

## ***FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA***

### **The Secret of Contentment**

By

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Psalm 23:1-6

The Lord uses various analogies to compare the relationship of Himself to His elect: The bride and the Bridegroom is a beautiful analogy. In other places he employs the analogy of the vine and the branches or the olive tree and the branches on it. In other places he uses the analogy of a Temple of which we are the stones and he is the corner stone. In another place he compares the human body of which he is the head and we are the members of that mystical body. But the analogy he used most frequently is the analogy of a Shepherd and his sheep. David could visualize this very well for he had been a shepherd and knew from first hand experience what that relationship was like. He could apply this to himself as one of God's sheep.

Contentment is basic; we must have it or learn it in order to live well. According to the NT, in Philippians 4, it may be a secret that is learned. Paul said: **I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. <sup>12</sup>I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.**

Contentment means to learn to be satisfied with what you have. We are to be content with what God gives whatever that may be.

The secret of contentment is discovered to you and me in the Twenty Third Psalm. Before we can know contentment we have to come to a conviction that the teaching embodied in this Psalm is meant for every one of us who knows Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Knowing Christ makes you a sheep under the care of the Good Shepherd. The secret is having your own personal faith in the words contained in this Psalm as being especially meant for you.

But before we discuss this Psalm let me tell you a story of a farmer who had lived on the same farm all his life. It was a good farm, but with the passing years, the farmer began to tire of it. He longed for a change--for something "better." Every day he found a new reason for criticizing some feature of the old place. Finally, he decided to sell, and listed the farm with a real estate broker who promptly prepared a sales advertisement. As one might expect, it emphasized all the farm's advantages: ideal location, modern equipment, healthy stock, acres of fertile ground, etc. Before placing the ad in the newspaper, the realtor called the farmer and read the copy to him for his approval. When he had finished, the farmer cried out, "Hold everything! I've changed my mind. I am not going to sell. I've been looking for a place like that all my life."

We can all grow discontented with what we have in life. Before we talk about the secret of contentment in Psalm 23 perhaps we need to be like that farmer and consider the blessings and comforts we already have. We would then find out that just living in America puts us in a better position to know contentment than many other people in the world.

I remember so well during World War II when I was not yet a Christian but because I was a flight radio operator in the Army Air Force I had the opportunity to visit many other places in the world. I would always be thankful when I got back to the United States. I had never realized how favored I was to have been born in this free land until I had been to other lands and saw first hand the desperate circumstances in which so many lived. I had never appreciated my birthright before as I did after traveling abroad to Africa, India, war ravaged France and England and then to the Pacific Theater of Operations to New Guinea, some Pacific Islands and finally Manila in the Philippines. How glad I was when the war was over and I could return for the rest of my life to the good old USA.

Our Lord after his resurrection told Peter that if he loved him to feed his sheep, repeating this three times as his chief responsibility as a minister of Christ. I really think of this in my own pastoral responsibility. The main duty of a teaching elder is to feed Christ's sheep.

David says in this psalm that because the Lord is my shepherd -- **I shall not want**. There is nothing that his soul or body needed that was not taken care of by the Good Shepherd. This is because the Shepherd has a heart for his sheep that might be summarized under the simple heading of Providential Care.

**First and foremost**, the Shepherd provides for the sheep all that they need for health and happiness. This really sums up the whole range of necessities of the sheep. God is of course the Shepherd and we know Him in Jesus Christ. He calls Himself the good Shepherd who lays down His life for his sheep. It is because He cares for His sheep that he does this. We understand this as the atoning death He died on the cross for our sins so that we might be forgiven and accepted into God's holy fellowship. But David says I shall not want. There is therefore nothing needed for life in this world that is lacking to him because the Shepherd sees to it that his wants are all taken care of.

Can't you and I say that too? We are in the care of Christ as the good Shepherd who has already shown his love for his elect people by his sacrificial giving of Himself as the Lamb of God. How much more will he take care of those physical necessities we have.

**Secondly, He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters**. The shepherd has a concern to see that his sheep have good nourishing food and plenty of pure, clear water to drink.

There is providential guiding by the Shepherd. He makes his beloved sheep lie down in green, lush pastures and he leads them beside the still waters. Sheep do not like angry, swirling water to drink. Such water is disturbing and muddy. Sheep, like the quiet and clear water to drink. This is what your soul and mine desire. The peaceful nature of a sheep is in the Christian. We dislike controversy and contention. The world ministers a jarring, jangling noisy disquietude. There is a restlessness and clamor in the world that unsettles the soul. But the Lord leads his sheep into quiet places of contemplation and meditation

This is a way of saying that he charts my course so that I will come into those times of blessing and refreshing. When I simply trust in his Providence it always turns out to be wise and good. I can look back and see how that is true even though at the time it may not have seemed that way.

We have similar needs for food, clothing, shelter and comforting care. We are social beings and we need association with others of our kind. This is why we congregate in local churches. There we are nourished and fed. We shall not want.

There are those who do not avail themselves of the provision that is readily available if they will but stay with the flock. David understood and believed what he penned in this Psalm and it produced contentment in his soul. You and I can have the same contentment he had. The secret is to believe in the unfailing providential care defined in this Psalm.

But sheep can stray away. We can get off the path and distance ourselves from the flock. The devil is always trying to tempt us to sin, to lure us away from the Shepherd, to do things that disturb the conscience and disquiet the soul. He is the enemy who would bring pain and discomfort and ruin if he could. To know contentment is to stay close to the Shepherd and to be alert to the danger of straying into by pass meadow.

**He restores my soul**; When you get into the Devil's territory and suffer for it the Shepherd will come seeking after you. He desires to restore you. You simply need to be willing to be restored. Repentance and renewed trust in the Shepherd brings restoration. Then there is rest and refreshment planned by God. He knows that we need that for our souls as well as physical things for the body. He has all the provision and knows where to take us to be well provided for.

**He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake**.

Our Lord knows that the greatest need of the soul of every person is for forgiveness and righteousness. He provides that fully in Jesus Christ and then he leads us along in paths that avoid sin and establishes us in lives of righteousness. This is because He Himself is a God of righteousness and His Name is Righteous and Holy. He wills to do us good by bringing us into a state of righteousness and should I stray he will bring me back to the path of righteousness.

This is what David had experienced. There is this need for the soul to be restored in a world that is full of sin, commotion and problems. We can face difficulties. We can get discouraged. We can fall into sin and experience chastening. But he graciously restores your soul and my soul as he gently leads us back on to the path of righteousness. And this is not just for your good but it is for his name's sake. His name is coupled up with his sheep. His honor is involved. So he will keep us on the path of righteousness. And that produces contentment in your soul.

We need to understand this spiritual truth. Righteousness is not an option. It is not negotiable. We cannot be content unless we are walking in the path of righteousness that he leads us in.

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil, for You are with me;**

**Thirdly and perhaps most importantly**, the Shepherd provides for his sheep the assurance that death is no longer an enemy to be feared. This knowledge enabled David to be unafraid. Christ has taken the sting out of death. The fear behind all fears is the fear of death.

I am reminded of the illustration of the fear of death of two boys seeing and feeling the scary experience of it. After picking Berries, in the late afternoon as the sun was going down they would pretend having a train run over them. As the train came thundering down the tracks as a monster puffing smoke and fire the sun was blocked out and the tremendous noise shut out everything else as the locomotive seemed to run over them. But they felt nothing because what went over them was the shadow that blackened out all else until it had passed. Then the light returned and all was quiet and peaceful again. This is how David explained facing death. It was a shadow that he would go through but the Lord would go through it with him. Knowing this dispels all fear.

The fact of death is not removed but because the sting is gone it cannot hurt us and David had learned not to fear what is a normal fear for all the sons of Adam. Death is only a shadow for the Christian. Our Father has made salvation provision so that we can face death with confidence and assurance that death is but a valley with a shadow that cannot harm us. A shadow never hurt anyone.

Christ himself tells us, **I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.** (John 11:25, 26)

Doesn't that apply to you? Then what is there to fear? Knowing that he is with me assures me that he is protecting me. He is watching over me. When the Shepherd is near we have nothing to fear. The Shepherd is willing to risk his life to protect and defend his sheep. David tells how he fought with a lion and a bear to defend his sheep. Our Lord fought with the Devil and death to rescue his sheep from their captivity and certain doom. This shows us the loving heart of the Shepherd.

David is saying that because he belongs to the Shepherd there is nothing that can happen to him that is not for his good. He can face life unafraid, fearless. Even death is but a shadow that we pass through. It has no substance anymore.

**Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.** The Shepherd's staff keeps track of us. Sheep have a tendency to stray and when they do the Lord will seek to recover them to the fold. His staff has a crook at one end and he could collar a straying sheep and draw it back to his shepherding care.

He counts His sheep and knows them by name. His staff is also a rod of correction and direction. It is not administered except to help us and benefit us. His staff is a tool and weapon to guide and protect against enemies. It no doubt had many uses to the Shepherd and it is a way of illustrating our loving and caring Shepherd's watchful eye upon us. He is the security of the sheep, the sentinel of the sheep, the guardian of the sheep. Why should I fret and worry when I have such a powerful Shepherd looking after my every need, ever on guard for my safety

The merely human shepherd cannot do what the divine Shepherd can do. He controls the events that happen in all of our lives and He causes those things to work together for our good at all times. This is what David means in the closing verses of this psalm when he says: **He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.** He is never so surrounded by enemies that God cannot or does not provide for him a supply of whatever he needs in life.

**You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.** He goes on to say that his cup runs over so that he has all that he needs of comfort and help. His blessings abound daily. You and I are showered with blessings if we but take time to look and see and reflect There may be trouble in this world but our needs are met and we have ample supplies of his grace and material provisions as well.

David concludes this psalm with a word of assurance and confidence:

**Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

This should be the faith of every one of us. We may waver in this conviction at times but as we look backward in time we can see that everything David says in this psalm is true for each one of us as well. He is speaking

forth the experience of every Christian. David's Shepherd is your Shepherd and mine. We have a God who never leaves us nor forsakes us, who looks to our every need and who constantly guards and guides us. His providence is working out events in our lives for our good, even though our faith may be tested at times as we meet new experiences to maintain that steadfast conviction. But as I say, when you look backward in time you can see that this is so and is always so even when you are going through something that seems contrary to that truth. Our heavenly Shepherd knows what is best for us and he never fails to cause all things to work together for our good.

My part and yours is to hearken to the voice of the Shepherd. We are to follow him as he teaches us by his word. We truly find our contentment in our Lord Jesus Christ who has everything in hand. He promises to never leave you or forsake you. He is your Good Shepherd if you have come to him for the salvation he freely offers to all who will hear his voice. I invite you today to repent of your sins and believe in his saving mercy. His blood cleanses from all sin. Let our closing hymn be your heartfelt faith in him as your Shepherd.

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