

Psalm Sundays

Text
Psalm 23

Topic
**You need not fear even when you find
you are in the valley of the shadow of death**

Title
***"Are You Reelin' In the Fears,
Goin' the Way That's Right?"***

The Call of the Wild is the big movie release this weekend. This latest interpretation features Harrison Ford. But the real star, the one who Jack London's story is about, is the dog, Buck. Sold without his owner's knowledge, Buck gets increasingly feral as he is constantly abused, and forced to fight for his survival.

Enter John Thornton, whose care for Buck leads him to love and become devoted to him. Buck learns to trust his master.

Psalm 23 talks, not about dogs, but about sheep. One commentator titled it, "A Sheep Looks at the Shepherd." In this psalm, the sheep learn that they can completely trust the Shepherd to provide all their needs.

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Psalm 23

*"Are You Reelin' In the Fears,
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The Bible identifies Jesus, figuratively, as the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, and the Chief Shepherd:

- 👤 Jesus identified Himself by saying, "I am the **Good Shepherd**" (John 10:11) Who would give His life for the "sheep" by dying on the Cross.
- 👤 In the letter to the Hebrew believers we read, "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that **great Shepherd** of the sheep..." (13:20).
- 👤 The apostle Peter called his Lord the **Chief Shepherd** (First Peter 5:4).

It is not uncommon for pastors to teach Psalm 22 as the Good Shepherd; Psalm 23 as the Great Shepherd; and Psalm 24 as the Chief Shepherd.

That Jesus is trustworthy to shepherd His sheep is beyond dispute. The question we each must face is, "Do I trust my Shepherd at all times?" The honest answer is, "No." We can therefore approach Psalm 23 as a sheep learning to completely trust their Good, Great, and Chief Shepherd.

One more introductory detail; something that gets overlooked. Psalm 23 may introduce a second figure besides the Shepherd. In verses five and six, some see the figure of a household, and its hospitality, rather than a flock.

In light of all this, I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 You Must Learn To Trust Your Trustworthy Shepherd**, and **#2 You Must Learn To Trust Your Trustworthy Servant**.

#1 - You Must Learn To Trust Your Trustworthy Shepherd (v1-4)

Trust is something that must be... tested. We can't know if we trust the Lord until we're in a circumstance where we must.

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The kind of trust I have in mind is the kind Asaph came to in Psalm 73. It's the famous psalm where Asaph, probably recovering from a heart attack, could not accept that the wicked prosper while he, God's faithful servant, suffered. By the end of the psalm, nothing has changed except his understand and he proclaims in the last verse, "But *it is* good for me to draw near to God; **I have put my trust in the Lord GOD**, That I may declare all Your works" (v28).

He struggled in his pain, but sought the Lord, and he came to a place where he trusted the Lord completely.

Psa 23:1 A Psalm of David. The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

There's a book you should read. It's by Phillip Keller, titled, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm Twenty-three*. It's an enduring, endearing, modern classic. From his own experiences as a shepherd in (I think) Africa, Keller explains each element of the Psalm 23 as they relate to actual shepherding, then makes spiritual connections.

I don't want to simply rehearse what Keller said. I want to stick to the theme of our learning to completely trust the Shepherd. One reason it's important: Right here in the first verse we are challenged by the words, "I shall not want."

Is that true of you? Do you *never* "want" for anything? While we are contemplating that, look at two other declarations in the psalm:

- 👤 David goes on to describe "still waters." Yet do we not often find ourselves in the storms of life?
- 👤 Likewise the "green pastures" are often brown, or weed-filled. You get the idea.

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It can't be wishful thinking; or some sort of 'positive confession,' that we say things are still when we're in the storm. And as Asaph initially thought, the grass can be greener on the other side.

"I shall not want." Albert Barnes suggests that "this is the main idea in the psalm." There are at least two ways commentators approach these words:

1. The Pulpit Commentary says, "David was experiencing a time of rest and refreshment, of prosperity and abundance. His thoughts are happy thoughts - he lacks nothing; he has no fear; God's mercy and goodness are with him; and he feels assured that they will continue with him all the days of his life; he has but one desire for the future, to dwell in the house of *God* - *i.e.* in the presence of God, for ever." According to this line of reasoning, Psalm 23 is applicable for times of prosperity. That doesn't sound right.
2. OR: These words can not only always be true, but are even more true in times of suffering. Indeed, it is in that context that we most encounter this psalm. I can think of barely a handful of memorial services I've officiated where this psalm didn't appear as a strong comfort to those grieving.

We pick door #2 (as it were), taking these words for our comfort when troubled.

It is helpful to see Jesus as reciting this psalm, and receiving its comfort. As we suggested last time, on the Cross He may have recited (or sung) Psalm 22:1 all the way through Psalm 31:5.

👤 Psalm 21 - "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken Me?"

👤 Psalm 31:5 - "Into Your hand I commit my spirit."

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Think briefly of what we call His passion on the Cross. Then hear Jesus singing the Shepherd's Psalm. It's claims were true, for Him, on the Cross. As a man, Jesus completely trusted His Father to shepherd Him through the valley of the shadow of death. He could fear no evil, even surrounded by sinister supernatural enemies.

Plus - Just as Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of Psalm 22, on the Cross and afterward, He was fulfilling His own role as the Great Shepherd, giving His life for the sheep. God the Father was supplying Him with grace.

How is it "I shall not want?" As the Good Shepherd, Jesus would take the place of His sheep and be led to the slaughter. Three days later, He arose from the dead. Forty days later, He ascended into Heaven.

If my math is right, ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost, He sent upon His gathered followers - His flock - the promise of the Father. He sent God the Holy Spirit to permanently indwell all those who believed in Him; and all those throughout the age who would believe their testimony.

Since He was not spared but delivered up for us all, we can be sure we will not "want," meaning *lack*, anything we need to *endure* or *enjoy* our actual circumstances - whether they be blessings or buffetings.

Psa 23:2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

Food. Water. Key needs of the flock. It is the job of the shepherd to provide them.

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Looking at these words from our New Covenant relationship with God, our food is what? Yes - the Word of God.

We further have the indwelling Holy Spirit as living water. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be like torrents of living water - not "still." Different water metaphors:

- 👤 "Still" indicates the Holy Spirit is like *deep* water, e.g., an inexhaustible supply.
- 👤 I think we can accurately say that the Holy Spirit is both inexhaustible **and** a torrent.

The fact is, we are told that we have all the spiritual resources we require at any particular moment for living-out a godly life in our circumstances:

- 👤 We are promised by the apostle Paul that Jesus has, "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places*" (Ephesians 1:3).
- 👤 Listening again to Peter, he promises, "as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature" (Second Peter 1:3-4).

Our problem seems to be that we won't believe that God has truly enabled us to walk with Him. If we did, there'd be a lot fewer Christian self-help books and conferences.

(You can tell I'm not a big fan of "how to" books when it comes to walking with Jesus. It is because I think that they can get in the way of simple belief and obedience).

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At this year's Beloveds Banquet I shared from that most romantic of books, Deuteronomy:

"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (30:11-14).

The way of obedience was not to be found by some journey, or radical discovery. It was - and it is - present with us, as believers.

We can be full in the famine; we can be still in the storm. Our Good, Great, Chief Shepherd has provided all we need.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered everyone in his kingdom to bow down to his golden image. Three young Jews, captives from their teens, boldly refused. They uttered one of the greatest expressions of trust ever spoken:

They said, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to talk about this anymore. We might be thrown into the blazing furnace. But the God we serve is able to bring us out of it alive. He will save us from your powerful hand. "But we want you to know this. Even if we knew that our God wouldn't save us, we still wouldn't serve your gods. We wouldn't worship the gold statue you set up" (Daniel 3:16-18).

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The king had them thrown into a furnace that had been heated seven-times greater than normal. It was so hot that on the approach the men charged with throwing them into it were burned to death.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were seen walking safely in the furnace. A fourth Person was with them, of whom the king said, "the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25).

It was the original "fiery trial." The apostle Peter said of our trials, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the **fiery trial** which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (First Peter 4:12-13).

We *will* partake of His sufferings, and we can do it through His Word and His Spirit empowering and enabling us.

Psa 23:3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

I love those restoration shows. Never seen them "restore [a] soul," though.

I know I'm quoting quite a bit, but, hey, if someone says it better, why not. Plus it keeps me from simply plagiarizing. Albert Barnes:

The word "soul" here means life, or spirit, and not the soul in the strict sense in which the term is now used. It refers to the spirit when exhausted, weary, or sad; and the meaning is, that God quickens or vivifies the spirit when thus exhausted. The reference is not to the soul as wandering or backsliding from God, but to the life or spirit as exhausted, wearied, troubled, anxious, worn

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down with care and toil. The heart, thus exhausted, He re-animates. He brings back its vigor. He encourages it; excites it to new effort; fills it with new joy.

“Burn-out” got so over-used that it is no longer a valid description. But for our purposes, I think we can call what Barnes describes as “spiritual burnout.” If, in fact, you have an inexhaustible supply of the Spirit, how is it you burn-out?

It must be that we are refueling from the wrong source. Gasoline... Diesel... Propane... Electricity. These are all sources of fuel for motor vehicles. They are not interchangeable. A little over a year ago, a video went viral of a woman at a gas station trying to figure out how to fill-up her Tesla.

You must “refuel” by relying on the promised Holy Spirit, and not by the world’s programs, or even so-called Christian programs that are based on your works.

The Holy Spirit is the only fuel by which Jesus “can [lead] me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.” We simply cannot live the Christian life in our own strength. In order to bring glory to “His name’s sake,” we must yield to Him.

Psa 23:4 Yea, though 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.

Perhaps no words in human history have brought so much comfort, and joy, to the hearts of believers as they approach death. The truth of the Good, Great, and Chief Shepherd receiving you into Heaven is priceless, timeless, full of grace and mercy.

“Shadow.”

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The word is applicable to any path of gloom or sadness; any scene of trouble or sorrow; any dark and dangerous way. It is therefore applicable not merely to death itself - though it encompasses that - but to *any* or *all* the dark, the dangerous, and the gloomy paths which we tread in life. To ways of sadness, solitude, and sorrow. All along those paths God will be a safe and certain guide.

Remember the *No Fear* campaign? Believers are the original "fear not's." The words, "Fear not," or "Do not fear," occur nearly 100 times in the Bible.

But I DO fear. Well, then I need to believe two things:

1. My Shepherd is "with me."
2. His implements will "comfort me."

The One who experienced Gethsemane for me is with me in **my** darkest times.

I won't go into all the masterful ways a shepherd uses the "rod and staff." For our purposes today, they represent *any* and *all* of the resources that can come to us thanks to Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

Like Asaph, who was in his valley of the shadow of death, we find God and we'll find comfort.

Death Valley Days are frightening. It can be so dark, you can't see to move. Believe that Jesus can never leave you or forsake you. Trust and obey. It may take time... But seek no other way. All other methods, or programs, are off-road detours.

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#2 - You Must Learn To Trust Your Trustworthy Servant (v5-6)

It is certainly possible to see the next two verses as applying to the shepherd and his care for the sheep; but it seems more about Eastern hospitality. In that figure, the Shepherd is also the Servant of those He shelters in His household.

Psa 23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

- 👤 "Table" could relate to what we'd call "tableland."
- 👤 The "enemies" could be bears and wolves and lions.
- 👤 It's true that shepherds use "oil" on the sheep.

But it seems that the *anointing* with oil, and especially the "cup," are more likely images drawn from receiving guests into your home.

Hospitality, in the biblical sense, is not simply entertaining. You can be great at entertaining, but not have a gift of hospitality.

Let me give you an example. When the two angels came to destroy Sodom, Lot insisted they come within his house. He did it to protect them. (The fact that they could protect themselves is not the point. Lot didn't know they were powerful spiritual beings).

When the men of Sodom came demanding that Lot surrender what they thought were two men, it becomes clear in their conversation that Lot is responsible for defending them, at any cost (Genesis 19). His solution was not godly; but it shows the lengths you must be willing to go to in order to uphold hospitality.

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Eastern hospitality could involve dying to defend your guests. So, yeah, it's not just entertaining.

The "table" represents fellowship. The household of the Lord, of which you become a member when you are saved by grace, is a place of fellowship, with Jesus, and with His people.

After all, are we not looking forward to a table - called the Marriage Supper?

As long as we are in the world, we are surrounded by enemies - both worldly and other-worldly. One of the strategies of our enemies is to draw us away from the table the Lord sets to the seeming delicacies of the world.

Everybody's on a diet of some sort. I'm not making fun; just using it to make a point. **Stick to your spiritual diet and exercise.** Nothing offered by your enemies can nourish you. God's bread, milk, meat, and honey are more than sufficient.

I find it strange, but it was the custom to pour oil over the head of your guests. To us, it can represent the awareness that the Holy Spirit that was promised is now **poured-out** on us.

No one wants an overflowing cup. It's not talking about spillage.

It represents a cup that cannot be exhausted. It's always full - no matter how deep you drink of it. The idea the psalmist seems to be trying to get across is that of *abundance*.

Remember Mama Celeste? She'd say of her frozen pizza, "Abbondonza."

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If you drink, so to speak, of the cup of the world, you'll remain thirsty. Jesus has water that will go on quenching your thirst forever.

Psa 23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

Ever been followed? Once you get the feeling you're being followed, you keep looking back.

As a believer, you *are* being followed. Every time you look back, you can see the "goodness and mercy" of the Lord.

- 👤 His "goodness" certainly includes the grace by which you are saved.
- 👤 His "mercy" is the constant companion that reminds you God doesn't give you what you deserve, on account of Jesus taking your place on the Cross.

As far as the "house of the Lord," you are in it now, in this life; and you will be in it "forever." Whether through death and resurrection, or by rapture - we're in His household and going home.

As the householder, Jesus serves you. Not the way a genii does, by granting wishes. No, He protects, He feeds, He follows. You're surrounded, true. But greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.

Do you completely trust Jesus? Not always, but you learn to. But in order to learn, you must be in circumstances where trust is tested.

Did you know that there are feral sheep? New Zealand; sheep were introduced by European settlers into the wild in the 1700's. You can hunt them.

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We start out feral: wild, undisciplined, dangerous, diseased... Sinners. The Good, Great, Chief Shepherd seeks us out and, like Jack London's Buck, over time we learn to trust Him.

We still hear, as it were, the call of the wild; but we refuse it on account of Who leads us.

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