

THE GOOD SHEPHERD
A SERIES ON THE 23RD PSALM
(4) THE SHEPHERD'S PROTECTION

Psalm 23:4-5a
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October 21, 2018

PROLOGUE

The world is in desperate need of hope but short on answers. It is like the man who went into the hospital for tests, where he learned that he had several highly contagious incurable illnesses. He was quite upset and asked the doctor what he was to do. The doctor informed him there was only one way to treat him. He would receive a private room and would need to eat veal cutlets and pancakes every day. The patient liked pancakes and veal cutlets but asked, "Why do you want me to eat the same things every day? How will they help me?" The doctor answered, "Oh, they won't really help you. They're just easy to slide under the door to your room."

So the world cannot offer us much hope. The Good News is – Christ came to give us hope.

SCRIPTURE

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely 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 NRSV).

The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

Philosopher Paul Tillich described the human condition as one that always involves three fears: fear about guilt, fear about meaninglessness, and fear about death. For Tillich, to be human is to be afraid.

“Is there more to life than fear?” David believed so. He could declare:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 (Psalm 23:4-5a NRSV).

This passage from the 23rd Psalm speaks of the Divine Shepherd’s protection. This does not mean that David was spared the difficulties of life but that he learned the Lord was with him to see him through the difficulties of life. We need not be afraid, for nothing has the power to separate us from God. Our Shepherd protects us from such fear.

1. PROTECTION FROM THE FEAR OF GUILT

If we trust in the Shepherd we do not have to fear guilt.

Now part of the problem we have with guilt stems from a misunderstanding over the use of the word. Often when we speak of guilt we are referring to an emotion. It is the feeling of anxiety that accompanies our belief that we have violated our own standards of conscience. It is the emotion we experience when we believe we have done something wrong.

But there is also the objective use of the word guilt. It refers to the status of being out of conformity with the righteousness of God. If I break a commandment I incur guilt.

These two guilts do not necessarily go together. It is possible for someone to commit a heinous crime but feel no anxiety about it. On the other hand, someone may be filled with guilty feelings even though they have done nothing wrong.

When the Bible speaks of guilt it almost always does so in the second sense of the word. It refers to our objective status before God. We have violated God’s law. We have rebelled against his authority. We incur guilt. The Bible says:

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

If the event that triggered the writing of the 23rd Psalm was the rebellion of Absalom, as suggested earlier in this series, then there is much that falls into place. At some point David fled Jerusalem and headed for the sheep country of Gilead to the northeast. He would have been light with provisions but heavy with guilt — both kinds! He had turned from God and he knew it.

The physical danger awakened him to the greater danger of having neglected the Lord for so many years. Perhaps as king he had become complacent. There were no more Goliaths, and no more Sauls. He didn’t need God’s protection, or so he thought. But now he was desperate for a place of safety, wondering how he was ever going to patch things up with God or if that was even possible.

David did not find God. Instead, God came to David in the form of a shepherd from Gilead named Barzillai. Barzillai did not come empty-handed:

Here is a list of what [he] brought: sleeping mats, blankets, bowls, pottery jars, wheat, barley, flour, roasted grain, beans, lentils, honey, yogurt, sheep, and cheese (2 Sam 17:29 CEV).

In other words, Barzillai brought a sumptuous feast and plenty of provisions for David and those who fled with him. This was completely unexpected and completely undeserved. But this is the way God works. His mercies are new each day (Lam 3:22-23).

We do not know for sure, of course, but it does seem likely that David's encounter with Barzillai contributed to David's belief that the Lord was like a shepherd to him. From his experience he could say, "You, LORD, are my shepherd. I will never be in need." But he also said, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," and this confuses modern readers.

Perhaps it was as he reclined at Barzillai's table that David realized who else was in the tent. The Bible tells us that two other men came with Barzillai: Shobi and Machir. Shobi was an Ammonite. The Ammonites were the traditional and cruel enemies of the Israelites. Machir was the close, personal friend of the very man (Saul) who tried to kill David. Can you picture this in your mind? Barzillai the shepherd had set a table in the very presence of David's enemies!

But here is the amazing part that only God could have brought about. Shobi and Machir were not there to hurt David. They were there to help David any way they could. The irony must not have escaped David. He had prayed to God that God would save him from his enemies. God answered his prayer. He saved David from his enemies by turning those enemies into friends.

It's the kind of thing God delights in doing. It is the reason he sent his Son into the world. Paul says:

While we were God's enemies, he made us his friends through the death of his Son (Rom 5:10 NCV).

We were once God's enemies. But Christ came to redeem us. He took the punishment for our guilt. Through faith in Christ we receive the benefits of his death and our status before God changes. He declares that we are not guilty. So we never need fear guilt ever again.

But it does not stop there. God wants us to join him in the enemy changing business. The Apostle declares:

All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his

friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also (2 Corinthians 5:18 TEV).

So here is a paradoxical, counter-cultural, turn-the-world-upside-down type of instruction from our Divine Shepherd. We are to bring as many enemies to the heavenly banquet as possible and eat with them as friends.

2. PROTECTION FROM THE FEAR OF MEANINGLESSNESS

Trusting in the Divine Shepherd protects us from the fear of meaninglessness.

Charles Coulson tells about a Nazi concentration camp in Hungary during the Second World War where the prisoners were forced to work in a stench-laden factory that distilled human waste and garbage into a fuel additive for military use. One day the factory was bombed and destroyed.

The next morning the prisoners were given a new job: move a pile of sand from one end of the compound to the other end. The next day the job was repeated in reverse. In fact, day after day they had to move the same pile of sand from one end to the other. It was a pointless job and it soon had a macabre effect. Prisoners went insane, cried uncontrollably or threw themselves into the electrified fence.

There is a gruesome lesson to be gained from this. Human beings will cling to life so long as they believe their work has purpose even if that purpose is for a malevolent cause. But labor without meaning crushes the mind and spirit. Natural science can explain why human beings work to survive but cannot explain why we have to have purpose. The hunger for significance only makes sense if human beings are a reflection of a purposeful Creator.

I doubt very much if sheep contemplate their existence. Nevertheless, they are less afraid when they feel the presence of the shepherd. This serenity comes not from an intellectual apprehension of the shepherd but because of the specific, caring actions of the shepherd.

As human beings, we worry about the meaning of our existence. Fortunately, our Divine Shepherd has shown his love for us in specific, caring actions. First of all, we are created out of love. And the fact that we are created by God means we are related to God and it is in that relationship we find the meaning of our existence.

Secondly, we are redeemed out of love. The Lord demonstrated this when he came to us and clothed himself in our humanity. The Bible says:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8 NIV).

Jesus said:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11 NRSV).

Jesus clothed himself as the good shepherd to show his love for us. Now we do not know what David wore the day he arrived in Gilead but we do have a good idea of his attire when he was a young man working as a shepherd over his father's flock. He would have had a covering for his head held in place on a windy day with a length of camel hair chord. He would have worn a coarse shirt gathered at the waist with a leather belt. At night and on cold days he would have worn a sleeveless woolen garment. As a shepherd he would have carried four pieces of equipment: a rod and a staff (as mentioned in the 23rd Psalm) a sling, and a pouch.

The rod was a short club with flint or metal at the business end and a leather loop at the other through which the shepherd placed his wrist. It was used as a weapon against predators or even a human attacker.

The sling was the preferred weapon as one could engage a predator or attacker from a distance. David was skilled at the sling but his ability was not unique. The Benjaminites were known to be deadly accurate with their slings (Judg 20:16). It has been estimated that a skilled slinger could hurl stones up to three inches in diameter at more than one hundred miles per hour. It was especially valuable if they could do it left or right-handed (Judg. 20:16; 1 Chron. 12:2). But for shepherds, the sling was also used to guide the sheep, especially in the absence of sheep dogs. A well-placed projectile striking the ground just ahead of a wayward sheep could steer it back into the fold.

The pouch was made of leather and hung over the belt. The shepherd would carry things like grain, dried fruit, olives and cheese. Some of this was for the shepherd but some of it was also used as snacks to be hand fed to the sheep. These small tidbits of encouragement were one of the primary means of developing the bond between shepherd and flock.

But the item we most associate with the shepherds in Bible times is the staff. This was a longer stick or pole with a crook at one end used to rescue the sheep when they strayed into a dangerous place. In time, the shepherd's staff became a symbol for someone who truly represents the Lord —prophet (Ex. 4:2-4; 7:8-24; Judg. 6:21), priest (Num. 17:1-10), and king (Gen. 49:10 NRSV; Judg. 5:14 NRSV; Jer. 48:17; Rev. 2:27).

I can imagine that David felt a bit like a "dumb sheep" on his flight to Gilead. But the experience reminded him that the Lord was watching over him. The Divine Shepherd's rod protected him, the Shepherd's staff had rescued him, the Shepherd's sling guided him, and from the Shepherd's pouch he was fed. David's life meant something because he meant something to God. Our lives matter for the same reason.

3. PROTECTION FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH

Trusting in the Divine Shepherd protects us from the fear of death.

David would have crossed the Kidron Valley to get to Gilead (2 Sam 15:23). A portion of this valley as it gets near Jericho has steep walls and a narrow and treacherous floor. In modern times it is alternately known as the “valley of death” and the “valley of fire.” But whether or not these nicknames date back to David’s time is unknown.

The original Hebrew of the 23rd Psalm speaks of the “valley of shadows” or the “valley of gloom.” These words also came to represent death. “The valley of the shadow of death” is an appropriate translation.

It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for a shepherd to lead his flock through dark ravines in order to get to another pasture. In effect, David says, "and so it is with life." We often travel through “dark valleys,” but we need not be overcome with fear for the Shepherd is with us and is able to ward off any evil by his rod and staff. This does not mean that God shields us from every harmful circumstance but that nothing can separate us from Christ during these experiences (Rom 8:38-39).

Many Americans base their security on material possessions. But this is more of a gamble than people think. Chuck Swindoll tells of:

A missionary [who] was sitting at her second-story window when she was handed a letter from home. As she opened the letter, a crisp, new, ten-dollar bill fell out. She was pleasantly surprised, but as she read the letter her eyes were distracted by the movement of a shabbily dressed stranger down below, leaning against a post in front of the building. She couldn't get him off her mind. Thinking that he might be in greater financial stress than she, she slipped the bill into an envelope on which she quickly penned "Don't despair." She threw it out the window. The stranger below picked it up, read it, looked up, and smiled as he tipped his hat and went his way. The next day she was about to leave the house when a knock came at the door. She found the same shabbily dressed man smiling as he handed her a roll of bills. When she asked what they were for, he replied: "That's the sixty bucks you won, lady. Don't Despair paid five to one"

Material possessions are a poor basis for security. They can be lost, stolen or destroyed. Better to base your security on what the Lord can give you.

God brought David through the shadow of death. He will do the same for all those who trust in the Divine Shepherd. Christ died and lives again. So it shall be for those who die in the Lord. God will bring them with him. Jesus said Martha:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11:25 NRSV).

Death is not the last word. Christ has the last word. He has conquered sin and death and

raises his children to everlasting life.

CONCLUSION

“Is there more to life than fear?” We believe so. The Divine Shepherd meets every fear head on. He is the way out of guilt, the one who shows us the true meaning of our existence, and the one who gives us eternal life. He is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).