

■ The 23rd Psalm – part two

Introduction

Last week I taught from the first three verses of the 23rd Psalm. We discovered that David was writing a Psalm about sheep and a Shepherd. However he was giving us a role reversal. He was the sheep and the Lord was his Shepherd.

We learnt how important it is to have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. We also learnt that if we have a personal relationship with Jesus, then He wonderfully provides for our needs. We must be content to hand over the management of our lives to God.

God provides through His son Jesus for the Salvation of our soul. He provides for all our life situations and ultimately for our final destination in heaven. We also learnt that Jesus wants us to have a peaceful life which is free from conflict, fear, irritation and to be well fed spiritually through His word.

We learnt that God is constantly moving us on in order to grow spiritually. There are always new challenges and opportunities to trust God and grow to be more like Jesus.

We also learnt that there are times in our lives that we can be very broken (upset, downcast, depressed etc.) It is during these times that we are like a caste sheep who has rolled on his back and can't get up. Sometimes God uses us to roll people over back into a better spiritual condition. We need to be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance in order to help people who are downhearted.

Finally last week we learnt that God leads us in paths for HIS glory. It requires our obedience to go God's way. God moves us in different paths for our benefit, for His glory and for the benefit of other people whom He wishes to minister to.

This week we continue with Psalm 23 beginning with verse 4.

■ "Even thou 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..."

■ (power – point = enjoying the Shepherd's protection)

From a Shepherd's point of view, this verse marks the half –way point in the Psalm. It becomes a very intimate conversation of deep affection between the Shepherd and the sheep.

During the summer months in Israel, the Shepherd has to take his sheep to the hill country and the mountains, in order to get good grazing country with plenty of grass. The Shepherd is with the sheep all of the time. The Shepherd would take his sheep up through the valley. In the summer there would be thunder storms, with lightning. It would seem like the valley of the shadow of death. There were lots of dangers on the way up to the mountain top. There would be rock slides, poisonous plants, and also wolves. However the sheep were safe because the Shepherd was with them.

■ All that the Shepherd had was a "Rod" and a "Staff". The "Rod" was hand-picked by the Shepherd. (Chosen carefully)

From an early age the Shepherd would train using the “Rod”. Sometimes it consisted of a small tree that was uprooted. At other times it was a piece of wood cut to size with a knob on the end. This knob was rock hard. If the knob was used in the right way it could kill a person.

The “Rod” was also used by the Shepherd to examine and count the sheep.

■ (Ezekiel 20:v. 37. – quote it.)

I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant;

The Shepherd would use the “Rod” in order to pull the wool open and try to detect any disease, wounds, or defect in the sheep. During this period the Shepherd used to examine all his sheep in every intimate detail.

The “Staff” was a different piece of equipment. It was like a long stick with a hook on the end of it.

The Shepherd will use his staff to gently lift a new born lamb and bring it to its mother if they become separated. The reason he does this is because there is a danger of the mother rejecting her new born lamb if it bears the odour of the Shepherd's hands. The “Staff” is also used to hook in sheep that go astray. The “Staff” is also used for guiding the sheep. The Shepherd does not beat the sheep with the staff to guide it. The Shepherd gently uses the stick to apply pressure to the side of the sheep to guide it.

It is such a special relationship with the Shepherd using the “Staff”. It is like two people in love walking hand in hand.

Application

Q. What has this verse got to teach us personally as we walk with Jesus along the pathway of life?

Firstly the pathway of life is not an easy path. We have a personal devil who will try and distract you, divert you and destroy you. We don't need to fear the devil when Jesus is our Shepherd.

However we do need to make use of His “Rod” and His “Staff”. What are these things in our lives?

1. The “Rod” speaks to us of the spoken word of God. It speaks of the activity of God's mind in dealing with us. When God called Moses, who was a Shepherd, He asked him to use his “Rod” to demonstrate God's power given to him. It was used to convince Pharaoh of God's divine power and also to give assurance to God's people in Egypt.

We can trust in the Bible which is God's word for all of our life. Jesus used the word of God to defeat the devil and so can we. (Matthew Chapter 4.)

2. The “Rod” also speaks of God's discipline. If a sheep was about to eat a poisonous plant then the Shepherd would through the “Rod” and quickly the sheep would move away. The Bible also disciplines us in our lives and God disciplines those who He loves.

3. The third way in which the “Rod” is used in our life is what I am calling “intimate sanctification”.

■ Psalm 139 v. 23-24 says “Search me O God and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me the way everlasting.”

■ Psalm 66: v. 10 tells us that God tests us and refines us like silver. Just like Gold and Silver are refined by taking out the dross and impurities, so God refines us, in order to make us more like Jesus.

The Shepherd's staff can be compared to the Holy Spirit in our lives. It comforts us and protects us in all sorts of difficult situations. One of the words used in Greek for the Holy Spirit describes a person who comes alongside us to comfort us. The Holy Spirit is the great comforter.

Example: I remember about 15 years ago I was work with a mission team at my Church in London. We were holding a children's mission out in the open. It was on the grass in front of a very difficult housing estate of high rise apartments. There were lots of criminals and socially deprived people living in these homes. A boy of about 9 years old started throwing stones at our little group of children who we were teaching. The stones got bigger and closer to the group. There was a real danger that one of the children or adults would be seriously hurt.

I went over to the boy, took him by the arm and warned him that if he did not stop throwing stones I would call his mother and tell her what he was doing. Immediately he ran away. I thought, great that has solved this problem. About 15 minutes later a large lady, full of tattoos, and very muscular, came over towards me. She shouted a lot of abuse at me and said I had been abusing her child. Before I knew what had happened, she punched me so hard in the face I was knocked to the ground. I can honestly say that at that moment, the Holy Spirit comforted me in a very powerful way. Lying on the ground being comforted by God's Holy Spirit was a wonderful experience.

If we have to go through hard things, God's Holy Spirit is there to comfort us.

So in conclusion on this point, between moments of blessing here on this earth and heaven later, runs the valley of the shadow of death. The deep valleys run between mountains of blessing in the Christian life. The Lord Jesus is here to help us, through prayer, through the Bible and by the comfort of His Holy Spirit.

■ We now move on to verse 5 – “ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.....”

■ Trusting the Shepherd's provision.

Q. Where are sheep now on their summer journey?

They are approaching the top of the mountain. This is the place of the Summer grazing. These places are known as “Alp lands” or “Table lands”. In some of the finest sheep country in the world these places are known as the “Mesas”. This is the Spanish word for tables. The word is also used in a number of African countries. It appears that what David may be referring to was the entire summer grazing area.

The Shepherd would always go ahead of the sheep to prepare the area. He would find the best grass area, he would check to see if there were any poisonous weeds, or evidence of wild animals.

The Shepherd would also make sure that he had plenty of oil to rub over the noses of the sheep. The biggest problem for the sheep was the nose fly. They would try and lay eggs on the nose of the sheep. The oil would prevent this happening.

It is clear in this verse that David is thinking about 4 things.

■ He is thinking about his enemies, his table, his anointing, and his cup.

1. David is thinking about his enemies.

David was surrounded with enemies. He spent half his life running away from his enemies. His greatest trial came when his son became his enemy. David knew that as God's anointed he was the object of enemies all around him.

The moment that you become a Christian and the Lord Jesus is your personal Shepherd, you will have enemies. The Bible teaches us that we have three main enemies.

■ These are the world, the flesh and the devil.

a) The devil.

■ In 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 8 it says "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour..." (New King James Version)

We need to be aware of the devil and his schemes. (Cunning plans) The devil actively operates in the thought processes of our minds.

■ This is why Paul warns us in 2 Corinthians chapter 10 and verse 5 to take "every thought" into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

One of the devil's favourite tricks is to put negative thoughts into your mind. He often tells you that other people are thinking negative thought about you when they are not. The devil works hard to divide Christians, therefore we must work hard to prevent this happening.

b) The world.

There are two verses in the Bible that I would like to point out. The first is James Chapter 4: v. 4.

■ It says in this verse - "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." (New King James Version)

■ The second verse is 1 John chapter 2: verse 15 - "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (N.K.J.)

These are two very challenging verses. We need to be very careful that we are not sucked into the ways of the world. The world is always against the things of God. The Bible tells us that the devil is the ruler of this world. Although God is sovereign and uses things for His own ends, we must be careful that our hearts do not crave after (want) worldly things that will not satisfy the heart.

c) The flesh.

■ Peter warns us in 1 Peter chapter 2: v. 11 to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.

Both men and women need to be very careful that they don't give in to the desires of the flesh.

The best way to prevent giving in to temptation is to stay close to the Shepherd. He will always provide a way of escape.

2. David's Table.

David's table was God's provision, in spite of his enemies. Let us read 2 Samuel chapter v.17 verses 1-4. The chapter tells us that Ahithophel committed suicide and David's friends fed him with a banquet. (A very good meal)

■ Moreover Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Now let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. ² I will come upon him while he is weary and weak, and make him afraid. And all the people who *are* with him will flee, and I will strike only the king.

■ ³ Then I will bring back all the people to you. When all return except the man whom you seek, all the people will be at peace." ⁴ And the saying pleased Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

Application - As Christians we can become very weary and discouraged. We are attacked from every side from our enemies. However God can overrule in our lives to destroy our enemies and to produce good things from bad circumstances. If you read the life of Joseph you will discover that God was working to His plan and His timetable (schedule). God used the bad things in the life of Joseph to accomplish His plans. God can use the bad things in our lives to accomplish His plans, too. We must trust God and His Bible, even when things are not going too well in our lives.

3. David's anointing.

David is thinking about the blessing of God's anointing upon him. Reading through the Bible we notice the importance of anointing oil. In Exodus 29-30 we are told that the priest was anointed as a sign of their consecration. (Exodus 29: v. 7). It was not just any old oil, it had to be specially produced and it was Holy. (Exodus 30: v. 31-33)

David must have reflected upon the time when he was anointed King of Israel. Read 1 Samuel 16: v. 1 and v. 13.

■ 1 Samuel 16:1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons."

■ 1 Samuel 16:13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel arose and went to Ramah.

■ This fact was highlighted in Psalm 89: v. 20-21. (Read it)

²⁰ I have found My servant David;

With My holy oil I have anointed him,

²¹ With whom My hand shall be established;

Also My arm shall strengthen him.

The oil symbolised God setting David apart as His servant. It was the promise of God's presence, enabling David to fulfil his calling. It was also God's undertaking to protect David.

Application - You might be surprised that this same theme of anointing transfers to the New Testament and applies to every Christian. Let us read 1 John 2: v. 26-27.

■ ²⁶ These things I have written to you concerning those who *try to* deceive you. ²⁷ But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you;

■ but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

People in the Apostle John's day were trying to deceive God's people. They were introducing another gospel that was not true. John tells them that when they were born again they had an anointing of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of "TRUTH".

The Holy Spirit anoints and gifts Christians in different ways for different purposes. We are all important and we all have a part to play in God's plans. Be encouraged God has something for you and will enable you to fulfil that role.

4. David's Cup.

David said "My cup runs over" What did David mean? He meant that His life was so overflowing with God's blessing. David had plenty of things that he could have complained about. However he chose to focus upon the Goodness of God rather than His circumstances.

Because Jesus drank the wrath of God's cup, and died upon a cross to take the punishment of our sins, we can like David focus upon the benefits of our Salvation. Because the wrath of God was poured upon Jesus we will never have to suffer the punishment of our sins.

■ We can say like the Psalmist "O Lord, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup." – Psalm 16: v. 5.

If your cup seems empty, that is O.K., God can fill it up. If your cup is overflowing, make sure you bless other people with your overflow. We must witness to other people who don't know Jesus yet.

■ We now conclude with the final verse of Psalm 23 – "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (N.K.J.)

■ Dwelling in the Shepherd's house.

Where are the sheep now? They have safely returned to the barns for the winter. They are kept warm by sleeping on hay. They are safe from all the wild animals, but they are still cared for by the Shepherd.

Verse 6 is a wonderful conclusion to a wonderful Psalm.

When David says "Goodness and Mercy shall follow me...", he is using a very strong Hebrew word that means to "CHASE" or "PURSUE". The image is that, wherever the shepherd takes the flock, goodness and mercy are pursuing the sheep.

A Sheep farmer in Scotland used to have two sheep dogs. They were trained to keep the sheep under control. It is a special breed of dog, called a border collie with a long history of caring for sheep. He called one, "Goodness" and the other one he called "Mercy." Although the sheep used to wander off on their own paths, the two dogs, one on each side would bring them back.

We need to focus upon Jesus Christ, the good Shepherd, and then Goodness and Mercy will keep us in order.

Quote Hebrews 12: v. 1-2 here.

■ Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ■² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

If we focus upon Jesus, Goodness and mercy will never let us go, like two sheep dogs, keeping us focused on the Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

The Psalms ends with a promise. It is a wonderful promise. It is not a promise for now, it is a promise for the future.

We are all from different countries. Some of us are British Citizens, some American, some Korean, and some Japanese, some from the Philippines etc. However if Jesus is our Shepherd we are citizens of Heaven. We have a passport that has a visa to enter Heaven. The visa is stamped with the precious blood of Jesus. Jesus Christ paid the price for us to have a wonderful future in heaven.

■ The phrase – “The House of the Lord” is often used in the Old Testament. It usually refers to the “Temple”. The book of Psalms often uses it in this way. In Psalm 122 v. 1 it says “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord..”

The Temple was only a beginning of something greater. It had a purpose to teach us much about the seriousness of sin and the Holiness of God.

■ When John in Revelation 21: v. 22 saw into heaven, he said there was no temple there. There was no physical building which you could identify as the house of the Lord. John tells us that the Lord God almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

Jesus that great Shepherd of the sheep will at the end of our life, bring us into the glory of His presence. There will be no sickness, no tears, no sorrow, no more death. Jesus will make all things new.

■ In Revelation 21: v. 27 it tells us that only those people whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will be in Heaven. If you have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ to save you from your sins, your name will be in that book. However if you have not taken that step and would like to talk with somebody today or pray with someone today, don’t lose the moment if you feel that God is speaking to your heart.