

Facing The Future

Psalm 23

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I'm going to read Psalm 23. David is the psalmist. He says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, 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 runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Now we're facing a new year. Certainly the last two years have been very challenging and difficult for so many of us. One of the things that creates anxiety and fear is not knowing what the new year holds. But I like the concept that we don't know what the new year holds, but we know who holds the new year. As God's people and being His sheep and He is our shepherd, we don't need to fear the coming new year. That's what Psalm 23 is all about.

Where David said in the King James Bible, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," The Living Bible says, "Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need." I like that. The Living Bible is a paraphrase, but it's a great and accurate paraphrase. Then David goes on to delineate in the psalm the things that the Lord, our shepherd, provides. And verse 1 is actually the theme of the psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

We know that David wrote the 23rd psalm, but we don't know when he wrote it. Some say he might have written it as a young boy out in the fields while watching his sheep. That would be a good setting. He would have sung this while playing his harp. "The Lord is my shepherd...He makes me to lie down in green pastures." Everything David was to his sheep as their shepherd, he knew the Lord was to him. I'm sure David was a great shepherd. And because of his faithfulness as a shepherd, God raised him up to shepherd his people, the nation of Israel, and allowed him to be king.

And some say David wrote this psalm when he was middle aged and was being chased by Saul and he was hiding in the cave. Everything was dark and dreary, and he doesn't know what the future holds. He began to think and pray, "The Lord is my shepherd...I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Maybe he is shivering and cold in a cave when he is running from Saul.

The third viewpoint is my favorite. I think David wrote it as an old man. His hair and beard are gray, and he is looking back over his life. He sees how the Lord had shepherded him, guided him, provided for him and led him during his life.

I don't know what it is about getting older, but I'm starting to sentimentally look back over my life. I realize I have more years behind me than I do ahead of me. I don't know how long I'll have, but here is another year starting, and if the Lord is willing, He'll give me the strength to

keep preaching this year. But sometimes I get emotional thinking about the Lord's goodness, His provision and guidance throughout my life.

So I picture David as an old man, writing this psalm in retrospect. And in writing this psalm, he is using the metaphor of the Lord being a shepherd, and we are His sheep. David looks back over his long life at all the ups and downs, the highs and lows. Yet he sees the faithfulness of God in his life.

I like the concept of God's faithfulness. It is so true that He is faithful. Have you found God to be faithful to you? Faithful in your marriage? Faithful to your family? Faithful to your children? Just the faithfulness of God to provide and to take care of us is a wonderful thought.

So my opinion is that David wrote this psalm in his later years, and he is looking back over the years on how the Lord led him as He was his shepherd and David was His sheep.

If the Lord is our shepherd, it implies that we are His sheep. It is not very flattering to be considered a sheep. Have you ever heard of an NFL football team called the Sheep? We've got the Tigers, the Bears, the Lions, the Hawks and all these great names. "Here, ladies and gentlemen, is your team." They come out on the field and go "Baa, baa, baa." I don't think so. Sheep are weak and defenseless. They don't have fangs or claws. They are unable to defend themselves. They need a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd are in big trouble.

Since we are sheep and we need a shepherd, there is no one better to be our shepherd than the Lord Jesus Christ. And I believe the shepherd mentioned in Psalm 23 is the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 10:14, Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd." Literally in the Greek, it says, "I am the shepherd—the good one." There are the bad shepherds, but He is the good one. Verse 15 says, "I lay down My life for the sheep."

So what a blessing it is if you've been born again, if you're a child of God, that you fall into this category. You can say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

I like the personal statement "my shepherd." He may be my parents' shepherd, my friends' shepherd, but He is "my shepherd." David had that intimate, personal relationship with the Lord as his shepherd.

I want you to notice the emphasis in the psalm on "He/His." In verse 2, "He makes me...He leads me." In verse 3, "He restores my soul; He leads me...for His names sake." There is also an emphasis on "You/Your." In verse 4, "You are with me; Your rod and Your staff." In verse 5, "You prepare a table...You anoint my head with oil." So the whole psalm focuses on the shepherd. The focus is not on the sheep but on the shepherd and on His provision and His goodness.

This psalm, penned over 3,000 years ago, is as fresh today as if it were penned this morning. What David does in this psalm is that he tells us the six things that the Lord, our shepherd, provides for us, as we move forward in this coming year.

First, because the Lord is my shepherd, I will not want for rest and refreshment. Verse 2 says, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters." In the Middle East, there is little grass and water, so the shepherd must constantly be on the hunt for food and water for the sheep. It is similar to Southern California where it is dry and arid. The shepherd is always looking for pastureland, so the sheep are always on the move. They can't stay in one place for very long. The sheep can't rest unless they have food and water and are free from fear.

The Bible says that "The wicked are like the troubled sea." But when we come to Jesus Christ as our shepherd, He gives us rest for our souls. I like the promise Jesus made when He said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." So you go to Jesus for rest of the soul. So you find rest, and He leads us and guides our lives.

So Jesus is our shepherd, and He makes us to "lie down in green pastures." That's the picture of rest. And "He leads me beside the still waters." That's a picture of refreshment. If you haven't trusted Jesus as your shepherd, then you still need that rest of soul that only He can give. As we go into the new year, we can rest in the Lord, we can wait on the Lord, we can trust in the Lord. He will give us rest.

The second blessing that He gives to us as His shepherd is restoration. Verse 3 says, "He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." If you've never read the book by Phillip Keller titled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, it's an amazing study of Psalm 23 written by a man who was himself a shepherd in New Zealand.

I've preached in New Zealand several times, but I've only been to the north island. New Zealand is interesting, because it has more sheep than it has people. Everywhere there are sheep. Phillip Keller was a shepherd in New Zealand as well as a pastor. So he unfolds Psalm 23 in an amazing way.

He talks about what he calls "cast sheep." He says that sheep can eat so much that they get so full they lay down. They lay down on their side and then pull over onto their back. Their equilibrium shifts and from their full stomach, they get their feet in the air and can't stand back up. All they can do is cry out for the shepherd. "Baa, baa." He hears the bleating of the sheep, so the shepherd has to rescue them and put them back on their feet or they would die. They are cast sheep. David said, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?"

Have you ever been a cast sheep? I have. You just kinda get down and you can't get up.

I like the imagery of the bleating of the sheep and the shepherd hears it. Jesus talked about the Good Shepherd having 100 sheep, loses one, leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one. If I were the shepherd, I'd say, "Good riddance, the dumb sheep! He should have stayed with us. He got lost. Now it's his problem. He made his bed; let him lie in it!"

But not our Good Shepherd. He loves the sheep. He leaves the 99 and goes out to find that

one lost, cast sheep. He picks it up, puts it over his shoulders and returns rejoicing, because that which was lost is now found.

When we fall, we stumble, we fall into sin, we go through a deep, dark valley, we get discouraged and the clouds come in, then the Good Shepherd comes to restore our soul.

David, though he was a man “after [God’s] own heart,” knew what it was to sin and fall. We are all familiar with David’s great sin of adultery with Bathsheba. He took another man’s wife, and she became pregnant. David tried to cover his sin. The Bible says that if you try to cover your sin, you’re not going to prosper. But “whosoever confesses and forsakes [his sin] will have mercy.”

For quite a long period of time, maybe a year or so, David thought he covered his sin, because he had Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband who was a soldier at that time, put out at the front of a battle and had the troops pull back so he would be killed. So David committed adultery and murdered her husband to cover his sin. Think about that. He was what the Bible calls “a man after [God’s] own heart.” Even God’s people can fall into sin. We won’t habitually practice sin, but we can stumble and fall.

So David lived with this guilt and shame. In Psalm 32, he talked about the moisture of his soul “was turned into the drought of summer.” He said, “Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me.” He was a child of God living under the conviction that he had sinned against God and against these individuals and his own family.

After a long period of time of God’s patience, He sent a prophet to David. Nathan told David a story about a wealthy man who had many sheep. When a visitor came to his house, instead of killing one of his own sheep to feed his visitor, he went to his neighbor’s house who had only one little, ewe lamb that was a pet. He took that ewe lamb and killed it to feed his visitor.

When David heard that story, he didn’t realize the story was about him. God was trying to reach David’s heart with this message. David got angry and said, “The man who has done this shall surely die!” Wow! I’m convinced Nathan pointed his boney finger at David, and then Nathan said, “David, you are that man!” Then David’s sin overwhelmed him, and he realized that God had exposed his sin. David broke down and said, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Then Nathan said to David, “The Lord...has put away your sin.” But Nathan also said, “The sword shall never depart from your house.”

God will forgive you, but the consequences have to be paid. It is a law of God: “Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” You can’t pray, “God forgive me and cover my sin.” The consequences are still going to be there.

So David was forgiven, but the consequences were still there. The sword came into David’s life, and he never really rose again to the place where he was before his great sin with Bathsheba. God lifted David up and he wrote Psalm 51. He said, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my

transgressions.”

Psalm 51 is tear stained in so many believers’ Bible. I’ve prayed that prayer so many times. “God, please forgive me. Cleanse me.”

When you read about what David asked God to do in Psalm 51—“Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit”—he is actually praying for what sin had robbed from him in his life. Sin robs us of the joy of the Lord, the presence of the Lord, the peace of the Lord. So David is praying that God would restore all those things back to his life. So it is a picture of God restoring the soul.

So no matter what happens this year, if you fall into sin, God is there to forgive you and restore you. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

So we have rest, restoration and the third blessing our Good Shepherd gives us is righteous paths. Psalm 23:3 says, “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”

Sheep are not only kinda dumb, dependent and defenseless, they lack a sense of direction. A dog can wander off and find its way back home, and cows can wander off the pasture and find their way back to the barn and shelter. But not sheep. When they wander off the path, they get lost. They need a shepherd.

So this coming year, we need the Lord to lead us and guide us. We need righteous paths to walk on. We need the Good Shepherd to direct us and guide us.

How do we find and know His righteous paths? I believe that we start with the Bible.

“The B-i-b-l-e.

Yes, that’s the book for me.

I stand alone on the Word of God.

The B-i-b-l-e.”

I think we need to take some of the songs from the children’s ministry and sing them in the sanctuary.

What you should pray for this year is for a greater, deeper hunger for God’s Word. Pray that God gives you a hunger for His Word and that you go deeper into His Word so you learn more about Him. God lays out His “paths of righteousness.” God always leads us in righteous ways. He doesn’t lead us into sin; He leads us into righteousness. Why does He do it? “For His name’s sake.” Everything God does is for His glory. So pray that God gives you a hunger for His Word.

I continue to have a hunger to study, to teach and to preach God's Word. We're going to continue to do that throughout this year.

Pray, ask the Holy Spirit to lead you and "guide you into all truth" and surrender your life in obedience to His Word. And all He does, He does for His glory. So our desire for this coming year is that God would give us righteous paths. "And God, help me to walk in obedience to Your Word—in my marriage, in my private life, in my thoughts, words and in my heart, in my parenting, in my occupation, in my ministry. May it all be on Your righteous paths. Keep me on your 'paths of righteousness.'"

So we have rest, restoration, righteous paths and, fourthly, we have comfort in the deep, dark valleys of life, verse 4. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."—why?—"...for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Many times sheep are timid, as well. Phillip Keller talks about times when he tries to get the sheep up to the higher pasture lands in the summer months. He would have to go through the valleys to get to the mountaintops. In the canyons, shadows would be cast, and sheep, being timid and shy and seeing the dark canyons, wouldn't want to go up the side of them. Sheep, unlike cattle, cannot be driven; they must be led. Many times a shepherd would take a little, ewe lamb, pick it up in his arms, go ahead of the flock and lead the flock and then the sheep would follow the shepherd.

So the Lord is leading us in His righteous paths, but being a sheep doesn't mean that we don't go through dark valleys. Some people have the idea that if you're a Christian, nothing ever goes wrong—no difficulties, everything's downhill but not too steep, it's smooth, no bumps, well lit, a gentle wind at your back and there are fragrant roses, but the thorns have been removed. Everyone is lining the road and cheering you as you go by and float along through life.

There are no Christian fallout shelters. God doesn't save you and then put you in a bubble so nothing happens to you. We live in a fallen world. We have unredeemed bodies. We're saved, born again, but our bodies haven't been redeemed yet. We will get a new body.

So we get sick, we get weak, we get frail, we have financial reverses, we can lose our job, we can get diagnosed with cancer. I never come to a new year but that I look over the congregation and realize that some are going to go through some deep, dark valleys. Some won't be here next year; maybe the Lord takes you home. It's true. I wish it weren't. I wish we would all live until the rapture. It could happen at any time. But I've been around long enough to realize that some of us, including myself, could go through deep, dark valleys this year.

But I'm confident of one thing: "The Lord is [our] shepherd," and He will not leave us or forsake us. He will be with us.

And verse 4 is not just talking about death. In the King James Bible and in other translations, "the valley of the shadow of death" is literally in the Hebrew "deep, dark valley" or "valley of darkness." It's assumed that this verse is talking about death—and it very well could be; I think

it's including death—but it also is talking about deep, dark valleys of difficulty or trials in life.

So whatever we face in this life—either life's difficulties or death—there are two things that we will have in this dark valley when we pass through it. We will have His presence—"For You are with me"—and His protection—"Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." The rod and the staff are there to protect and guide the sheep.

I like the part that says, "For You are with me." Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." That's a promise that you can take to the bank. So no matter what deep, dark valley you pass through in this coming year, you will have His presence and His protection. The Lord will be with you.

The fifth blessing our Good Shepherd gives us is that we have His provision, verse 5. "You..."—the focus is on the shepherd—"...prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; "You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over."

I've always thought it's interesting—and some feel it's the case—that David switches the metaphor from the shepherd and the sheep to the host and the guest. It seems to be that the picture is we are now the guest, and the Lord is the host. He prepares a table before our enemies, anoints our head with oil and our cup runs over. So He invites us over, anoints us and provides for us at His table.

We have Jehovah-Rohi, my shepherd; Jehovah-Jireh, my provider; Jehovah-Nissi, my banner; Jehovah-Shalom, my peace; Jehovah-Tsidkenu, my righteousness. These are some of the compound names of God. When God used the name, I AM, it's the concept that He is whatever we need at a particular time. He is our shepherd, our provider, our banner; Jehovah is our host, and we come into the house where He provides for us.

I like the doctrine of God's provision for His people. In Philippians 4:19, it says, "My God shall supply all your need..."—not your greed—"...according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

In light of the coming new year, in Matthew 6:26-34, Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles..."—or "the nonbelievers" or "heathens"—"...seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry..."—or "be anxious"—"...about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Why worry about tomorrow? It's not here yet. You get burdened about the cares of tomorrow. And then you get to tomorrow, but it doesn't happen. You sometimes worry about things that never happen. You should at least wait to see if it happens or not. We get burdened with the worries and cares of tomorrow. The Bible says, "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," in the King James translation.

So the Lord is our provider and host. "You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over."

The psalm concludes, in verse 6, with the sixth and last blessing, in what I believe is a summary of the psalm: certainty. At this point, David abandons all metaphors in the psalm; it's not sheep and shepherd or host and guest. He says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

I've highlighted three words in verse 6: "surely," "shall" and "I will." These three words/phrase speak of the certainty, when the Lord is our shepherd, that the goodness and mercy will follow us all our life through. It won't be easy, but we will be blessed. And when we get to the end of our life, "all this and heaven, too."

So, again, I believe David is looking back over his life. He basically says that all his life long, God had been good to him. He's watched over David. In those times when he thought, Where is God?!, He was actually carrying him and protecting him. He was watching over David. In the darkest periods of David's life, when God was watching over him, there was goodness and mercy.

I don't know what your life has been like; what pain, heartache and difficulty you've had to face. But I do know that once the Lord is your shepherd, you have everything you need. He is everything you need. He gives you rest. He restores your soul. He leads you in righteous paths. He protects you with His presence. He watches over you in the deep, dark valleys. He provides for you. And then He takes you to heaven when you die. What a beautiful psalm!

So it goes back to verse 1. When the Lord is your shepherd—when you can say, "The Lord is my shepherd," then you can say, "I have everything I need." Someone put it in these words in a devotional:

"Each step in the life of faith is toward richer blessing. Are you a child of God? There is nothing before you in the unopened future but goodness. Every new experience, whether of joy or sorrow, will be a new storehouse of goodness for you. Even in the heart of disaster, you will still find goodness unfolded. Even your disappointments will disclose truer, richer blessing than if your own hopes had been realized. Here is a lens through which every true Christian may see his own path clear to the end; from goodness to richer goodness, from glory to glory, and the last step through the opening door of heaven into the presence of the King."

What a wonderful thing it is to know the Lord as your shepherd and you have everything you need.