

TAKE ME HOME

A Message About God's Household The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 8)

I

As we come this morning to the close of our study on the 23rd Psalm, let me make a confession to you. I have personally struggled with the meaning of the last verse. Up to that point I am right with David. I get it when he says that the Lord is his shepherd. I mean, I understand that everyone has to have something or someone that is their ultimate source of guidance and confidence. For some people its Wall Street or their mom. For others it's an astrology chart or their own intuition. For me, it's God. The God whose plan I read about in this book, whose personality is enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, whose power I encounter in day-to-day life, He is my shepherd.

No, I don't struggle with that. Nor do I have any big problems with the stuff that follows - the part about how the Good Shepherd meets our needs. Since asking Christ to take over the Shepherding role in my life nearly 30 years ago, He's helped me to separate my genuine wants from my vain wishes, and again and again I've seen my needs met. Along the way, the Lord has guided me through some incredibly green pastures -- schools, travel, life experiences, and more that have fed my mind and heart. When my spirit has gotten too dry, God has led me to friends, fellowship groups, great books and worship experiences that have restored my parched soul like deep, still waters.

Don't get me wrong, it hasn't been happy trails all the time. I could tell you about some shadowed valleys too -- times of financial crisis, relationship disasters, deep depressions, and worse -- moments when I couldn't see where I was going, when it was all I could do to just keep putting one foot front of the other. But somehow the Shepherd brought me through to higher ground. Time and again I've been grateful for the staff of God's Holy Spirit. It has regularly given my conscience the gentle poke or dramatic hook I needed to get me back on the right path.

God has also proven immensely faithful to me in the presence of my enemies. As I've learned to keep the rod of His Word close at hand, it's often been an excellent defense against the moral temptations and fragrant deceptions that lurk along the path. When the parasites of worry and guilt, or the pressure of contentious peers have made me frantic, the Lord has often anointed my mind with the soothing, protecting oil of His Promises. Even when the lush tablelands of success have turned frigidly stormy, I have found the cup of God's Grace warming me up within and overflowing. No, I think I understand what the Psalmist is saying in all of *these* things.

II

It's what he says here at the end that I've found awfully confusing, and I bet I'm not alone. The text reads: "**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of**

my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Now, there are some people who say that this means exactly what, at first blush, it *seems* to say -- namely that if the Lord is your Shepherd your life will be one uninterrupted parade of blessings, a constant party in the house of joy.

There are times in our walk through the pastures of life when it looks like it might actually work that way, aren't there? When we've got a decent job or some financial security... When our marriage is in tune and our kids are doing fine... When we are relatively healthy and reasonably happy... it's not hard to say God is good and so am I: **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”**

But then there are other parts of the pasture, periods when the job dries up and there isn't enough cash or even credit to cover the bills; when the marriage goes sour and the kids start to develop character traits like your in-laws -- God forbid!. There are times when the doctor's report is very bad, or your precious loved one dies, or the friend you thought you could count on really lets you down. If you've taken that phrase in Psalm 23 at face value, then there are only two possible responses to such happenings. You've got to conclude that either you aren't trusting the Lord enough, or you can't really trust the Shepherd. Have you ever been in a place like that?

III

If you have or are, then it may be helpful to know what Psalm 23 is *really* saying in that final verse about goodness and mercy. To understand, you've got to remember that the Psalm has been figuratively tracing the annual journey of the shepherd and his sheep. The Psalm begins in the green pastures and still waters of the meadows near the shepherd's ranch, and then follows them up into the hills. Towards the end of the Psalm, the shepherd is leading his flock down from the high tablelands of summer, and through the rains of Autumn. By the last verse, the flock is nearing home, and the toughest part of the journey.

It is early winter now. Rain has given way to sleet and snow. Now, remember how skittish sheep are. There were times in this portion of the trip when the storms were so bad that the flock would lose sight of the shepherd, when the winds would even drown out the shepherd's voice. It was not uncommon for the flock to become so worried about their own course and so doubtful about the continued care of the Shepherd, that they would stop dead in their tracks, and refuse to go further.

It was then that the Good Shepherd relied on his favorite instruments to reassure the sheep and keep them moving towards home. Can you guess what those instruments were? His dogs! One of them would follow the sheep on the left and one of them would follow them on the right. Together they would bark at the flock, urging them onward, reminding them that they had not been forgotten, that the Shepherd was still there. I'm told that it was usually enough to get them home.

IV

It still is. You see, my friends, the Shepherd is taking you and me home too. Whether you can see Him or not, whether it's the early Springtime or the late Winter of your life, you are on a journey with God. This whole journey is designed to build your reliance upon Him, so that when you go one day to **"dwell in the house of the Lord forever"** you will truly feel "at home" with the Shepherd. Because life's storms sometimes get pretty thick, because sometimes you and I get pretty distracted, all through the journey, the Shepherd has been following you with his two dogs, as a constant reminder of his presence.

Have you been aware of them? They've got names, you know. They're called **"Goodness"** and **"Mercy."** Let me describe these heavenly hounds. **"Goodness"** is the willingness to offer blessings to someone when they do not deserve them. And **"Mercy"** is the willingness to withhold judgment from someone when he or she does deserve it.

In the stress of family life, that's not always easy to do. I'm reminded of the third-grade teacher who asked her class what each of them wanted to become when they grew up. "President." "A fireman." "A teacher." One by one they answered until it came Billy's turn. The teacher asked: "Billy, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Billy responded: "Possible." "Possible?" asked the teacher. "Yes," said Billy. "Everybody's always telling me I'm impossible. When I grow up I want to become possible."

Now that little boy may have been quite a handful. But it's amazing what it means to even a pig-pen sheep to encounter a goodness that persistently offers blessing even when on the surface it may not appear deserved. I think of the story of the little girl who, while visiting her grandparent's home, broke a vase that was a cherished heirloom. Because she'd often been told its value, the child cried out in despair when she broke it. Her granddad came running. The child was surprised to see not anger but relief on her grandfather's face. "I thought you were hurt," her grandpa said, gathering her into his arms. Looking back on that event later, the child now a grown woman said: "That was the day I came to see that I was the family treasure." **"Goodness"** is the willingness to offer blessings to someone even when they, by their actions or inactions, may not deserve them.

Mercy has extraordinary influence too. Again, "mercy" is the willingness to withhold judgment from someone when he or she does deserve it. At the Pan American Games many years ago, the United States' champion diver, Greg Louganis, was asked how he coped with the stress of international diving competition. He replied that he climbs to the board, takes a deep breath, and thinks: "Even if I blow this dive completely, my mother will still love me." It's amazing how often the knowledge that such mercy followed him, apparently gave Louganis the confidence he needed to step forward after a failure and make a perfect dive.

How about you? Have you heard the voice of goodness? How about mercy? Do you realize how long they have been following you? They're following you now, and if you

listen hard above the wind and clamor of your life you will hear them barking out the Shepherd's direction, urging you to take courage, to not give up, to keep on moving as you find your way home.

V

Years ago a young mother was making her way across the hills of South Wales, carrying her tiny baby in her arms, when she was overtaken by a blinding blizzard. She never reached her final destination. A day later, when the storm had subsided, her body was found by searchers beneath a mound of snow. What staggered the rescuers was that before her death, she had apparently taken off all her outer clothing, wrapped them around her baby, and then made of her body a mound over her infant child. When the rescuers unwrapped the child, to their astonishment and joy, they found him alive and well. That little lamb grew up to be David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of England -- one of the greatest Shepherds that Britain ever had.

What might we grow up to be if we could take in the full wonder of that great love with which we have been loved? What might we be inspired to become if we could have been there when Evil snarled through fanged teeth in Calvary's storm: "Leave them for me and save yourself!" Only to hear Jesus say: "No, for I am the Good Shepherd and these are my lambs." Oh, it's hard to take this great love in, I know that. Sometimes it's hard to hear the voice of Jesus or see his face amidst life's storms. Sometimes, all we have is the barking of that goodness and mercy that keeps following us all, reminding all of us, that we're not alone -- that it won't be long before we are finally home. **"Let not your hearts be troubled,"** Jesus once said. **"Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go, I will come back, and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."**

So in the meantime, let's not forget that great love. Let's keep reminding each other when the way is long and the valleys are deep. Let's say to ourselves and one another: **"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. You rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen."**

Let us pray...

Lord, we remember how you said: **“I am the way, the truth, and the life,”** said Jesus. **“I am the Gate for the Sheep. If anyone enters in by me, they shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. For I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.”** If there are any sheep living on the other side of the fence who want what only the Good Shepherd can provide... Thank you that you have made yourself the Gate for the Sheep and the Way home. In thy name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ John 14:1-4