

## January 31, 2010/ Psalm 23

we are going to meditate together this morning on the 23rd Psalm ... let's turn it over in our corporate /collective hearts and minds, and let it do its work in us, encouraging and strengthening us as we live as sheep of the Good Shepherd ...

### **Psalm 23** **A Psalm of David.**

**v1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

**v2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.**

**v3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

**vs4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.**

**vs5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.**

**vs6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

let's pray before we look at the text a verse at a time ...

Psalm 23 ... these short 6 verses are among the best known in the entire Bible ... we seek them out when we need comfort ... they speak to us in time of trial ... we recognize that they touch all that is really important in life, and in death ... and even those of us who are pretty dense in such matters, instinctively know that they are perfect in literary form ... we instinctively know, that by the Holy Spirit, king David, a man after God's own heart has given us a gem of symmetry, beauty, and poignancy ... one that with amazing economy of words gets to the heart of what ultimately matters ... thank God for the 23rd Psalm ... let's look at it a phrase at a time ...

**v1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

the Psalm begins where all human thinking should begin ... it begins with the LORD ... Yahweh ... the I AM ... the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe ... the One who was there in **Genesis 1:1** and **John 1:1** ... the One who will be forever praised throughout eternity ... the one who St. John the revelator saw sitting on the throne of heaven ... this one, David says, **is my shepherd** ... we romanticize the work of shepherd ... but truth is that being a shepherd was rough hard work ... it was a 24-7 affair, always on duty, in all kinds of weather and in all kinds of circumstances, generally looked down on and poorly esteemed ... if a family needed a shepherd, it was a servant or youngest son that got the job ... and wonder of

wonders, the LORD, the I AM has chosen to be pictured as a Shepherd ... what marvelous condescending grace ...

you and I, even though most of us haven't often been within 100 yards of a sheep, know instinctively that "The Lord is my shepherd" is a most wonderful and tender statement ... we've all heard just how stupid and helpless sheep are, how prone they are to wander, how they need One to guide and protect them, to see that they are cared for ... we've seen the artists' representation of the Good Shepherd with the lost lamb on His shoulders, tenderly carrying it to safety ... and (at least if we've lived 60 years or so and are the least bit honest with ourselves) we know that indeed we are the dumb sheep who need His tender care ... again, the amazing thing is that David, a mere mortal, can say that God Himself is to him a Shepherd ...

and there's even more to it than the condescending mercy and grace and great tenderness that we quickly recognize ... good kings in David's time thought of themselves, and were spoken of, in these terms ... as shepherds of their people ... so David tells us that his life experience is that God has been, and is, to him both Protector and King ... the LORD is both Guide and Sovereign ...

with such a Shepherd, David knows **I shall not want** ... that only makes sense ... how could it be otherwise? ... it is, after all, the God of the Universe that is guaranteeing that he shall not want ... but this is also much more than just a logical syllogism ... this is David's *life experience* ... and it is a statement that is just as true in the hard times, as it is in what you and I think are the good ones ... **I shall not want** is just as true for the Christian believer suffering persecution and physical deprivation under an oppressive hostile government this morning, as it is for you and I sitting here in comfort in Ames, Iowa ... that can only be, that can only make sense, if the point of life is other than physical circumstances, if the point is the all-sufficient grace and presence of our great and merciful Redeemer ... the **I shall not want** doesn't imply things will be easy ... it does promise that God's grace is sufficient in all times and circumstances ...

**v2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.**

this great Shepherd sees that His sheep have abundant provision ... the picture is one of a meadow so lush that there's no need to be moving about looking for that next blade of grass ... of water so plentiful that it's not exhausted by a flock drinking its fill ... water from deep springs and wells ... there's provision and safety here adequate to allow rest for the sheep ... David says he lies down in green pastures ... he's content and safe ... his Shepherd has provided all that he really needs ...

apparently (at least so says Philip Keller who has been both shepherd and Christian pastor) sheep will not lie down if they are hungry, in any kind of fear, if there is friction in the flock, or if they are tormented by pests ... David says that "He maketh me to lie down" ... His provision is complete ...

**v3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

he restores my soul ... David knew that to be true in at least two ways ... all people who walk with God through a lifetime also know it to be true in at least two ways ... for one, the Lord restores the souls of His sheep the way the Good Shepherd left the 99 to search for the 1 ... God graciously carries His people back to His fold when they wander off in their own sinful and rebellious ways ... He restores the wayward ... David knew that by experience ... I know that by experience ... and if you are His, you know that by experience too ...

but you also know by experience that the Great Shepherd restores your soul in the sense of providing refreshment when you are just plain exhausted ... when you and I have carried life's burdens to the place that we think we cannot go on, when we think that it all depends upon us and we're spent, the Master says : **Matt. 11:28-30** **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** ... we find, with David, that the Shepherd renews our souls ... He refreshes and restores us and gives us what we need to carry on ...

Boice again points at what shepherd/pastor Philip Keller says about this Psalm in regard to this restoration of "soul" or "life" ... apparently it is not impossible for a large or long-fleeced sheep to lie down in a little hollow in the ground and get itself into the condition of a turtle that is on its back, unable to right itself ... and apparently, that condition so stresses a sheep's body that unless the Shepherd intervene, the animal fairly quickly dies in a panic ... David says "He restores my life" ... I've been a "cast down" sheep, and He's tipped me back up ...

He leads us in right paths ... right in the sense that they are the correct ones ... they are straight ones, that lead most directly to the final goal ... *and* they are right in the sense that they are morally blameless ... those two things are inextricably intertwined ... when we do today the next thing, and do it in a morally upright way to the glory of God, God is at work guiding our steps, leading us the right way ... what is before us today, you and I can see ... the big picture, we see only in outline form, if at all ... how we're going and exactly what we'll find along the way isn't our business ... that's the Shepherd's responsibility ... we fret ourselves and usurp His place when we figure we need to know the end of it before we'll do the right thing today ... He can be counted on to take us the right and straight way **for his name's sake** ... David understood what is finally at stake in our lives ... that is the glory of God ...

**v4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.**

he leads me ... SOOOO ... in all of it, even through the valley of the shadow of death, **I will fear no evil: for thou art with me** ... glory to God! ... there are narrow, hard, dark places in life, and there is the final walk through death itself ... but none of that shakes David, because **thou art with me** ... it's no accident that to this point in the Psalm, David has spoken of the Great Shepherd as "He," in the third person, but now the Psalm switches to the second person ... David's no longer speaking about God, but to

God ... David's speaking to One he knows has led him (as part of walking the "right" paths!!) through dark narrow valleys before ... he's speaking to One he knows will sustain him in the final walk ... he speaks to One that in the dangerous place is **with** him, not directing from afar using sheep dogs, but walking right next to him ... David speaks to the only One in all of the universe that CAN go with him as he walks his final walk ... all others must fall behind, but David knows the LORD will be with him ... and therefore, he fears no evil ... the very fact that David mentions this, is evidence that such fear is both possible and common to humans ... but David has learned better ...

**thy rod and thy staff they comfort me** ... the Shepherd is no sissy ... He's up to the task ... Kidner: he comes armed ... and we, his poor frail sheep give thanks that such is the case! ... the Shepherd packs a rod, a nice compact heavy little club, in his belt ... a weapon adequate to defend the defenseless sheep from any attacking wild animal, from any danger or evil ... and He carries a staff to prod the sheep along in right ways, to give the sheep discipline ... in the power and discipline of the Shepherd, there is great comfort ... in literary/metrical terms, this is the center of the Psalm, the comfort that is given to God's people in all things, in the easy and hard things, even in the shadow of death ...

the scene or figure changes now in the final two verses of the Psalm ... David looks ahead and sees the LORD, not as Shepherd, but as great and beneficent Host ... (it's almost as if David has had a peek at the marriage feast of the Lamb) ...

**v5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.**

it was common in David's time for a victory banquet to be conducted in the view of the vanquished foes ... the point here is not so much gloating in front of the enemy, but that with the enemy vanquished, there is genuine rest ... there will come a time when the pressure is off, the battles of this life are done, those who have walked with the Shepherd are vindicated, and there is perfect rest in the presence of our LORD ... I don't need to tell you, that that time hasn't yet come ... but David looks ahead and sees it ... and it's as sure as if he were already there as he writes ... that's the blessed hope of the Christian Faith ...

as David looks ahead what he sees is magnificent ... he's treated like an honored guest ... there's perfumed oil for anointing his head ... there's so much to eat and drink it's spilling over from his cup and probably running off his plate ... and again, it's **thou** who is preparing it ... David speaks **to** (not just **about**) the One who has led him as a Shepherd through life, and is now his gracious host ... this, brothers and sisters, is better than being a dumb sheep ... a sheep can be cared for tenderly by a kind and conscientious shepherd ... but a sheep is never an honored guest at a banquet ... there is great news in this verse ... you and I are not going to spend eternity as the klutzes we are now ... instead, we're destined for places at the eternal table of God ... we're destined for intimate fellowship with God ... amazing, truly, truly amazing ...

**v6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

so what's the total of it? ... David declares that in this life, goodness and mercy will follow him ... follow him not in some passive, slinking-along-behind kind of way, but aggressively pursuing, chasing after, and hunting him down ... goodness and mercy will pursue him ... the mercy is the rich Hebrew word "hesed" ... it's the covenant-love of God, His lovingkindness, His durable devotion to those who are His, His steadfast love, His steady persistent refusal to wash His hands of wayward human beings, His gracious relationship with us established in spite of our human unworthiness and failure ... that's what David sees pursuing him ... and because of it, in eternity, he's not invited for a single meal and then sent away ... instead, the invitation is in fact to come live **for ever** with this One who has been his Shepherd in life ... our Good Shepherd has said

**Joh 14:1 "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.**

**Joh 14:2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?**

**Joh 14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.**

the Psalm ends where it began ... with **the LORD** ... that is both wonderful symmetry of poetic structure and theologically appropriate ... David has come full circle ... he began with God in verse 1 and he ends with Him in verse 6 ... all of his life, both mortal and in eternity is in right perspective ... it is God's, is ordered by God and heading for an eternity in the presence of God ... the hard stuff now simply fades into the background in light of this ...

## **NT Scripture Reading January 31, 2010**

**John 10:11** “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

**John 10:12** The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.

**John 10:13** The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

**John 10:14** “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me —

**John 10:15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father —and I lay down my life for the sheep.

**Rev. 7:13** Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

**Rev. 7:14** I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

**Rev. 7:15** Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

**Rev. 7:16** Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

**Rev. 7:17** For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

**Hebr. 13:20** May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

**Hebr. 13:21** equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.