

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

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Scripture: Psalm 23

Our meditation for today is this very familiar psalm, one that many of you know by heart. I remember when I was 5 or 6 years old, we were living in Bangalore and in our living room we had a picture of flowers and underneath were the words: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." It is a very vivid memory. This has been a favorite psalm in our family. In fact, when my dad passed away, on his grave we had the words engraved, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," because that was one of his favorite passages as well.

Most of us have grown up reciting it. It has become popular in tunes, hymns. I think one could safely say that this particular psalm has been one of the most popular words put to music than all the other songs put together. Also, many people know how to pull fragments off it, especially when you need to be able to say, "The Lord is my Shepherd; even though I walk..." and so on. Who can forget 'Sister Act' when Mary Clarence was invited to pray the blessing over the food the first time she reached the convent? She closed her eyes and said, "Bless us O Lord, for these gifts that we are about to receive. And yeah, though I walk through the valley of no food, I will fear no hunger." And once could see the eyes popping from all the rest of the nuns who were there.

But again, even though we look at it facetiously and humorously, in fact there is truth that we can pull so many things from this psalm that has meaning for us. "Even though I walk through the valley of hunger," – we know that there are places like that, valleys that have these kind of things attached to it. But we can still count on our Shepherd.

And that's the 23rd Psalm. It fits into our everyday lives and situations so beautifully and so meaningfully. In fact, it's like a dear friend, who steps in whenever we get into a tight spot or in a difficult situation or circumstance, and provides just what we need at that particular time. And like any friend, we continue to understand the friendship in varied and deeper ways as we journey along. And I think it's the same with Psalm 23; the longer we go with the psalm and the more we read it and try to understand it, the more we see beautiful nuggets of truth that just keep coming out, surprising us with its comfort, assurance, promises, and possibilities, every time we delve a little beyond the surface.

So, let's do that today; let's mine the psalm under the Holy Spirit's leading and see what precious truths are gifted to us today.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul;

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

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I 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 have anointed my head with oil;

My cup overflows.

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

When I look at this psalm structurally, and I have looked at it very differently in the past. I think I have preached out of this psalm, 2 or maybe 3 times, but have not looked at it in this particular kind of structure. The way in which I believe God showed it to me today was that we have kind of two bookends – one at the beginning of the psalm and one at the end. And in between we have three promises about this Shepherd.

Bookends:

- The Lord is my Shepherd.
- I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Promises:

- He will provide,
- He will protect,
- He will pursue.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Everything that follows after that line is contingent on Him being your Shepherd and mine. The Lord is my Shepherd, the Lord is your Shepherd, and the Lord is our Shepherd. The question before us, even before we begin to look at the rest of this Psalm is: Is He your Shepherd? What does that mean? If He is your Shepherd, then you are His sheep, and sheep trust the Shepherd completely. Does He have your full trust? Are you part of His pasture, and His flock?

Before we look at those questions, and say: My goodness, metaphorically how do we put all this together, and what does it mean in plain English for me to trust the Shepherd or to be sheep?

Is He a Shepherd?

1. Do you trust Him completely? As the songwriter says, and so many songs come to mind.

I'll go where You want me to go, dear Lord;
I'll say what You want me to say.
I'll be what You want me to be, dear Lord;
And I'll do what You want me to do.

Do you trust Him completely, that whatever He required and requests, or says to you, you have a willing compliance to what He is asking?

2. Do you accept correction? The sheep accept the correction. If we tend to stray, when God calls us back and tells us that we are on the wrong path and need to turn away from that, do we listen?
3. Do you accept His discipline? When we don't listen, are we willing to accept the discipline that comes from Him? The Lord loves us and He disciplines us when we don't listen to Him, just as a shepherd would discipline a sheep for continuing to stray away.

I think the key word here is control. Have we yielded control to Him? Are we letting Him lead us? The song that Marty Nystrom wrote, and it's so beautiful, says:

Shepherd of my soul, I give You full control;
Wherever You may lead I will follow.
I have made the choice to listen for Your voice;
Wherever You may lead I will go.

So, that must be your position and mine when we begin this psalm and say, “The Lord is my Shepherd. That’s the first criteria, and I hope that you can tick that box because when we are done with this world, then the second bookend takes on. It’s like a baton being passed. The Lord is my Shepherd And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In the present, the Lord’s my Shepherd. I yield control to Him. He leads me. And then, when this world is over, I will dwell with Him forever.

Now we get to the good part: Know Him as Shepherd gives us three wonderful privileges or promises. What are they?

THE PROMISES

1. HE WILL PROVIDE. He is our provider.

a) He provides for our every need.

Every need He is supplying,
Plenteous grace He bestows.
Every day my way gets brighter,
The longer I serve Him, the sweeter He grows.

He provides for everything that we need. He is Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides. And I know that if there’s something that you are lacking, you need to take it to Him. Don’t be anxious for anything, but in prayer and supplication make these requests be known unto God. Tell the Shepherd today: Lord, this is what I need. Will You give it to me? You are my Provider.

b) He gives us rest.

Apart from giving us what we need, the psalmist tells us that He gives us rest. In our harried, frenzied lifestyle, sometimes we need rest, which we don’t get or sometimes don’t take. Yet we know that we need it. Often, it’s our body that finally draws the line, and says, “Okay. I’ve had enough.” And yet, well before that, we need to be able to turn to God and say, in the midst of all that is going on in our lives, “Lord, I need rest.”

The psalmist says that He gives that rest to us. Have you asked Him for it? Have you told Him how you’re feeling, even today, that you need rest? Maybe, “Lord, give me rest for today, through this day. Let it be just a day of rest and rejuvenation of my spirit, my body, mind, soul, strength – all of it.”

c) He provides restoration.

What is it that needs restoration in your life? What do you need restored today? Is it a dream? Have you stopped dreaming about the things that you can do, places that you can go to, things that you would like to do? Have you stopped dreaming and just beginning to go through life just putting one foot in front of the other? Let me get through this day. Have you lost vision for the future? You used to have vision when you were younger, or some years back maybe. Now it’s just a mundane ordinary response to life.

He restores your soul. He gives back to you, beloved. Maybe today, it’s just zeal, an enthusiasm for life that you need restoration for. Or maybe it’s strength and energy. Maybe after COVID, it’s just fatigue that you’re going through. You just need a touch from Him, a restoration of good health. Maybe you need to have faith in yourself restored, or faith in God, or faith in friends. One of the things He provides as provider is restoration for you.

d) He provides direction.

He provides direction to walk in paths of righteousness. He provides that direction to know what the path of righteousness is and what is not. To warn us of straying feet, of straying eyes, of straying thoughts. As the songwriter says:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

God's heart is to provide a path of righteousness, of right living for us to walk in, beloved, and sheep of His pasture can get that from Him.

2. HE WILL PROTECT.

a) He protects against death and the shadow of death.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, or the valley of dark shadows – both understandings are in the original Hebrew. Notice here though, it says, “Even though I walk through...”. Not so much protection from the valley, but enablement to go through the valley. That's His promise.

Maybe you're in this valley today, struggling, finding it hard to take one step or one day. Maybe you've lost a loved one, and you wonder whether you'll ever leave the valley, whether this pall of gloom will ever lift, whether you'll actually begin to have life again. The valley is a place where we are very vulnerable. We are not very sure of making good decisions, making the right ones, or going on.

That's why he moves from that and he says, “In the valley, don't fear.” Fear what? Evil. You need fear no evil. Often, it's in our most vulnerable times that we are open to people taking advantage of us. That's when exploitation takes place. Especially the evil one – tries to exploit our situation and our circumstances, makes us question our faith and trust, offers us other seductions. And often, fear envelops us, immobilizes us, and we can't move and we stop our walk of righteousness.

Even though I walk through the valley of dark shadows or the valley of the shadow of death, I need fear no evil. Why? For He is with me, and His rod and His staff, they will comfort me. So, when fear comes to grip me, when I'm worried in the valley, He comforts using the shepherd's tools for the sheep. Whatever tools He needs to help you through this time, He will bring to bear on your situation and circumstance. He is a protector. He's got you, beloved. Don't fear. You just need to continue to trust Him.

b) He protects us from enemies.

The psalmist says, “He will provide a feast in the presence of our enemies.” That's hard to wrap one's mind around – having a feast in the presence of enemies. It's a picture that doesn't come easily. Yet, I think the essence of what he's trying to say is that in the midst of situations and circumstances there may be people who are foes, who are enemies. There's a certain nonchalance with which you can face them. No need to worry, no need to panic, no need to run for cover – just act as if you've got a meal, a lovely meal right there in front of you and forget the enemy. Enjoy the meal.

Enemies may be physical that come in the form of people; enemies of the mind that come in the form of thoughts or images or voices; or enemies of the body that come with discomfort, pain or isolation. And he says, "Treat them with disdain because the Shepherd guards you." Jesus said of Himself: I am the Good Shepherd, and the good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. So, give Him the baton, hand over the reins to Him. It is His fight. You trust Him and keep your focus and attention on Him.

I wonder whether you're battling enemies today. I wonder whether you're tired of fighting them by yourself. May I remind you of a Shepherd who says, "I'll take care of you and My comfort will rest upon you. And you can be absolutely at ease in the midst of this situation." That's worth exchanging – your panic and your fear for absolute quiet and comfort and peace.

3. HE WILL PURSUE.

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life." The understanding of that Hebrew word "radaph" was translated as 'follow', but many scholars say that it doesn't really capture the full essence of the word radaph. Follow is kind of a tame word because really what that word means is not to follow you, but to chase after you, to pursue you relentlessly.

Chad Bird, the Hebrew scholar, says, "The Lord's goodness and mercy chase us down labyrinthine paths like the hound of heaven. You remember Francis Thomas Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven." That's the imagery that he used for God pursuing us. The Hound of heaven, not just following us but relentlessly not letting go; chasing, pursuing us.

In fact, Jeff O'Connor says,

"When you talk about the Hound of Heaven, the name is strange. It startles one at first. It is so bold, so new, so fearless. It does not attract; rather the reverse. But when one reads the poem, this strangeness disappears; the meaning is understood. As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide itself. Divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after, till the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to Him alone in that never ending pursuit."

Till we feel His presence so overwhelming, His pursuit so relentless, that we look over our shoulders, and see the love and compassion with which God is pursuing us. And then we turn and we embrace Him. Surely goodness and mercy will follow you, will chase after you, and will pursue you, because you are the sheep of His pasture.

I wonder today, whether you're a sheep that's running. You're feeling you are lost. You don't know where you are fearful of the unknown. I wonder whether you need to just look back and see the 'Hound of Heaven, the Good Shepherd' pursuing you, arms wide open, saying, "I've got mercy and goodness to give you." Take the goodness, beloved. Don't we have enough bad? Take God's goodness; He offers it to you, and receive His mercy. And mercy it is.

Then yield control. That word again! we saw as we started: it's all about control. Be His sheep again and know that He is the One who will provide, protect and pursue you. So I ask: Are you will to really

appropriate the essence of this psalm and say with deep, sincere conviction, “The Lord is my Shepherd, and I yield full control to Him”?

The psalmist first talks about God in the third person. “He makes me lie down, He restores my soul, He leads me in paths of righteousness.” But midway through, the psalmist suddenly moves into the second person and he says, “For You are with me, Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table, You anoint my head with oil.” From the third person – He does all this – to You – like I know it more personally.

Lloyd Stillely says, “We are more prone to talk about God when we are in the green pastures, and more prone to talk to God when we are in the dangerous ravine. In the light, we are prone to wander off in pursuit of greener grass. But in the dark, we hug His knee.” And he moves from ‘He’ to ‘You’. I wonder whether that’s what you and I need to know Him as, today.

Ralph Carmichael wrote a beautiful song over 50 years ago, in 1964 I think, that brings out this truth.

In the stars His handiwork I see,
On the wind He speaks with majesty,
Though He ruleth over land and sea,
What is that to me?
I will celebrate Nativity,
For it has a place in history,
Sure, He came to set His people free,
What is that to me?

Till by faith I met Him face to face,
And I felt the wonder of His grace,
Then I knew that He was more than just a God who didn’t care,
That lived away out there.

Now He walks beside me day by day,
Ever watching o’er me lest I stray,
Helping me to find that narrow way,
He’s everything to me.

Everything to me, beloved, that’s what we need to say today. He’s not a God out there. He’s a God whom you and I know. We met Him, we felt His grace. We must know Him today as Shepherd, so we can say, “The Lord is my Shepherd and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Dearly beloved, and now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the continuing enabling, inspiring, invigorating presence, and fellowship of His Holy Spirit, rest upon each one of us until the very end of the age.
Amen.