

THE GOODNESS OF THE LORD
A SERIES ON THE 23RD PSALM
(5) THE SHEPHERD'S PLACE

Psalm 23: 5b-6
Jeffrey S. Carlson
October 25, 2009

PROLOGUE

David was a shepherd. He tended sheep. He had a knack for caring for these creatures who were often helpless and easily led astray.

There is something about a shepherd that tells us something about God. God is like a shepherd. David discovered this and later he would pen the immortal words that we know as Psalm 23. God is very much concerned about those of us who are often helpless and easily led astray.

SCRIPTURE

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley I'm not afraid when you walk by my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life. (Psalm 23 MESSAGE).

You anoint 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 my whole life long (Psalm 23:5b-6 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23 is one of the best known, best loved passages of the Bible. And as we have seen throughout this series, it speaks directly to the joys and fears of being human. 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.

David concludes the psalm by saying:

You anoint 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 my whole life long (Psalm 23:5b-6 NRSV).

Through the psalm we see that we are offered a place with the Divine Shepherd. The closing words give us a glimpse of what the Shepherd's place is like.

1. A PLACE OF WELCOME AND RELIEF

The text says, "You anoint my head with oil." This tells us that the Shepherd's place is a place of welcome and relief.

Flying insects plague sheep in the summer months. Oil is a natural bug repellent and it is also a soothing lotion that aids in healing the skin. The shepherds of the ancient Near East used a mixture of oil, sulfur, and spices applied especially around the head. The shepherd would use this mixture to care for the sheep.

But the image here may not be so much a sheep getting tended to by a shepherd but a human guest made welcome in a shepherd's home, which could either be a tent in summer or a house in winter. Pouring oil on someone's head was an act of hospitality (see Luke 7:46), offering a way for guests to clean and refresh themselves. David, perhaps recalling the hospitality of Barzillai the shepherd when David was on the run from Absalom, is grateful to God for welcoming him back into the fold.

God extends the same invitation to us. He does not do so reluctantly as though he can barely tolerate us, but graciously and generously because he loves us. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God is like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child (Isaiah 49:15). Jesus tells us that God is like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home (Luke 15:11-32).

Now according to the laws of hospitality, David would have also found refuge in Barzillai's tent. Those who sought David's destruction would be forbidden to even come near. This was a place of asylum. Would Absalom have honored this code had he caught up to David? Maybe so, but we do not know. In reality, no place on earth is completely safe. Ultimately, only God is our true refuge.

2. A PLACE OF SATISFACTION AND REJOICING

The passage says, "My cup overflows." The Shepherd's place is a place of satisfaction and rejoicing.

The caring shepherd provides more than the bare necessities to his sheep. He wants them fully satisfied and happy. He is willing to take the sheep to better grazing and water sources even if it involves risk.

Jesus was willing to risk his life for his sheep (John 10:15). If he was willing to give his life, he is also willing to give us anything that we need (Matthew 6:25-34). Paul says it this way:

If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? (Rom 8:32 MESSAGE).

Our Divine Shepherd wants us to know complete satisfaction and joy. David says that his

“cup overflows.” Apparently, sheep will not drink from half- empty containers, so the shepherd had to make sure that they overflowed with water. And the refreshment we are offered is of the overflowing kind, also. Jesus said:

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38 NRSV).

David knows that his “cup” will not always be full in this life, but he also knows he has the promise that the joy of the Lord, which the cup represents, will be his lifelong companion. This is similar to what Jesus said:

While you are in the world, you will have to suffer. But cheer up! I have defeated the world (Jn 16:33 CEV).

And elsewhere:

I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! (Jn 15:11 NLT).

3. A PLACE WHERE LOVE IS RELENTLESS

The next phrase in the psalm says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” The Shepherd’s place is a place where love is relentless.

Sheep, when properly managed and cared for, can aid in the fertility of the land, transforming wilderness into fertile fields. The good shepherd makes blessing follow his sheep.

We need to see that God's loving blessing on his people is not for our benefit alone. Often God's blessings extend from God's people and become blessings for others as well. We are blessed to be a blessing. Terry Muck makes this observation:

The figures would be very difficult to come by, but the facts of the case - such as the single-handed raising of the world's health quotient and life span by Christian medical missions, and the comparative freedom and level of justice enjoyed by people living in countries that have a majority of Christian people - are enormously satisfying to those of us who passionately believe in the health and growth of the Christian church.

In addition, consider that virtually every movement in civilization that has stressed mercy, care, giving and nurture finds the Christian faith at its wellspring. Where did hospitals originate? With the Christian faith. Where did care for orphans originate? With the Christian faith. Where did prison reform, women's rights, child labor laws, emancipation and a thousand other movements that lightened the load of humanity begin? With the Christian faith. Visit anywhere the Gospel has gone and you will find people who give and because there are people

who give, people live. We are blessed to be a blessing.

But before “goodness and mercy” can be blessings we give to others, they need to be blessings we have experienced. The irony is, before we come to know the Lord, we want little to do with goodness and mercy. You've probably heard about the little boy who came home from Sunday School crying and saying he never wanted to go to Sunday School ever again. His parents asked him what happened and he explained, "The teacher said, 'Good Mrs. Murphy was going to follow me all the days of my life.' I don't know who Good Mrs. Murphy is, but if she's going to follow me everywhere I go, then I'm not going back!"

Of course, the boy was confused about “goodness and mercy” thinking it was “Good Mrs. Murphy.” But he was correct in thinking this involved relentless pursuit. The phrase “follow me all the days of my life” is a mild translation of a Hebrew expression (*radaph*) meaning to “hunt down” or “chase after” without giving up. In fact, it was this verse from Psalm 23 that inspired Francis Thompson to write his now famous poem, “The Hound of Heaven.” The Neumann Press Book of Verse describes the poem this way:

As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and imperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace.

“The Hound of Heaven” had a profound influence on author J. R. R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*). This poem was also instrumental in bringing Dale Evans, wife of cowboy film star Roy Rogers, back to God. She said:

I saw that it told my own story of running and hiding from God, over eighteen years, of sunshine and shadow, toil and pleasure, success and defeat, trying hard to get out of my life the sound of those steady strong, haunting feet that followed me everywhere.

Have you ever felt the hound of heaven? No need to be afraid. God is not trying to harm you but to love you. And his is a relentless love.

4. A PLACE WHERE RELATIONSHIPS ARE RESTORED

The final words of the text say, “And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” The Shepherd’s place is a place where relationships are restored.

The Shepherd’s place is not easily defined in terms of time and space. It is not so much a location as it is a restored relationship with the One who made us. David found this out the hard way.

The phrase, “And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD”, is based more on the Greek translation of the Old Testament than on the original Hebrew. The Hebrew actually says, “I

will return to the house of the Lord.” While a fugitive in Gilead, David may have wondered if he would ever be able to return to Jerusalem and worship at the Temple. But at some point he realized that did not matter. One could return to the Lord at any time, in any place.

The “House of the Lord” was no longer just a physical structure in the capital city but a taste of everlasting fellowship with God. Old Testament scholar H. J. Krause defines the house of the Lord as an experience of the Lord’s salvation that means we can remain in the presence of God for all time. In a similar way, Walter Brueggemann writes, "it is not the place but the vitality of the relationship which transforms."

Jesus speaks more plainly when he says, "In my Father's house are many rooms" (Jn 14:2). By his Father's house he meant heaven. Jesus goes on to say, “I am going there to prepare a place for you.” We can believe that Christ is the Finisher of that which he has begun for he not only prepares a place for those of us who trust in him, he also prepares us for the place. Here is a great truth put in the simplest way. Here is the greatest hope for every believer. Heaven is where Jesus is. We do not need to speculate on what heaven will be like. It is enough to know that we will be forever with him and our loved ones in Christ.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 23 is a powerful declaration of trust in God. The vivid images from a concrete, common activity—shepherding—describes a caring, tender, welcoming God. In this song, David celebrates that he belongs to such a God. Indeed, all those who place their trust in the Divine Shepherd can rejoice with David that they belong to God.

The goodness of the Lord becomes even more clear in the life and ministry of Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep. He is the One who offers us provision, peace, purpose, protection and a place where we can be with God and God’s people forever. Place your trust in the Good Shepherd.