.

True happiness and joy in life begin with the recognition that we are sheep in need of a shepherd’.

And doesn’t this say a lot more about the shepherd if you consider how stupid we are. The Shepherd creates a place, a shelter which the sheep feel safe in and realise it’s the place best for them.

2. So we’ve got to know the Shepherd. It’s got to be a personal relationship. The second stage of contentment is to enjoy the provisions that the Shepherd gives us.

Many people don’t realise daily how much God has abundantly provided. And therefore here’s the question –

Question – Let’s share with each other what are all the things that God has provided for us – let’s think of specific examples where we have seen his provision.

David in the next 2 verses says that he has provided 4 things :

a) He makes me lie down in green pastures. Sheep will not lie down in a pasture that is hard. In fact I have watched as sheep have moved more towards hedgerows for comfort. A green pasture gives the picture of lush grass, where the sheep have ate and now they will be content to lie down and chew their cud. God wants us to understand the contentment that comes from his daily provision. And at the centre of this has to be the feeding from his word. Let’s read 1 Peter 2:1-3 “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” When we feed on God’s word we know that it is good for us, good for our thoughts, good for our souls.

Question – what have we been feeding on during these last 6 months? Is it lots of News, is it lots of TV programmes? Has this affected our behaviour.

b) He leads me beside quiet waters. My dog Spud will often look at me almost ready to speak when there is no water in his bowl. It’s an essential for life. It refreshes us on a

warm day. We need to be refreshed by God. John in his gospel uses the imagery of water a lot. Let's read John 7:37-38

'On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified'.

Question – in what ways does the Holy Spirit provide for us?

Dwells in us (Romans 8:9), Empowers us (Galatians 5:16-23), Gives us hope in trials (Romans 5:3-5), He guides us (Acts 13:2-4), he teaches us (1 John 2:27), he prays for us (Romans 8:26), he comforts us (John 14:16), he gives us spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12), he helps us to be witnesses (Acts 1:8).

Question – If the Spirit of God provides so much, why would we look to other things to quench our thirst?

Sometimes being sheep we won't wait for God to help us. As Tim Keller says, "They stop to drink from the polluted potholes along the trail, contaminated with the manure and urine from previous flocks. It satisfies the initial thirst, but eventually it riddles them with parasites and disease"

c) Next the Psalmist says, "He restores my soul".

The Hebrew word here for restore means refreshment and turning back. I watched a sheep get it's head stuck in a fence because it was being too inquisitive and greedy for food in the next field. I had to free it because otherwise it would tangle itself further to the point that it would end up killing itself. There's no thinking what might have happened through the night. The interesting thing was that while I was rescuing it, it continued to fight and get more tangled - it did not understand the help that it was in, but that was because I wasn't its shepherd. I worry about the things that people go off to look into to help bring restoration to their bodies and minds. They may think they are getting help from a shepherd of the flock, but it's actually strangling them further.

There are two main ways in which God uses to restore us. Look at 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'. So he gives us his WORD. And he also gives us PEOPLE. Look at Galatians 6:1, 'Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. James 5:19-20 '9 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins'.

Question – do you feel you have people who help to restore you when you are heading in the opposite direction to God’s will?

- d) Finally we receive Spiritual guidance – ‘He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake’. Note here that God’s name is bound up in his guidance. Therefore if we choose to walk a different path as a believer, then we are bringing his name into disrepute. Sometimes we will not know why the path is a certain path, but we must trust in the one who shows us the right path to live.

I read in Ray Stedman’s book the story of the wife of physicist Albert Einstein. She was asked did she understand her husband’s theory of relativity. She answered, “No, I don’t, but I know my husband. If he says it’s true, you can trust him”. For each of us if the Lord is my Shepherd, then we can trust him, and he will guide our paths in the right way. He has staked his reputation, his name, on it. That’s his seal or guarantee.

3. So we know the Shepherd, we know he provides for us, and now to be content we are to trust in him through the hard times.

Verse 4 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 staff they comfort me.

God has never intended that we walk through life troubled by fear. Paul wrote to his spiritual son Timothy (2 Timothy 1:7) ‘For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline’. In the past year I was with a parishioner who faced a major operation. The size of his tumour was massive. I have never seen a man go into the path of a major operation with such strength in his Lord. It wasn’t about being brave. It was putting his entire trust in the Lord that gave him power.

It is important to note here that God is not saying that we won’t face dark times. David says, ‘Even though I walk through’, so it’s inevitable. It’s also important to see that up to this point in the psalm David has talked about God as he. David now shifts to you. It’s a more intimate relationship that we have seen before. And so let’s now look at the trials to be faced.

- a) The valley of the shadow of death

Question – when we read this verse, what do we think it means?

The Hebrew here doesn’t necessarily point to death, although that could be involved. Rather it points to a fearful place of extreme danger and darkness. Stedman suggests an alternative translation might be ‘the sunless valley of deathly shadows’. Many people will refer to this in funerals, and Stedman says it is very appropriate, but it is more appropriate to life than death. It is a passage of comfort and assurance for the times when we are passing through life’s shadows, through valleys of hurt, betrayal, doubt, and fear, loss, sadness and sorrow. Tonight on Love Ballyclare’s Facebook page there was an advert that said, ‘If in Doubt, try Yoga’. Is

that what is comes to? When we are in a low place, in a dark place, verse 4 assures us of God's presence. There are 2 things that bring reassurance to the sheep in difficult places – one is the presence of the Shepherd, but the other is his Rod & Staff.

Question – What is the difference between a Rod and a Staff?

The rod was a pole used to ward off predatory animals and it therefore gave an assurance of protection to the sheep from the Shepherd. It was also something referred to in Leviticus 27:32 'Every tithe of the herd and flock—every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod—will be holy to the Lord'.

So it was also considered something used to count the sheep. Therefore with the rod here we are assured that God is interested in every one of the flock. He knows the very hairs on our head.

The Staff was also a pole, longer, but with a hook on the end (you see Bishops using these). The staff was used to pull the sheep to safety or to guide them. It was a symbol of concern.

- b) Next are those times of conflict (you prepare a table in the presence of my enemies)

We are not free from conflict. In fact if you stand for the truth of God's Word, then you will have enemies and there will be conflict, even amongst believers as Satan wages war against us. 2 Timothy 4:7 Paul talks about his ministry being a fight, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." The presence of enemies suggests that they are all around us, yet David has nothing to fear as God is his host.

Question – who do you think are our enemies today?

- c) Next are those times of irritation (you anoint my head with oil)

We know that oil was used to anoint Kings and priests. But what would oil signify being poured on a sheep?

It was to signify healing. It could be used for medicinal purposes. My dog spud gets itchy ears, and he cannot lie content with it. It requires me to put some ointment on it to sooth the irritation. Remember in Luke 10 how the Samaritan treats the injured man with oil. Oil is also a picture of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 61:1 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners;'

So in those tough times we are assured here of God's presence, his protection, his guidance, and that we have his healing.

And so the Psalm ends with a beautiful picture of David's confidence in God's loving kindness and his hope for us. 'Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever’.

4. Our contentment therefore comes in knowing that we are constantly being followed throughout our lives by God’s Goodness and his Love.

Whenever I am with people who are sick, I will often quote one of my favourite passages of scripture and that is Isaiah 43:1b-3a

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

Question – can you think of situations which may have seemed full of despair and worry, and yet you have seen God’s Goodness and his Love in it?

Our future, no matter what we are facing, will always be secure when we know the Shepherd. He loves and cares for us. The final statement in the psalm of dwelling in God’s house is one that is so communal. You are part of the household.

So walk contented in God’s presence. Be conscious of the joy that this brings.

Are there areas of your life that you need to sit and reflect on this Psalm today. Are there areas where you are not enjoying the provision which God has for you? He wants you to know again the joy that only comes from knowing him.

Next week – Psalm 27