

THE GOODNESS OF THE LORD
A SERIES ON THE 23RD PSALM
(2) THE SHEPHERD'S PEACE

Psalm 23:2-3a

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PROLOGUE

Ed was a sheep rancher in Idaho. One day a stranger walked up to him and asked, "If I can guess how many sheep you've got, may I have one?" Thinking this impossible, Ed agreed. The stranger declared, "You have 1,795 sheep." "Now how did he figure that out?" Ed wondered as the man selected an animal, slung it over his shoulder and turned to leave. "Wait," called Ed. "If I can guess your occupation, can I have that animal back?" "Sure," said the man. "You're a government bureaucrat." "How did you figure that out?" asked the stunned man. "Well," grinned Ed, "put my dog down and I'll tell you."

SCRIPTURE

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever (Psalm 23 RSV).

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul (Psalm 23:2-3a NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved passages of the Bible. It speaks directly to the joys and fears of any human being. It reminds us of the goodness of the Lord toward his people. We are like sheep under the care and guidance of the Divine Shepherd.

The opening verse tells us of the Shepherd's provision; and the next three phrases speak of the Shepherd's peace:

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul (Psalm 23:2-3a NRSV).

What a wonderful image of contentment and peace is found here. What a contrast this is to our anxious and stress-filled lives! We need the Shepherd's peace.

1. THE SHEPHERD'S PEACE BRINGS REST

The Shepherd's peace brings rest. This is the idea behind green pastures. It represents the end of the day. The verse does not say, "He makes me *eat* in green pastures" but "He makes me *lie down* in green pastures."

A shepherd's day starts early. He leads his flock through the rough pasturage to the more tender grasses. Finally, he looks for a shady place with the sweetest grasses where the sheep can lie down and rest.

Apparently it is quite difficult to make sheep lie down. They are stubborn, tend to wander off, are readily distracted and easily panicked. (Now why do you suppose God would use sheep to describe human beings? — A rhetorical question, obviously!)

Phillip Keller, author of the best-selling book, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23," tells us:

It is not generally known that sheep are so timid and easily panicked that even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. When one startled sheep runs in fright a dozen others will bolt with it in blind fear, not waiting to see what frightened them. One day a friend came to call on us from the city. She had a tiny Pekingese pup along. As she opened the car door the pup jumped out on the grass. Just one glimpse of the unexpected little dog was enough. In sheer terror over 200 of my sheep which were resting nearby leaped up and rushed off across the pasture.

Sheep need rest but they will not rest if they are distracted or afraid. Keller continues:

In the course of time I came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep as to see me in the field. The presence of their master and owner and protector put them at ease as nothing else could do, and this applied day and night.

Like sheep, we cannot rest if we are preoccupied with worry and fear. Nor can we look to the world to ease our fears and give us peace of mind. Peace comes from recognizing the presence of the Shepherd. There is no substitute for an awareness that the Shepherd is nearby. If we have the Shepherd's peace then we can find rest for our souls.

Jesus said:

"My peace I leave you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives give I to you" (John 14:27).

How is it that we can have peace when so much of the time we are in conflict with others, with God and even with ourselves, in our minds and bodies? The answer is found in the kind of

peace that Christ gives.

It means, first of all, peace with God. This is a gift from God to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul writes:

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us" (Rom 5:1 NLT).

Secondly, the peace that Christ gives is not based on worldly circumstances but is felt from within and is the assurance of a fuller peace to come. From Jesus we hear:

"I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world" (John 16:33 THE MESSAGE).

Thirdly, it is the peace that comes from knowing that Lord is always with us and will never forsake us. I read a story about a widower who went to a monument company to arrange for a marker for his wife's grave. He told the salesperson to put the words "Rest in Peace" on both sides. After it was completed, the man went out to the cemetery to see the marker. And there on the front of the gravestone were these six words, "Rest in Peace on Both Sides." The article did not say how the man reacted. Maybe he was upset or maybe not. But if you think about it, there is a lot of truth to what was put on the marker. We can rest in the Lord's peace on both sides.

2. THE SHEPHERD'S PEACE BRINGS SATISFACTION

The Shepherd's peace brings satisfaction. It is like a drink of cool, fresh water. It fulfills what we need in a way that is lasting and profound.

Getting sheep to drink the right kind of water is quite a challenge. On the one hand, sheep are terrified of moving water. They are poor swimmers and if their coats become soaked the excess weight means they drown. So a shepherd has to find calm water where the sheep can safely drink. The text says, "He leads me beside *still* waters."

On the other hand, sheep are interested in *any* water that is not moving, even water that is not good for them to drink. They do not seem to care if it is dirty or polluted or teeming with parasites. So the shepherd must be careful to lead them to clean, fresh water that is good for them.

Like sheep, we have a tendency to look to the wrong sources to meet our deepest needs. Just over forty years ago (1965), The Rolling Stones came out with their first international number one hit, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction". According to Mick Jagger, who wrote the lyrics, the song is about alienation from commercialized culture, an inability to find anything authentic, anything that satisfies the deepest longings of the human soul.

I would have to say that the situation has not improved since then. Social psychologist David G. Myers of Hope College tells us in his book, "The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty," that since 1960:

"...We have less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal contentment, less vocational security, more crime (even after the recent decline), and more demoralized children."

The things of this world cannot truly satisfy our spiritual thirst and we are paying the price for our metaphysical dehydration. The Bible says:

"God has set eternity in our hearts" (Ecc 3:11).

This creates a spiritual thirst that can only be satisfied by God himself. Listen to what Jesus told the woman at the well:

"Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14 NRSV).

3. THE SHEPHERD'S PEACE BRINGS JOY

The Shepherd's peace brings joy. This is the meaning of a restored soul. David says, "He restores my soul." The Hebrew term has to do with bringing something back to its original capacity. In this case, the capacity to enjoy. Souls were made for joy. A restored soul is one that has not only learned to enjoy the gifts of God but, more importantly, God himself.

What makes for the ability to enjoy God and the things of God? The Biblical concept of joy is intricately related to the act of rejoicing. Joy is a VERB. Paul says:

"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say rejoice" (Philippians 4:4).

Rejoice means to celebrate that there is such a thing as goodness and that goodness will triumph. It may look bad now, but you know that someday it will change. Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever (2 Cor 4:16-18 THE MESSAGE).

This kind of joy is uniquely Christian. Samuel Shoemaker once said that the distinguishing mark of the Christian is not faith or even love, but joy. Jesus said:

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

Much happiness is passive. We wait for the right circumstances to come along. We wait for people to do things which please us.

Joy, on the other hand, is not passive. It does not wait for all the circumstances to line up. It is an action that affirms God’s goodness right at the start.

Our English word happiness gives itself away. The root word is *hap* and it means “chance.” Our culture teaches us that happiness depends on circumstances. If you are lucky you will be happy but if you are unlucky you will be unhappy.

Biblical joy is independent of circumstances. Look at The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Jesus speaks of profound joy in the context of impoverishment, grief, loss, conflict and even persecution. If biblical joy does not derive from worldly circumstances then it cannot be destroyed by them either.

The Hebrew term for this joy is found in the Psalms where it says:

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night (Psalm 1:1-2 NLT).

It has the sense of, “Congratulations, you are on the right track!” The person in Psalm 1 has the right priorities and their destination is assured.

If you have ever been lost in the woods and then suddenly come upon a familiar landmark then you know something of this kind of joy. You know you are going to make it home. Christians can rejoice because they know they are going to make it home. The Shepherd will make it so.

CONCLUSION

You and I are so much like sheep. We need a shepherd. Only in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, do we find the peace that brings a healing rest; a lasting satisfaction; and an irrepressible joy. If you want peace, follow the Shepherd.