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Psalm 23

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THE SONG OF THE SHEPHERD

By any standard of measurement, David was an extraordinary Old Testament character. There is more written about David than any other person in the Bible, apart from the Lord Jesus. Sixty-six chapters of the Old Testament are devoted to David's life; and there are fifty-nine references to him in the New Testament.

David possessed tremendous natural assets. Someone has said that he had the literary skill of Shakespeare, the musical ability of Beethoven, the military skill of Alexander the Great, the political savvy of Abraham Lincoln, and the hand-eye coordination of Joe Montana. It's no wonder that Michelangelo's sculpture of David stands 18 feet tall. David was a giant of a man.

As we have seen in our studies in 1 Samuel, the real measure of David's greatness was his obsession with God. David was preoccupied with the love of God. In fact, God declared him to be "a man after my own heart."

Michelangelo took almost four years to complete his statue of David. He was working with a piece of flawed marble, because the block had been damaged when it was removed from the quarry. David, too, was flawed in his origins. He was abused as a child, unloved by his parents, and controlled at times by obsessions like pride, ambition and lust. And yet God took that lonely, love-starved boy and shaped him into the man he envisioned him to be. It was hard work, because David was deeply flawed. But God never gave up until the work was done.

Out of that work the 23rd Psalm, our text for this morning, was born. We will draw from the psalm a number of truths that will help us get to know a little better this God with whom David was obsessed.

Most of us do not have a clear picture of the God we are encouraged to trust and worship. Our image of him is clouded by pastors or priests who put the "fear of God" into us. Our impressions of God are distorted by fathers who were absent, emotionally detached, brutal, or weak. Who is this God and what is he really like? David's answer in Psalm 23 is that God is a shepherd. This image appears throughout the poem.

David himself, of course, was a shepherd. As a youth he spent a lot of time tending sheep in the wilderness. Somewhere along the line the thought came to David that God was like a shepherd. David thought about the incessant care that sheep demand. He remembered their helplessness, their defenselessness. He recalled their foolish straying from safe paths and their constant need for a guide. He thought about how long it took for them to trust him before they would follow him. He remembered the times when he led them through danger, and they were right at his heels. He pondered the fact that he had to think for his sheep, to fight for them, guard them and find pasture and quiet pools for them. He remembered their bruises and scratches that he bound up. He marveled at how frequently he had to rescue them from harm. And yet not one of his

sheep was aware of how well it was watched. Yes, David thought, that is the right metaphor. God is indeed very much like a good shepherd.

Some say the psalm was written early in David's life, while he was still a youth and engaged in shepherding his father's sheep. But I disagree. Although this poem enshrines the memories and metaphors of those early years, it reflects the thoughts of someone closer to the end of his life than the beginning. There is a depth in this simple psalm that has been a source of comfort and strength to many during upheavals in their lives.

Perhaps you find yourself shaken and in turmoil this morning. David faced similar circumstances when he penned these words. Yet in the midst of his pain, confusion and fear, he reminded himself of three wonderful facts about his God. And these three facts became the anchor of his life. They are, in a real sense, what made David into the man that he was. These truths enabled him to say in the midst of difficult circumstances, "I shall not want...I will fear no evil."

The first fact is this:

I. In our Wilderness, God is Committed to Feed Us— To Fullness

Look at the first two verses:

The LORD is my shepherd,

I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters. (Ps 23:1-2 NASB)

The basic needs of sheep are grass and water. These picturesque verses illustrate both quality and quantity. The picture here is not of sheep grazing and drinking, but at rest, lying down. The scene is one of tranquillity, satisfaction and rest. The common practice of shepherds was to graze their flocks in rough pasture early in the morning; lead them to better grasses as the morning progressed; and then to a cool and shaded oasis for noontime rest.

The fact that the sheep are lying down suggests that they had eaten their fill. They were totally satisfied. The verbs suggest the gentle persuasion of a shepherd patiently and persistently encouraging his sheep to the place where their hungers and thirsts would be satisfied.

Some of us have a problem with these sentiments. "Is my life really a green pasture?" we ask. We are surrounded not by green grass and still waters, but by stones and rocks—a wilderness. We are not full; we are hungry and tired. Life is anything but a green pasture. David certainly experienced this. Much of his life was spent in sorrow, misunderstanding, persecution and discipline. But David knew something more. He knew that God could transform a wilderness into a green pasture. Only in a wilderness are we able to discover the supernatural provision of God.

In 1 Samuel 16, David was anointed king by Samuel. Immediately afterwards, David defeated Goliath in a magnificent display of faith. But where do we find him next? On the throne? No! We meet him in the wilderness. He was being chased by a mad king and he could not fight back. Even when it was in his power to get revenge he could not act, because he knew that he must trust God as he prepared for kingship. In that wilderness David poured out his heart to God. Over fifty of the psalms record David's lamenting. And in his tears and anguish, he learned to trust in God. In the wilderness he learned that his own resources were not sufficient. There he learned to say, "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

The same was true of the nation of Israel. After they were brought out of the Egyptian captivity, and had victoriously crossed through the Red Sea, their enemies destroyed, where do we find them? In the promised land? No. In a wilderness. Why did they not immediately enter the promised land? Moses told them in Deuteronomy 8:2-3:

"And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD." (Deut 8:2-3)

This was also true of our Lord. Where do we find him after his baptism and the assurance to him that he was God's beloved Son? On a throne, ruling his kingdom? No. The Spirit immediately led him into a wilderness. As Jesus was preparing to be king over his people, he was led to a wilderness. There he had to trust his Father while he hungered and thirsted for forty days. After that time, angels ministered to him and provided him with supernatural food.

Have you ever thought that all your restless longings which can't be quenched are actually signs that God is calling you, leading you to a place of rest?

And what are these green pastures and quiet waters to which God leads us? What is the reality behind the metaphor? It is God himself. As Jeremiah reminds us, "He is our true pasture." God is our pool of quiet water. He is our true nourishment, our living water. If we don't take him in, we will starve.

There is a hunger in the human heart that nothing but God can satisfy. There is a thirst that no one but God can quench. Jesus tells us, "Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give you . . . I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Malcolm Muggeridge expresses this thought in his own confession:

I may, I suppose, regard myself as being a relatively successful man. People occasionally look at me on the street. That's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for the highest slopes of inland revenue. That's success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, can partake of trendy diversions. That's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time. That's fulfill-

ment. Yet I say to you, and I beg of you to believe me, multiply those tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment, measured against one drink of that living water that is offered to the spiritually hungry.

It is only in a wilderness that one looks for supernatural food.

Samuel Rutherford explained it this way in an essay he wrote in the 17th century:

If God had told me some time ago that he was about to make me as happy as I could be in this world, and then had told me that he should begin by crippling me in arm or limb, and removing me from all my usual sources of enjoyment, I should have thought it a very strange mode of accomplishing his purpose. And yet, how is his wisdom manifest even in this! For if you should see a man shut up in a close room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by blowing out all his lamps and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven.

The secret to David's life was that he had learned to wait upon God. God would renew his strength. God would be his salvation. God would be his food. As David waited upon God, God transformed his wilderness into a green pasture where he fed until he was full.

Not only does God feed us, but, secondly:

II. In our Failure He is Committed to Restore Us—To Fruitfulness

He restores my soul;

**He guides me in the paths of righteousness
for His name's sake. (23:3)**

God knows that we are in need of restoration. In the face of common, everyday temptation we fall, voluntarily and repeatedly. The same old flaws and failures seem to pursue us all our lives. New vices awaken and dominate us. We stumble again and again into bad judgment. Theologians write about "original sin" and "total depravity." This does not mean that we sin in novel, creative ways. There aren't any innovative ways to sin. It has all been done before. Original sin simply means we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity to sin. We are like a baseball with a spin on it. Sooner or later we break, and the break is always down and away. Total depravity means that sin affects our total being. If sin were blue, we would be a shade of blue all over. There is something in our makeup that is dreadfully wrong, something that causes us to do evil. Even when we try not to do wrong, sin makes it impossible for us not to think about doing it.

But we don't need to be told we are defective; we only need to be reminded. We know what we are like, and we don't want to expose that to others. But God has a way of not allowing us to keep it hidden. He permits us to do the most embarrassing things at the most inopportune times. He allows us to experience the depths of our depravity, to see the miserable stuff of which we are made.

Sin is an atrocity. We have to realize how monstrous and scandalous it is, and how desperately we need God's forgiveness. We will never appreciate the magnitude of his acceptance until we comprehend the measure of our sins. It is at the point of depressing failure that we hunger for grace.

David knew this need from his own experience. You know the story about how he fell for Bathsheba, Uriah's pretty young wife. One brief spell of passionate indulgence plunged David into ruin. The sweet singer of Israel became a seducer and an adulterer. Then he became a monstrous liar, a murderer, and finally a mass murderer, pitiless and unmoved in his horrifying evil. There is no end to sin once we set out on that road. That is sin's deception. We are seduced by its attraction, and quickly we enter into a life of fantasy. Why is it that fictional sin seems exciting but fictional good seems dull? That is the fundamental deception of our fantasies.

Though David tried to cover all his tracks, ultimately there was disclosure. Sooner or later, we too we must face the humbling experience of being found out. At first we deny any wrongdoing; then we fabricate a story (people in trouble always lie). But eventually we have to face the facts. God brought the prophet Nathan to confront David over his sin. His evil exposed, David buried his face in his hands and cried, "I have sinned against the Lord." David offered no excuses, no justification. Nathan's immediate reply was, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You will not die." David remained king, and he was forgiven. He knew what it meant to be cleansed and revived, and he could say from his own experience, "he restores my soul."

God lets us fall not to shame us, but to assure us that though we are guilty, vile and helpless, he loves us deeply. God's love in the face of wickedness is what awakens humility and contrition. At that moment of exposure and brokenness, our shame can either drive us underground, or like David, we can be touched at the heart level by God's amazing grace. We learn that though we are miserable sinners we are fully accepted. Unlike the Marines, God isn't looking "for a few good men." God stays with us despite our ruin. He uses our sin to awaken our need for his grace. Sin softens us and makes us more susceptible to his shaping. When we fall, we fall into his hands.

Rather than mourning our humiliation, we need to accept God's grace and move on. We must not let sorrow and self-pity set in. Sin has consequences we must live with, but sin acknowledged and confessed can work for good.

David tells us this for our encouragement, so we might know that although we fail, God will never discard us.

Some of you may have committed a terrible and tragic sin that has never been traced back to you. You may have a criminal record. You may have been involved in a moral failing or a domestic conflict that has not been exposed. You may wrestle with a past that has been fractured, or wounded by a mental or emotional breakdown. Maybe a futile attempt at suicide has scarred you. Perhaps you live with memories of an illicit relationship, a financial failure, a vile habit, a divorce, or some scandalous involvement. God not only promises to forgive, but to restore you to fruitfulness once again.

David says that God leads us to "paths of righteousness." The Hebrew word translated "path" means a "well-worn trail." Though the path is well marked, the sheep still wander, just like us. A hymn writer expressed it this way: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." But God is faithful to bring us back on the right path, to "paths of righteousness." And he does it "for His name's sake." It is not our names that are at stake; it is his name, his character, his reputation. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

God is faithful to restore us and forgive us.

There is a third thing.

III. In our Fear He is Committed to Protect Us—By His Faithfulness

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. (23:4)**

Here, in another picturesque scene, the shepherd is leading the sheep home at the end of the day. As they go down a narrow gorge, the long shadows lie across the trail. The experience is frightening to these timid and defenseless animals. But because the shepherd is with them, their fears are calmed.

In the middle of the meadow the path plunges down into the "valley of the shadow of death." These may be the most familiar and evocative words in Scripture. As I meditated on this phrase, I remembered hiking down the Grand Canyon once, down the valley with its narrow, twisting paths, its ledges and steep cliffs. The phrase "shadow of death" is actually one word in Hebrew, meaning "deep darkness." It is a dreary word that is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the impenetrable darkness before creation, or the thick darkness of a mine shaft. Its a word associated with anxiety and unfocused dread.

The valleys are emblematic of the days when we walk in darkness and gloom; when unrelieved suffering is our lot; when troubles fall upon us like bricks out of a dump truck. Perhaps they remind you of the day your employer told you to clean out your desk; when your doctor said, "your child will never be normal"; when you found the stash in your son's closet; when your teenage daughter told you she was pregnant; when the doctor said you had cancer; when your spouse told you he or she had no energy or desire to continue the relationship. Those are the days when we lose all perspective, when we say in despair, "it's no use. I can't go on."

I used to think that the Christian life was lived mostly in green pastures, with an occasional wilderness and dark valley along way. I realize now it's the other way around. There are days of surprising joy, but much of life is a vale of tears. Every year confirms my view that life is indeed difficult and demanding. Any other view of life is escapist.

The path by which God leads us often seems to lead away from what is good, making us think we have missed a turn and taken a wrong road. That is because most of us have been taught that if we are on the right track, God's goodness will always translate into earthly good: that he will heal us and exempt us from disease and pain; that we will have money in the bank, children who turn out well, nice clothes, a comfortable living, and a leisurely retirement; everyone will be a winner; nobody will lose a business or a marriage or live in poverty. But God often leads us down roads where earthly comforts fail us so that he can give us eternal consolation.

What we need during those times is what David discovered: "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." David's Shepherd was by his side, armed and vigilant, warding off his enemies and keeping him from wandering off the trail. God was with him in the midst of his fears.

The grammar of the poem shifts significantly at this point. David moves from speaking of God in the third person (He) to the second person (You). He had been speaking about God, but in the valley he speaks to him. It is a small detail in the text, but it makes a big difference in our hearts to know that God is with us in the valley. God

paid great attention to detail in the Scriptures to assure his people that he was with them. He said it to Moses, to Joshua, to the nation Israel. Jesus told us, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

God is always with us. Friends fail us, spouses walk out on us, parents disappoint us, but God is with us every moment of every day. When we ford the deep waters, when we pass through the fire, when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he is there. Of him alone it can be said, he will never say, “Good-bye.” Sometimes it is only in the valley that we realize this, because, as Richard Foster says, “God becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity.” The dark valleys make God more real.

In verse 5, the metaphor shifts from a good shepherd to gracious host. But notice that these same three truths are repeated:

Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
Thou hast anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows. (23:5)

David is now at a table filled with delicacies. There is too much for him to eat. He looks at his wine goblet, and it is more than he can take. His cup overflows. God feeds us. Whereas before David talked about God restoring him, now David talks about his head being anointed with oil. This is a picture of being revived and refreshed. When we feel like we are worthless and ought to be discarded, God revives us and restores us.

Notice that all of this is done “in the presence of my enemies.” This feeding and restoration take place in the midst of a satanic world system that seeks our destruction. But we don’t need to panic or fear; God protects us.

David closes with one more statement. But no longer is he speaking in metaphors. Verse 6:

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (23:6)

David says, “Surely.” It is a fact that is as certain as it is comforting. Too good to be true? No. God is too good not to be true. He is good, as good as we are capable of imagining him to be. He is love, as loving as we need him to be. David often links God’s goodness and lovingkindness. In David’s mind they were inseparable components of God’s gracious care. God follows us. He shadows us. He assures that no matter what transpires today or tomorrow or the next day, nothing can separate us from his goodness and love.

That is why I am convinced that everything the devil does is designed for one purpose only: to draw us away from God’s love. It is not so much that the devil hates us, but that he hates God and will do anything to break his heart. And nothing breaks God’s heart more than being separated from those he loves. Jesus called the devil a “liar and a murderer.” His goal is destruction; his method is deception. He is the source of all our doubts about God’s goodness, of the subtle seductions to find ourselves apart from God, or meet our own needs rather than trust God’s provision. The devil fills us with guilt. He denies God’s forgiveness. He makes us anxious about the present by insinuating that God can’t provide. Anxiety, guilt, fear: these are the marks of Satan’s presence. These emotions are based on the notion that God cannot or will not do anything about our condition. But it is all a lie.

In our wilderness God is committed to feed us to fullness. In our failure he is committed to restore us to fruitfulness. In our fear he is committed to protect us by his faithfulness. What a God we serve!

Let me close with these words from Ruth Caulkins:

I may fall flat on my face; I may fail until I feel old and beaten and done in. Yet your goodness and love are changeless. All the music may go out of my life, my private world may shatter to dust. Even so, you hold me in the palm of your steady hand. No turn in the affairs of my fractured life can baffle you. Satan with all his braggadocio cannot distract you. Nothing can separate me from your measureless love—pain can’t, disappointment can’t, anguish can’t. Yesterday, today, tomorrow can’t. The loss of my dearest love can’t. Death can’t, life can’t. Riots, wars, insanity, non-identity, hunger, neurosis, disease—none of these things, nor all of them heaped together can budge the fact that I am dearly loved, completely forgiven and forever free through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son.

I am indebted to David Roper for his excellent book, *Psalm 23: The Song of a Passionate Heart* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1994).

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