

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

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There's probably no portion of Scripture more familiar to us in this room than Psalm. 23. For many of you that was the first Scripture you committed to memory. Yet this psalm as one matures in life can only grow richer and richer in significance. It's great to be able to have something that is three thousand years old still ministering. When you look through the pages of Scripture to this psalm you recognize its antiquity is close to three thousand years of age and then you begin to calculate in your mind how many persons over the centuries these words have come to as a blessing and assurance of the control of God. How many persons have gone out of this life with a faith in God, with the song of the Shepherd on their lips as they died, or with the psalm of the Shepherd on someone else's lips reading to the person as they passed into the presence of God! It is a beautiful thing.

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness 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 goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:1-6, NIV).

I've chosen to title this series "Singing in Psalms." We use the phrase sometimes singing in tongues or singing in the Spirit or singing in the mind. But in Ephesians 5 Paul talks about what it is to be full of the Spirit. He says "Do not be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit,

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord in your heart.” Singing in psalms. A scriptural way of really encouraging one another in your Christian journey. I found in my conversations with individuals who are going through times of difficulty that it’s really important for us in the moments when we are the most down or most depressed or when we feel like we have no time or no song at all, that at that very moment we lift our hearts in a word of song to the Lord. I can really substantiate from the Scripture that music is the divinely ordained way whereby God can release us from troubles and problems. We find how even in the Old Testament Saul leaned heavily on the instrumentality of David with his heart and with his lyrics to solace his soul when he was in a time of great trouble. More recently in the Book of Acts we see how Paul and Silas were in jail in the city of Philippi, in the middle of the night, and they lifted their voice in song to the Lord.

If you want to know how to begin to lift depression or lift grief in your life, release to the Lord a song. Sometimes the aspect of being daily filled with the Spirit is relegated to a mystical level. Yet Paul brings it down in Ephesians 5 to a commonsense approach. A way to be continuing to be filled with the Spirit is to address one another singing in psalms, making melody in your heart to the Lord.

When you’re in trouble you need to sing. According to the best traditions which surround this psalm, perhaps its historical origin owes to 2 Samuel 15 when David’s beloved son Absalom revolted against him and David has been forced to flee Jerusalem. He goes out into the wilderness. And evidently some time in his experience at that juncture, according to tradition, he wrote the Psalm of the Shepherd in which what he was really doing was he was on the run without perhaps a decent night’s sleep. Without the kind of courtesies he has had in his court life. His mind reverts to his childhood days when he had served as a shepherd. Many times, by the

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

way, when you are going through a difficult experience, your mind is solaced with a memory from your youth. David is going to begin to lift some of the heavy troubles surrounding him through a construction of a hymn of praise to the Lord.

This Psalm 23 is a very subjective song of worship. The emphasis is upon personal experience. As you go through our hymnal you'll basically find two types of songs. Some we call "hymns" and some we call "gospel songs." Perhaps the best way to differentiate between a hymn and a gospel song is that a hymn is an address of praise to God whereas a gospel song normally speaks about how God has worked in our life.

David is saying in this psalm there is an experiential part to worship as well. We need not be hesitant in our singing to use the personal pronouns "I" and "me" and "my."

In the six short verses of Psalm 23 the personal pronouns "I," "me," or "my" are mentioned seventeen times. It's fascinating, the tradition surrounding the writing of this psalm. By faith David was singing security in the midst of a situation in his life where all the external environment would tend to suggest to him that the situation was totally insecure and out of control. But he lifts this psalm as a song of faith to the Lord. It's great to sing of what the Lord is doing in our lives.

Psalm 23 provides for us a picture of the Lord as our shepherd and the Lord as our host. The theme of God as our shepherd is in the first four verses. Then the metaphor changes in 5 and 6 where the Lord becomes our host. In the first four verses, perhaps, the theme is more to describe the journey through life. And verses 5 and 6, God as host, describe what happens at the end of the day, when the journey is coming to an end. Both the end of the day in a literal sense and the end of the day in a figurative sense when the journey of life itself is done.

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

I. The key phrase, which runs throughout the psalm, particularly the first four verses, is

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Then reasons are given as to why we need not want.

A. I've taken this phrase “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want,” and put the reverse on it.

If I want, then perhaps I'm not making the Lord my shepherd. If there is unfulfilled anxiety in my life then have I really made Him my shepherd? For the relationship with the Lord is one which casts out all anxiety and unwholesome fear. A gradual resting in the security of the Lord begins to knock out all that sense of wanting. If we let other things in life be the controlling instrument, be the shepherd of our life, then you know you're going to have want. If life is being motivated around living for your vocation and living for your work, you're going to have unfulfilled desires and a constant feeling of unrest. If success is your shepherd and that is the principle by which you guide your life, there's going to be dissatisfaction in your experience. Or if money is your shepherd. Or if drugs are your shepherd. Or if other things are in the controlling panel of your life, then there will be want. But with the Lord as my shepherd, I shall not want. The fact that “the Lord is our shepherd” suggests to us that we are sheep. And that perhaps for those of you who know sheep well may be an uncomplimentary sort of thing. Sheep in pictures look very wonderful. But sheep as we know are some of the dumbest animals alive. I don't know if we should really press this metaphor that David means sheep are dumb. I think more he's talking about the shepherd, that we should recognize, as Isaiah puts it, the sheep have a tendency to stray. “All we like sheep,” Isaiah says, “have gone astray and turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). A sheep is an animal that cannot possibly sustain life unless there is someone who has taken a shepherding interest in it. A sheep will not survive because he has no natural defenses. A prowler, a vicious animal of some kind, can easily take its life. Unlike the deer, it

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

cannot run away from trouble. And stupid enough to need to be led to places where grass can be eaten and water drunk. The sheep on his own cannot survive.

God sees life from the standpoint that we, with all of our intelligence, really cannot survive. We must have someone who is watching out for us. If we don't, we may think that we're making it, we may have all the trappings of what accounts for success. But yet we are really lost and spiritually starving. I shall not want.

David provides some reasons in our lives why we do not want. There are three in the first four verses, reasons why the sheep need not want.

One is that the shepherd leads the sheep to those things, which meet its needs. In respect to the sheep the needs are for food and drink. In respect to us as persons the needs the Lord leads us to are not only those physical things but also the things which meet the needs of our inner man. "He makes me lie down in green pastures" (verse 2, NIV). In the arid wastes of the wilderness it's good to know where the green pastures were. The sheep could not find them on its own.

Sheep are such animals that will not drink beside waters which are roaring or troubled. They would drink in a still pool. I've often thought in my own life how often the Lord has led me to want to drink my still waters. When we're in a time of turbulence we seek for that which is very calm. "He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul" (verses 2-3, NIV).

The Lord provides for our inner needs. He does this in beautiful ways. Because we use the words so often, they almost seem to be trite and appear that they don't have answers. Yet the way the shepherd restores our soul basically is through what we feed upon through His Word and through prayer and through bringing that background of individual attention to His Word and to prayer together with other believers sharing a life in common. A shepherd does not exist that he might

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

simply herd one sheep. But it is the sheep as a community, which the Lord is leading to safe pastures and quiet waters.

So the Lord himself guides us through the action of His Word within our lives. And what a release His Word is as we turn to it in times of need. Through prayer and through the community of believers He constantly works as we let Him restore our soul, so we don't want. Because inwardly there's the satisfaction of knowing God is in control.

B. We also don't want because the Shepherd provides our direction: "He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (verse 3, NIV). Or, "He leads me in right ways." The paths, not leading us in an unaccustomed way, but sheep are evidently such dumb animals that they maybe don't file down a well-traveled trail. Even going across something that has been traveled many, many times by the sheep themselves, unless the shepherd is there, they'll stray from the well-defined path. We do not want because we allow the Lord to be our shepherd and that's the difference between us and the sheep. The shepherd is imposed upon the sheep. Jesus invites us to allow Him to come in and be the Good Shepherd. We choose the Good Shepherd and from then on we're under His guidance. What a comfort this is to know that in the decisions of life He is with us and shepherding us. We all have difficulty making decisions.

How can we know the Shepherd is leading us in the right direction? There are three ways.

First of all by submitting wholeheartedly to the leadership of the Shepherd. By saying to the Lord, "Here is my life in its totality. Do with it what You will." We lack direction in our life when we have not given, really, all of ourselves to the care of the Shepherd.

Direction also comes in our life as we obey what we know to be God's will for today. Ninety-five percent of the decisions which we make in life are already covered for us by the Word of God. They're not in any doubt at all as to what action is called for. Scriptures teach us that as we

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

are faithful to the Lord in doing those things which He calls upon us to do that we already know are ours, as we obey Him in that 95% area of our life, He takes care of that other 5%.

We find His direction then in the third way that in that 5% where guidelines are not clearly defined He allows peace to be the arbiter of our decision. He allows that gentleness to arise within our hearts to let us know we're walking in the right way. Peace.

How do you know if a decision you are making is really in the Lord's way and will? Because the sheep know the shepherd's voice. As you walk with the Shepherd you know when He's speaking to you and direction can be firm and safe. "I'll not want. The Lord has His hands upon my life."

C. Another reason why we do not want is the Good Shepherd meets our need for protection.

"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" (Psalm 23:4, NIV). It's fascinating here to see the sequence of the psalm. That before one passes through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord has already led before still waters and has led in green pastures. The Lord allows us the times during the daytime to prepare for the more difficult moments. The Shepherd does not have us going through the valley of the shadow of death until we have been adequately fed and prepared for that venture.

The heaviest tests often come to a person in his later years. This is certainly true with Psalm 23 and why it has been such a tremendous solace to persons in hospital beds and rest homes, persons who are aged. Because that critical test is coming in this particular moment. The figure of speech "valley of the shadow of death" arises from the fact that in the evening when the shepherd was leading his sheep back to the sheepfold he might have to pass through a narrow gorge, a trail going through the gorge. Entering into a valley. As he passed through the valley the shadow of the rocks or the cliff would throw its path across. And the sheep would need to walk

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

from the sunshine through the shadow in order to come out into the sunshine again. The fact that there was a shadow there could be a very frightening experience. Yet, David in applying this to his life and the Holy Spirit applying it to our life will suggest to us that the wise person, by the time that he comes into the valley of the shadow of death in his life, will have his priorities fixed and will have his shepherd so he can go through the valley of the shadow with a Shepherd, rather than passing through it without one.

Because the Good Shepherd himself has laid down His life for the sheep there need not be any fear on the part of the sheep of passing through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus has made death the valley of shadow. No mature adult is really afraid of a shadow. A child can be afraid of shadows. Mature adults don't become afraid of stories. They're not afraid of shadows. There is nothing in a shadow that can hurt. The shadow of a dog cannot bite. The shadow of a sword cannot kill. The shadow of death cannot destroy. So the great trial of life is seen from David's perspective as a shadow. There is no want and there is no fear.

On the early part of the psalm, verses 1–3, David has been speaking of God in the third person. He's been speaking, "He leadeth me. He restores; He leads me in paths of righteousness." But now as he's passing through the difficult trial all of a sudden he lapses into speaking of things in the first person: "Thou art with me."

That personal relationship is so cemented by going through difficulty. Friends can accompany us only so far. Then the Lord himself picks up and carries our journey even further. He goes with us through the valley of the shadow.

The Shepherd has two protective instruments to watch out for us. "His rod and his staff they comfort me." The rod was a heavy club, which was used to ward off wild animals. One didn't have a gun in those days as a shepherd. If something fierce would come by, a robber, the club

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

was to be used on that thing which attempts to take away the security of the sheep. Whereas the staff was a slender pole with a crook on the end which could be used to guide the sheep in the event he began to stray or pull him back on the path by gently connecting with his leg or neck and steering him back in. Very fascinating how the shepherd respectively used the staff and the rod.

The rod is not used on the sheep. The Lord does not club the sheep half to death to bring him back into the fold or to keep him from straying. The club is for the enemy. The Lord wants to rebuke us at times but He does it in a way with His Shepherd's staff, with gentility in bringing us back. His correction is not given that He might kill us, but that He might restore us to the fold. He protects.

God our Shepherd, providing for our inner needs, giving us direction, providing for our protection in life.

II. The metaphor changes in verses 5–6 where the psalmist sees the Lord not only as his Shepherd but as his Host.

There are two passages of Scripture that might indicate the sort of backdrop that was running through David's mind before he composed Psalm 23. His flight from Absalom is recorded in 2 Samuel 15. We see in verses 25–26 that the priest had arranged for the Ark of the Covenant to be taken from the tabernacle and moved out into the wilderness with David. But David, when he sees the Ark of the Covenant, which is the sign of the presence of God, he says to the priest that the Ark should not be taken out into the wilderness. Rather it should be left in Jerusalem. David says at that time, "Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the LORD's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him" (2 Samuel

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

15:25–26, NIV). In other words David, as he begins that flight from Absalom, isn't sure what the outcome is going to be. He's not sure God is going to bring him back. He's not sure that he'll ever be in the sanctuary, the tabernacle again.

Isn't that the kind of response when we face something where we need the shepherd's psalm? We're not sure if we're going to make it. We're human. We have feelings that things are maybe going to get messed up this time and that God isn't going to come through as He had in the past. Then as we move along in our journey some other thoughts begin to come to us. Psalm 3 was evidently written shortly after David had fled from Absalom. David in Psalm 3 is saying things like, "O LORD, how many are my foes? Many are saying of me, there is no help for him in God." The focus of the mind now is on the magnitude of the enemy. Not certain I'm going to make it back but in that prayer, Psalm 3, David begins to say that on his journey he's learned not to be afraid of the ten thousand. He's beginning to learn to sleep at night without fear. Then there is the prayer to God. "O God, deliver me!" The outcome is not yet sure but there is a measure of hope beginning to well up within him that God is going to come through. Psalm 23 is sort of a completion of those things. At the beginning of the trip he's not sure. In the early part of the trip he's praying for God's deliverance, but he's focusing in on his enemies. But in Psalm 23 there is that settled rest. There's no prayer for deliverance. God is already setting a table before him and acting as his host. Not to be feared any more for he is being given a place to eat, a place of satisfaction in the midst of his enemies.

In fact these last two verses, 5–6, so interrupt the psalm. They appear so abruptly. Here we're talking about a shepherd. Then all of a sudden the metaphor and we're talking about a host. Yet that's the very way the Lord works in our life. All of a sudden we're going through something

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

and we wonder where is God. Then all of a sudden He shows up quite unannounced on the scene with a full table spread.

It's very fascinating how David may have gotten this figure of speech. "The Lord setteth a table before me." This time of David's life where he was fleeing from Absalom. He's been out in the wilderness for some time; three men who are not even Israelites (2 Samuel 17:27–29) bring him beds, basins, earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, grain for the people to eat. They said the people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness. Someone came along and provided a tremendous meal for David. He sees this evidently as a picture of the Lord's setting a table before us in the presence of our difficulties. One is left with kind of a nighttime scene. The enemies are outside the camp, but they can only look in. There's protection. One is allowed to take his refreshment in the midst of it.

The Lord has come through again, is the message of Psalm 23. Facing into the struggle you wonder, "Would the Lord come through?" Psalm 23 is the answer. The enemies have pursued David but so has God's goodness and mercy pursued him.

I like the way David says the word "surely." That word is a certain word. It is a word which has moved doubt into an absolute position of faith. God will come through. When I am with the Lord life is indestructible. I'm vulnerable. Enemies can attack me. But in the ultimate end, at the journey's end the Lord has a table set for me. How beautifully the Lord speaks of this in terms of the eternal feast. That He has a table spread for us. While all through life He has been acting as our host in the age to come He chooses once more to act as our host. And He sets a table before us. Not one where there's something we don't like or just a little bit of something. But a full and benevolent table.

GOD OUR SHEPHERD AND HOST

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is not a prayer. Psalm 23 is not something coming from a person who wants a shepherd. Psalm 23 is a statement of faith by someone who rather than wanting a shepherd has found a shepherd. And who can apply the shepherd's goodness to his life.

That finding of the shepherd is so beautifully reflected in the fact that at the beginning of this psalm the word is "Lord" and at the end of the psalm the word "Lord" is again repeated, bringing things to a full circle. God with me as shepherd and host. Therefore I shall not want.

Closing Prayer

While this psalm, Lord, was not specifically written for people who did not have a shepherd, yet you say in John 10 that you are the Good Shepherd of the sheep and in other passages of Scripture You indicate that You want us to will to invite You in. That in order for You to be our shepherd we must want that to be so. Lord, if there are hearts here today who have never known the work of Your shepherding in their life and who would like that impact of a shepherd to provide security to them, may this psalm be a source of prayer and turning. Lord, I receive You and want You as shepherd. For all of us in this place who at times in life forget that Your unseen hand is really guiding. Guiding us to inner riches in our soul, directing us through dangers, protecting us in the midst of adversity, being our host in a very difficult place. I pray today that this psalm will be a source of joy and comfort. Cause there to be a filling of the Spirit in our lives as a result of addressing one another with this psalm. We thank You that you are our Shepherd, our Pastor. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.