

## Psalm 23

*\*\* The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.*

*He guides me along the right paths 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 your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

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\*\* Lots of people - even people who are not part of a church - can quote at least the beginning of the Twenty Third Psalm, and its usually from the King James Version. I grew up with this Psalm, and, other than the "thee's & thou's" the KJ is the translation that I have stored in my memory. But, I have to admit that it was quite a long time before I understood that first line!

I remember thinking, when I was a boy, "The Lord is my shepherd... *I shall not want*... Why not? Why wouldn't I *want* the Lord to be my shepherd? What's with that, anyway?" It didn't make any sense to me! Finally, someone explained to me that 'want' here is used in a rather archaic way, and it means, of course, *to be in want, or need*. So (and you already know this) what David is saying was that because The Lord is his shepherd, he *will not ever be in need*. Or, put it like this: he "lacks nothing".

Because this is probably one of the most well known, and most beloved, of all Scripture passages, I would assume that people believe that it is saying something to us - today - that is worth hearing. So, we'd agree that this is more than just a beautiful ancient Hebrew poem (one that has been put to music in hundreds of settings, but none, perhaps more beautiful than Rutter's Requiem), more than some nice words that have been printed on the back of funeral cards since Gutenberg invented the printing press. Right?

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In that case, in this world where there is such craziness, such madness as we've seen again lately... in this world that is so dangerous and sad, and broken... in this world where people set off bombs in happy places, purely to cause terror and fear... in this world where people lose jobs and homes, and where they get cancer, where seemingly solid marriages blow apart and even those closest say, "what just happened here?" ... in this world where 15 million children will die in one year from starvation (put it in this context - more than 200 have died since I began this message)... in *this* world, what does it mean to lack *nothing*?

"Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything that I need" ... for *what*? Everything I need for *what*? That is a critically important question, I think. And the way that we answer that question is going to reveal a lot about our understanding of where and how God 'fits' into our lives today, if God fits at all.

\*\* So let's think about this a bit... and let's first look at the images that David calls to mind. Now, remember that although David was a King (the second King of Israel), and he may have actually written this Psalm *while* he was King, that, actually his first job was shepherding. So, David is recalling here something that is very personal to him. He remembers what it meant for *he himself* to be a shepherd, and he writes that in some similar way, that God is a shepherd to him.

So he begins with what is perhaps the *main* task of a shepherd - leading the sheep. Leading...

**\*\* He *makes me lie down* in green pastures, he *leads me* beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He *guides me* along the right paths for his name's sake.**

There are lots of indicators here that David truly was a shepherd, and this has been pointed out by many writers. For example, 'quiet waters' refers to water that is not running fast. Apparently, sheep won't drink from a fast moving stream - and who would know that other than a shepherd?

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\*\* Many people have also pointed out that sheep aren't the most intellectually gifted of farm animals (which is a nice way to avoid saying that they're stupid), and that they are almost totally dependent on a shepherd to find pasture for them to eat in safety. They just can't do it on their own, and they're also almost completely defenseless.

But the main point that David is making in the beginning of this Psalm is that a Shepherd *leads* the sheep. God, then, leads David - and leads him to 'good places'. (But, here's a spoiler alert to where we're going - what God considers 'good' for us may require a bit of adjusting from our perspective. Where God leads us is certainly *good*, but it may not be easy for us, it might not even be *safe - from a human perspective -* and it certainly might not be what *our* first choice would be. We'll come back to this!)

\*\* Jesus, of course, picked up on this same image and he announces that not only is **he** the Shepherd of his people, but (in John 10) that he is *the **Good** shepherd*. Jesus is the Shepherd who 'knows his sheep by name'. Jesus also refers to the fact that not only does he know his sheep, but that his sheep, in turn, know him. 'My sheep hear my voice and they follow me.' Jesus' sheep recognize his voice, amongst all the cacophony of sounds and lures of this world... we learn to recognize his voice, and we follow it - because somehow, we have come to trust that it is here, and only here, where we can find 'everything that we need'.

I am constantly humbled by the honesty that people demonstrate in many private conversations that take place in my office. And I don't mean to imply that what someone is feeling is *wrong* or that they shouldn't say certain things (honesty is always the best place to start a conversation), but one of the most common spiritual issues that I hear about as a Pastor, the spiritual issue that trips up more people than any other, falls into the category of "*Why is God doing this to me? Why did God let this happen?*"

I think a reason these questions come up is because many people have a picture of God as, perhaps, a shepherd who only does the *first* part of this Psalm - i.e., we think

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that somehow, God's 'job' is to make sure that we (the sheep) only find ourselves in green pastures - good circumstances.

You know - if God is God, and if I'm doing *my* part, (whatever that is) then there should be no trouble, no conflict, in my life... I should be able to expect financial stability (even be well off), there would be little or no stress, my kids will turn out great, and so forth. This relationship is kind of assumed. Otherwise, what's the purpose of faith? We may not state it so bluntly, but, it is what it is.

The problem is, we just don't find this in Scripture - and we certainly don't see it in the words or the life of Jesus. Jesus did everything 'right'- he was *perfectly* obedient. And what happened? His friends abandoned him. He was falsely accused of crimes, tried, sentenced, and executed. And all the while, Jesus is telling anyone who would listen that "he does nothing unless God, the Father, tells him to." And, he says to us, "Expect the same treatment from the world as I got..." Even worse, actually.

\*\* (blank)

I often ask people a question in response to *their* questions about the 'why's' after tragedies, and after bad things have happened. (It's a hard question, and I don't ever ask it until later, after there has been some healing at least begun.) Nevertheless, its an important question. When we're upset at God because of circumstances, and particularly because of things that happen to us involving the decisions that *other* people have made... I will frequently ask this, "How much of *your* freedom are you willing to give up?"

Because what we're implying by being angry at God over these kinds of circumstances is that we expect that God should override the free will of people if the result of their choices is going to be negative for me. Think about how drastically that would change the world! We would no longer be fully human - we would be more like trained pets than human beings. The gift of choice is a precious, wonderful gift, that perhaps more than anything else is what it means for us to be created in 'God's image'.

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If you are married, think of your spouse - how different would their love be if it wasn't really something they *chose* to give to you? What if they had no choice? God gave us free will so that we could choose the right things, so that we could love in every sense of the fullness of that word, and it would then be all the sweeter. But the 'downside' of free will is that we can also choose badly. You can't have one without the other.

So much suffering in our world takes place because people choose poorly - not only in committing crimes, and saying harsh words, and cheating, all that, but even in issues like hunger and disease (which I mentioned earlier) so much of that suffering could be eliminated, but it is the choices of governments and people that so often limit the resources and allow these ills to continue.

Let's get back to Psalm 23. Lest we think that 'green pastures', 'soul restoration' and blessings is the only context of the Good Shepherd's leading, I suggest we look again at verse 4!

*\*\* "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me."*

What we might easily miss here is the connection between the first verses and this one. Which leads me to this question: If God is leading David, then how did he end up in the "valley of the shadow of death?" That's an incredibly vivid description of a bad place isn't it? I've done enough hiking to know that when you're in a valley, and something casts a shadow over you, one thing you know is that 'thing' (the source of the shadow) is higher than you. You don't get shadows from things below you!

\*\* So isn't David saying "Even if I'm in a place that is lower than death - down at the very bottom where the *shadow* of death falls on me", even there I'm not going to be afraid.

I think this begs the question: is he there by mistake? Did he make a wrong turn and end up in this valley, or could this possibly be someplace that *God* actually led him?

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And if so, maybe his faith in God's ability to supply everything he needs means that he knows that God will make sure that even in a place like *that* there is hope, and grace, and meaning.

So when David says "I have everything I *need*" do you think his context is something *more* than **this world**? I believe that this is certainly the case! That David's expression of confidence in God's providing is in reference to his relationship with God in the midst of a broken world. His security, the peace of his soul, his confidence in the future, his purpose in life is *not determined or effected by the temporary circumstances of this world and this life!*

His life is not about a search for material comfort and the kind of short term security which is the only thing we can manufacture in this world. His joy, his peace is in walking with God, walking under God's guidance - wherever that takes him. And in knowing that since God is with him, he has everything he needs.

\*\* I mentioned last week at our Missions weekend how impressed I was at the new staff at the Neighborhood Center. I had a chance to meet four of them, and had some good conversations with them, and truly, these are people on a mission, with a calling. Maybe more than all of them, I was humbled and blessed by meeting Nahama Jackson Brown.

We talked for about a half hour at the Center as she showed me the 'teen room' (outfitted with computers given by our UMW!). She told me how few Camden kids go to college, but that she discovered that of the ones who do go, less than 50% finish. They don't have the skills to cope in that world that is so different than theirs. So, she's teaching these teenagers skills like time management, budgeting, how to study, basic things that no one has ever helped them with before. And she just exudes the love the Christ.

She told me that upon her graduation from American University in Washington, that she was offered a good, full time job, and her first thought was "I made it out!"

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She was making plans to go to Law school. But, God wasn't giving her peace. And she knew clearly, that she had a 'calling'. And it was to go back home to Camden. To share what she learned, and to love teens with God's love. So she turned down the job, and went to Neighborhood Center... back to this city that leads the nation in drugs, urban flight, murder... because (get this!) *God led her there! The Good Shepherd led her into this dangerous, dark, place.* That's what it is from this world's perspective - but what's also very obvious, and she'll gladly testify to this, is that she is so happy there! She has truly found everything she needs!

I was asking Nahama how she recruits kids for her program. And she said that she 'hangs around in the schools' (she has permission to be there), she talks to them, and she invites them to come. And they're coming. So she says to me, "I don't understand it, but they just love me!" (I said, "Nahama, I've only known you for 20 minutes and I already do, too! I totally get that!") The Shepherd led her to Camden.

After the Boston insanity, our Bishop, John Schol sent a letter to the churches... listen to this part of it, he was writing about seeing the explosions on TV...

\*\* After the third or fourth time I watched it, I noticed a pattern. At the time of the blasts I saw people running from the blasts AND I saw other people running toward the blasts. I saw some people shrink in a crouching motion and I saw a police officer who actually made his body bigger to shield people from the blasts. Which are you?

In life, I watch some people run from the great challenges of our time and I watch others with faith, daring and courage step into the breach. Today, I watch some people shrink before challenges to our faith and creation while others rise up with faith.

Today is a day for prayer and healing. I invite you today and in your churches this weekend to pray for people who are suffering and mourning. But tomorrow is a day for you to ask yourself, will I move toward the challenge or run from or even just stand by and watch while our world groans with pain? Will your faith shrink when tested or will the God in you become larger so that the world sees and experiences a faithful witness?

This I can assure you: the world as we once knew it is no more. A way of life for the church, our society and creation itself has changed. Christian faith and experience today is more like the first century church experience. It calls for disciples to move

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toward the great challenges and to allow God to rise up within us. Our help is in the name of the Lord!

\*\* Because The Lord is our Shepherd, he will lead us. And, in our spirits we will know the peace and serenity of green pastures, restoration, and overflowing blessing. But that may well be a complete puzzlement to people around us - coming as it does in the midst of sadness, tragedy, pain, and brokenness. When the world sees us running *towards* the hurt, instead of burrowing in to hide, they will know the difference between a life of faith, and everyone else.

The Lord... your shepherd wants to lead you, too. Are you listening? In what direction are heading?