

Psalm 23 Revelation 7:13-17 ***“From Valleys of Trouble to Doors of Hope”*** by Michael Burkley, August 6, 2022

Last week I preached on Psalm 23, but I stopped part-way through, before I got to that “darkest valley,” the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” as the Revised Standard Version calls it. I think we often want to do just that: talk about God’s Presence in our lives and God’s Provision, God’s providing for all of our needs, but then we don’t want to talk about the dark times, the scary times when the walls seem to be closing in on us, with danger seems to lurk around every rock and when we’re traveling through a deep, dark and frightening valley of not-life.

But I’m going to get to that part today, never fear! But first, an overview again of Psalm 23. It’s divided up into five parts, the first and the last covering God’s Presence with us, the second and the fourth parts talking about how God provides for us, and the middle part telling us of how God protects us when it seems like the whole world is arrayed against us.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing that I need” is the first part, acting as an introduction to the whole psalm. The LORD, the God who revealed himself to the shepherd Moses in the burning bush, the one who wants us to know God and to walk with God is our Shepherd. The Shepherd stays with the sheep, guiding them, providing for them, protecting them, the one who is present with them, and that’s the kind of God we have.

The second section tells of our providing God, this God, this Shepherd, is the one who brings us into green pastures and beside still waters—places of health and safety. We might see this and think that God is like a shepherd, but really, the more accurate idea is that a shepherd is like God. We learn to protect and nourish and value relationships because that’s the kind of God the Lord is, and we, as people, are made in the image of God, to be God’s representatives in this world, to act as God acts, to walk in paths of righteousness, not of self-righteousness, but the way of justice, mercy and humbleness that God maps out before us, following the Lord as sheep follow their shepherd.

The next section of the Psalm is the pivot point of the Psalm, the center on which the whole Psalm balances and on which it moves from illustration to actuality. It’s the part of the Psalm that rejoices in the protection the Shepherd provides. We all know it’s wonderful to follow the shepherd when everything is green pastures and still waters and powerful shepherds guarding and guiding us, but it is not so wonderful when sometimes, whether you’re a sheep or a person, you have to go through the deepest, darkest, most death-filled valleys of life.

I’ve been told that in the wilderness of Israel there are valleys, canyons really, where the sun almost never shines, where there’s a twilight caused by the narrow width and the sharp depth of the cut in the earth. Those are dangerous places for sheep because a predator can lurk there and attack the sheep and the sheep would have nowhere to go except down under their teeth and claws. If I were a sheep, I wouldn’t want to go through a valley like that on my own, but I’d go if the shepherd led me. Psalm 23 says that the sheep don’t have any fear of destructive evil, even when they have to walk through the darkest valley, a valley that looms huge with the threat of death, because their shepherd goes with them. Why? What’s so great about the shepherd? The poem says the shepherd has a rod and a staff at hand. Why does that comfort the sheep? We tend to think of rods in connection with sayings like “spare the rod and spoil the child,” with the rod an instrument of punishment. By the way, people think that quote is in the Bible, but it isn’t. The rod that Psalm 23 is talking about is not a means of punishing the sheep but of trouncing the wolf, lion or bear attempting to eat the sheep. The rod was a cudgel, a club that the shepherd would use against anything that threatened his sheep. The staff mentioned was the walking stick that the shepherd used to guide the sheep and with its curved end to pull the sheep to safety when they were going or had gone someplace dangerous. What comforts the sheep is seeing that the shepherd has the means to protect them from external attacks *and* from their own foolishness.

And it’s here, in this darkest valley of life, this balance point in the Psalm, that the Psalm pivots from experiencing life as a sheep to experiencing life as a human being, a human being who sometimes has to go through the deepest, darkest, most death-filled valleys of life. The sheep of this Psalm who are in need of a good shepherd become more than just sheep. They become us, in need of the Good Shepherd to guide us safely through all that stands against us. And what the shepherd does for the sheep, our Lord does for us because he loves us. In Revelation 7 we can see who this Shepherd is. He is powerful Lion of the Tribe of Judah, this King, who protects the flock. This King is also the Lamb that faced his own deepest valley of death and was killed but is now alive and the conquering hero who can bring victory to his people, to us.

We might not always understand or like what our Shepherd does (remember the sheep dip!), but this Psalm, and from all of God’s Word to us, reminds us that we have a shepherd who loves us even to the point of dying for us, that our shepherd has everything needed to protect us and guide us. That begins when we say, “The LORD is my shepherd.” Have you said that and tried to live it out?

It’s interesting to look at what God can do to some of the dark valleys mentioned in Scripture. In Joshua 7 Joshua talks about the Valley of Achor, which means “the Valley of Troubles” because some of God’s people were willfully disobeying the Lord to gain an advantage for themselves. There were bad memories of that valley, but God isn’t limited by bad memories. Isaiah (65:10) points ahead to the time when that same Valley of Achor, that *Valley of Troubles* will become a

place of blessing, a place for livestock to lie down in peace. How's that to happen? The Lord will do it, because in that day God's people will seek the Lord. Hosea (2:15) says that the Valley of Achor, the *Valley of Troubles* will be made into a door of hope. Why? Because God still seeks for a faithful people, and in finding us will make us into the People that the Lord seeks. Psalm 84 talks about how when we travel through the Valley of Weeping (84:6), that it will be transformed into a life-giving place because we trust in the Lord. Trusting God: that's how the deep darkness of the troubles of our lives can be turned into safe places, into doors of hope, into transformative times of life, all by trusting in the shepherd who will wipe every tear from our eyes.

What deep valleys of life have you gone through, are you going through? We as a world are traveling through a deep dark valley right now: this ongoing pandemic, droughts, floods, fighting, fears. There is so much that threatens to separate us and so little, that we recognize, that draws us together. It's a hard time, and in hard times our memories tend to fly away. We forget that the Lord is still our Shepherd and all that goes along with that. That's why we need to take all of the reminders we can get to sharpen our memory. Worship is one of those reminders. Every time we worship with other believers we're reminded that we are all part of the Shepherd's flock. Reading from the Bible is another reminder. It's been said that the Bible is God's love letter to his people. In reading the Bible we can see God's tremendous and powerful love for us, the joy God has when we return his love and God's pain and grief when we turn away from him. In the Bible we can see God's love in sending Jesus, the Lamb of God who is the powerful Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and Jesus' love by coming to save us. And in Jesus we can see God the Father, for as Jesus told Phillip, "The one who has seen me has seen the Father."

So reading the Bible can remind us that the Lord is still our Shepherd. What other tools do we have to remind us that we are God's sheep? Serving others can remind us that we are a part of Jesus' flock. It's like that old joke, somewhat changed..."I don't want to go out to help anyone" "But you must," the Spirit says. "Why? They're not interested in me. They just want someone to help them. Let someone else do it!" "No, you have to go," the Spirit says, "You're a Christian." Whenever we do something in Jesus' name for someone else then they are helped and we are changed. Serving others can remind us that we are a part of Jesus' flock.

But for me, the activity that reminds me most that I am a part of Jesus' flock is prayer, and that, a specific kind of prayer. I love praying through the Scriptures and praising God through them. I encourage you to do the same. How? Take a passage of Scripture and pray through it. Psalm 23 for example, gives us wonderful opportunities to pray. You know how it starts, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Begin with that and tell God that you're glad that the Lord is your shepherd and that you are one of his sheep. Thank God that the Lord knows you and watches over you and guides you just like a good shepherd would do, only better. Just praying all the in's and out's of that phrase, making it personal, is something that molds your life into the model of a sheep, only better. Then tell God what "I shall not be in want" means to you and how you're thankful that every good gift you have comes from the Lord. You can expand that in so many ways.

Take this Psalm—or any Scripture—I really mean that, and tell God what you are learning from it, what you're thankful for from it, what you're bewildered about in it, what you ask God for the strength to avoid in it. On the back of the insert in your bulletins that has Psalm 23 printed on it I've also put a number of scriptures that contrasts what we often think with what God says. Those are some good scriptures to pray through. Stick that paper in your Bible and use those verses as a guide to your prayers. As you do that your relationship with God will move from an intellectual exercise to a living faith that will spill out into the rest of your life. It might just be a little movement, we're not going to be perfect in this life, but even a twitch away from rock-solid decrepitude is something good. Once we start, God will continue to pull us closer to the Shepherd of our souls. I challenge you to pray through Psalm 23 this week, not just once but keep on doing it until you've prayed it out, mined all of its life and health and had those truths applied to your life. Don't expect to be finished in a week! I don't expect that you'll ever be finished, if you really work at it, but the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Sometimes the first step is the hardest, and that makes it the most significant. Step by step, verse by verse, you'll watch the garden of your life grow in the Lord.

Again, we haven't finished with Psalm 23. We've looked at God's presence with us, how God provides for us, and God's Protection of us. We've seen again how we're compared to sheep and then in the balance point of protection in this psalm we've seen how the illustration of sheep moves on to our real, human lives, today and tomorrow. The next steps of this Psalm tell again of God provision for us and God's presence with us. What can we learn from that? See you next week!

Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters,

³he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD

forever.