

(Devotional #1) An Introduction to Psalm 23
The Psalm of the Great Shepherd

INTRODUCTION – Opening Scripture: Psalm 27:1-3 –

*The LORD is my light and my salvation
Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the strength of my life;
Whom shall I dread?
When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,
My adversaries and my enemies stumbled and fell.
Though a host encamp against me,
My heart will not fear;
Though war arise against me,
In spite of this I shall be confident.*

Proposition: *Yahweh, the Great Shepherd, Directs the Lives of His People. This will be the theme we will emphasize in our treatment of Psalm 23.*

On the morning after his Mother’s death, the Commentator, John Phillips found her Bible near the bedside where she had died. It was open to the 23rd Psalm — Written in the margin of this great Psalm were these words: **‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE, A HAPPY DEATH, AND A HAPPY ETERNITY.’**

As our church faces the unique challenges of the next few weeks, we (Rocky and Jeff) want to encourage you with the words and the teachings of this wonderful Psalm. This first lesson or devotional, or whatever the appropriate term is, will put this wonderful Psalm in the context of the Book of Psalms, then in three successive installments, we will view the Psalm as it addresses **‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE, ‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY DEATH, AND THE SECRET OF A HAPPY ETERNITY.’**

Psalm 23 was written by David. We know this because at some time in the distant past, the Rabbis wrote two Hebrew words above this psalm. Those two words can be translated by four English words: **‘A PSALM OF DAVID.’**

The text does not tell us if David wrote Psalm 23 as a young boy, sitting under the stars with *‘harp-in-hand,’* entertaining a new thought: *‘that as each sheep on the hillside was under HIS watchful care, so he too was like a sheep under the care of the Great Shepherd of Israel.’*

Maybe he wrote Psalm 23 as an old man, looking back on his life, remembering a day when he walked into the Valley of Elah, holding a slingshot instead of a harp, with the words: *“Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me,”* burning in his soul.

We don’t know for sure when he wrote it (*though I have an idea that I will share with you in a future lesson*) – but whenever David gave birth to the words of Psalm 23 – they are words that have endured for Three Millennia, because they ring true in every generation and in every culture. For they are indeed **‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE, ‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY DEATH, AND THE SECRET OF A HAPPY ETERNITY.’**

Psalm 23 is sufficiently powerful as *‘a stand-alone Psalm.’* A broader context is not necessary to appreciate its message. But context can enhance its already powerful message – so we should take just a moment to examine the surrounding context before we begin the interpretative part of

our lesson. Let's consider first the placement of Psalm 23 in the Book of Psalms. The psalm that precedes Psalm 23, quite obviously, is Psalm 22.

Psalm 22 sets before us **THE SON OF GOD AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD**, crucified and forsaken by the Father. Psalm 22 is a hard Psalm to read for it describes in more detail than we might like, the terrible suffering Jesus endured when he was crucified for the sins of the world.

It begins with a phrase you will recognize from the New Testament: ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”?*** Historically David is surrounded by his enemies and is in great peril. His circumstances would lead a reasonable person to conclude that God had abandoned him.

Jesus quotes David while on the Cross, but with a far more important meaning – The Son of God, who had enjoyed uninterrupted fellowship with God the Father — (*in his Humanity – since the Word became Flesh – and in his Deity – for Eternity*) — is bearing the sins of the world in his body on the cross. God's Absolute Righteousness and His Perfect Justice have separated Jesus and His Father; the Son is under Divine Judgment for the first time.

The Apostle John quotes Jesus in John Chapter 10 in a manner that links what Jesus is doing – *giving his life for the sins of the world* – with the Shepherd imagery of Psalm 22 –

In John 10, Jesus says:

- ***“I am the Good Shepherd — The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” – John 10:11.***

This Linkage Between Psalm 22 and the Cross Continues ... during the final three hours Jesus was on the Cross, he suffered indescribably. He cried out to the Father, but his Father did not answer. Darkness covered the Land of Israel as God the Father turned away from God the Son – As he suffered there, the Chief Priests and Scribes quoted Psalm 22:8, ridiculing him:

*He Trusts in God; let God Deliver Him now,
If indeed God takes pleasure in Him; for He said:
I AM the Son of God – Matthew 27:43.*

What they did not know is that Jesus could have come down from the Cross immediately and judged the world, just as He will do at His 2nd Advent. But instead – he chose to endure it in order to bear the penalty for the sins of the world.

Psalm 22 ends with the words:

*They will ... declare His Righteousness
To a People who will be born, that
He has performed it – Psalm 22:31.*

The Septuagint reads: ***“For the Lord has performed it.”*** The Hebrew word translated *‘performed’* is ***‘asah***. It means *‘to complete or finish a task.’* The Psalm that begins with the words: ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”?*** Ends with the words: ***“The Lord has finished it.”***

John 19:30 gives the New Testament account of Psalm 22:31 by using the word *‘tetelestai,’* – ***“It is Finished.”***

On the other side of Psalm 23 is Psalm 24 – It describes the LORD, seated at the Right-hand of the Father – The Chief Shepherd–king who will gather His sheep to Himself and reign over all the Earth.

The Apostle Peter writes: “*And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory*” – 1 Peter 5:4.

Jesus told his disciples ‘*He was going to the Father,*’ and then at some undetermined time (*undetermined in the human sense*) ‘*He would return.*’

In Psalm 24, Jesus is ‘*The King of Glory.*’ He is seen ‘*coming in power and glory*’ down from Heaven at His 2nd Advent: [READ Psalm 24:7-10]

Jesus will come then to judge those who have rejected him (goats) and to gather or rescue those who have known him (sheep):

- The ‘*Goats*’ He will cast into Hell for 1,000-years, and then ...
- Into the Lake of Fire for Eternity at the end of the Millennium.
- His sheep, however, He will gather to Himself to be with Him throughout Eternity.

In Psalm 22, the Good Shepherd gives His life for His Sheep. He saves them from the wolves – to stay with the metaphor – by dying on the cross for the Sins of the World.

In Psalm 24, the Chief Shepherd gathers His Flock together and they remain with Him for Eternity.

But between the Psalm of the Crucified Christ, who gives His Life for His Sheep, and the Psalm of the Shepherd-king, who reigns during the Millennium ... stands **PSALM 23 – THE PSALM OF THE RESURRECTED CHRIST WHO GUIDES THE LIVES OF HIS PEOPLE.**

How do we know that Psalm 23 is the Psalm of the Resurrected Christ? We know it because it stands between the Cross of Psalm 22 and the 2nd Advent of Psalm 24.

In Psalm 23, the Great Shepherd guides His sheep through the perils of the time between these two great events: (between the Cross and the 2nd Advent). The good news of the 23rd Psalm is that if the Lord is your Shepherd, He will meet all your needs.

Now Psalm 23 could be taught solely in its historical context; the context of ‘*David-in-Peril surrounded by his enemies.*’ But this wonderful Psalm also is for us – it is for us in times like these. At the time it was written, Psalm 23 pointed forward to the time between the Cross and the Second Coming – but from our perspective, it points to ‘**RIGHT NOW.**’

‘**RIGHT NOW**, for us, means the current pandemic. So how does knowing this psalm help us ‘*right now*’?

First it is not so much knowing the psalm as it is knowing the great shepherd whom the psalmist describes. For when we know that YAHWEH is our personal shepherd then we have all that we need. Or in the words of a booklet by Tony Evans: “God is More than Enough.”

A man on a trip in the African rainforest was following a guide. As they pushed onward into deeper and darker jungle, the guide with his machete was whacking away at the thick green growth that rose like a wall everywhere before them. “*How do you know where to go?*” the man asked. “*Where’s the path?*”

The guide replied, “*I am the path.*”

In the famous words of that TV character Monk – “*It’s a jungle out there,*” therefore, we need a guide who knows where he is going and what he’s doing. God is that guide, because he is the great I Am – the Great Shepherd.

The problem for us is at times like these, we take our eyes off the guide or we forget who the guide is. Here is an exercise for you to help you remember and refocus.

Take a blank piece of paper and when you look at it, what do you see? This is not a trick question. What you see is a blank piece of paper. Now place a dot in the center of the page or somewhere near the center. Look at it again. Now what do you see? You see the dot don't you? There is still a vast amount of blank space on the paper, but we allow the dark mark (*read: COVID-19*) to eclipse the blank space (*all of who God is as our Great Shepherd*).

Allow yourselves to see the blank space – the Great Shepherd, your guide and the one who meets all your needs. Be wise but focus on him ... and relax.

Sometimes at a crowded restaurant (*it wasn't that long ago when that this was a common experience*) when you're waiting for a table and your name is on the waiting list, the hostess will give you a pager to hold. When it's time for you and your party to be seated, the pager will vibrate. If you fail to hold onto the pager or ignore it due to all the noise in the restaurant, you will miss being seated at the table that is being prepared for you.

During times like these, we need to hold onto the truths we know regarding the Great Shepherd as we patiently seek and wait for his provision, otherwise we may miss the table that he is preparing for us.

Max Lucado wrote: *"You need to know what you have in your shepherd. You have a God who hears you, the power of love behind you, the Holy Spirit within you and all of heaven ahead of you. If you have the Shepherd you have grace for every sin, direction for every turn, a candle for every corner, and an anchor for every storm. You have everything you need. (Traveling Light, Pg. 32)*

The apostle Paul said it like this: *"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed."* (2 Corinthians 9:8).

In the days ahead, we will be examining just how Psalm 23 can encourage us in this current time of difficulty.

(Devotional #2) Psalm 23: The Secret to a Happy Life – Part 1
The Psalm of the Great Shepherd

Opening Scripture Reading:

*Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
Gently He will lead the nursing ewes – Isaiah 40:11*

INTRODUCTION – *[READ] Psalm 23:1-6* – (In our class, we usually read Scripture from the NASB, but since Psalm 23 is such a classic piece of literature, we will be using for this study, the King James translation.)

For the next few weeks, while we all are sequestered at home, we will be studying together one of the great Psalms of David: Psalm 23. The proposition that encompasses all six verses of Psalm 23 is this: ***Yahweh, the Great Shepherd, Directs the Lives of His People.*** This is the theme we will emphasize throughout our study.

We began last week by considering the placement of Psalm 23 in the book of Psalms. We saw that it sits between *Psalm 22 – The Psalm of the Cross, and Psalm 24 – A Psalm that depicts Jesus Christ ‘as the King of Glory and the Lord of Hosts’ at His 2nd Advent.*

Between these two pivotal events (*the Cross and the 2nd Coming of Jesus*) sits Psalm 23 ... a Psalm written, certainly to declare David’s trust in the LORD, but also written for the period of time between the Cross and the 2nd Advent ... in other words, Psalm 23 is written as much for us as it was for David.

As John Phillips pointed out, Psalm 23 teaches us ‘**THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE, THE SECRET OF A HAPPY DEATH, AND THE SECRET OF A HAPPY ETERNITY.**’ Today we will begin considering the ways in which Psalm 23 teaches us ‘**THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE.**’

(i) ‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE’–

Verse 1 – “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

David must have been an old man when he wrote Psalm 23. The words do not echo the limited experience of a boy, but a life in which David experienced both the difficulties living on this earth brings, and the faithfulness of His LORD to shepherd him through those challenging times.

David had lived a long time and had experienced triumph and failure – in both good times and bad. And when he looked back at the relationship he had over those years with his God, he writes: *‘It is the LORD who has been my shepherd – It is He who has looked after me.’*

David had been a shepherd, so he knew what it takes to tend a flock of sheep. It was a hard and dangerous job. Listen how – as a youth – he describes it to Saul: *[READ] 1 Samuel 17:34-36.*

Psalm 23 is the echo of David’s life. He speaks the NAME of His God in the first word of verse one: ***Yahweh*** – “***Yahweh is my Shepherd.***” It is Yahweh, the Covenant God of Israel – the Savior – who has been David’s Shepherd all the years of his life.

A Millennium later, Jesus will claim that name for Himself; he did so when he said, “***Before Abraham was, I AM***” – (*John 8:58*). Jesus is the Great I AM of the Old Testament, and it is He who is David’s Shepherd.

Moses was the first to learn it. The 80-year old shepherd was tending his sheep when the bush blazed, and God spoke. Moses was told to return to Egypt to rescue the enslaved Hebrews, and he had more excuses than a child at bedtime. After God answered all of them, Moses finally asked: ***When the people ask me for your name what will I tell them? "I AM WHO I AM."*** Tell them ***"I AM¹"*** sent me to you.

Think about it. Do you know anyone who introduces themselves as ***"I Am"***? Neither do I. When we say, ***"I am"***, we always add a predicate. ***"I am happy."*** ***"I am sad."*** ***"I am confused."*** And on it goes. God however, starkly states ***"I AM"*** and He adds nothing else, for nothing else can be added to the All Sufficient God.

Among other things, ***"I AM"*** means God never changes. Everything around us changes. The only constant we live with is change – the weather, our health, our moods, our level of knowledge of what to do to safeguard ourselves from COVID-19, etc., but God never changes. What HE WAS, HE IS and what He is, HE WILL BE. Psalm 102:27 states: – ***"You are the same."*** Practically speaking that means. ***"if there is to be consistency in your life, that consistency will be found in God alone."***

This God, Yahweh, ***the I AM 'IS' our Shepherd.*** The little word ***'is'*** denotes a present tense relationship. David did not say ***"the Lord was..."*** or ***"the Lord will be..."*** or ***"the Lord might be"***, but he said, ***"the Lord is."*** Right now, in this moment Yahweh ***is*** your Shepherd.

'To 'shepherd' (Hebrew: ro'i) in Old Testament parlance means: 'to guide, protect, feed and provide.' The Shepherd is the Provider and Protector of the sheep.

This then becomes the basis for the second phrase of verse: ***"I shall not want."***

Notice the order of the phrases:

- ***(1st) The LORD is my Shepherd; and only then does David say ...***
- ***(2nd) I shall not want.***

It is human nature to phrase this the other way around:

- I have a need; where is the Shepherd?
- I want something; where is the Shepherd?

This is self-preoccupation – David was not preoccupied with himself; rather, he was fully occupied with the Shepherd.

Looking at this from our perspective, Jesus is our Shepherd: He provided for our salvation when He died on the Cross to pay for our sins; He guides us now through the good times and the bad times of our lives, so we do not have to worry about the dependability of our Shepherd. The Great I AM is our Shepherd and He never will fail to provide for our needs.

"I shall not want" is the theological and practical conclusion of Psalm 23. David could look at his own life and deduce that every time he applied his own solutions to problems, he failed; but ... when he sought out and depended on the guidance of his Shepherd, his needs were met.

When David says, ***"I shall not want,"*** the word he uses means, ***'to lack a vital necessity.'*** Now there is a difference in ***'wanting'*** and ***'needing.'*** Even though our English Bibles read, ***"I shall not want,"*** in the Hebrew text of Psalm 23, David's choice of words is more akin to ***'needing'*** than to ***'wanting.'*** God does not promise a life of luxury – and He does not necessarily give us everything we want – but He DOES promise a life of sufficiency.

¹ God said His Name is ***"I AM."*** The Name Yahweh means, ***"HE IS."*** They are one-and-the-same.

A Sunday School teacher decided to have her 1st and 2nd grade classes memorize Psalm 23. Perhaps you recall doing something similar as a child. ‘Bobby,’ a rather shy boy, was excited about the task, but he just couldn’t remember the Psalm. After much practice, he could barely get past the first line. On the day he was scheduled to recite before the class, Bobby was nervous. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the front and said proudly, *The Lord is my shepherd...and that’s all I need to know!*

We might chuckle and smile but also recognize that while the verse was not said accurately, it was stated correctly. For the truth of the matter is, when the Lord is our shepherd, we have everything we need. Or in the words of a small book by Tony Evans – **God is more than Enough.**

When the Israelites were living in the desert, depending solely on God for food, He gave them Manna. He did not give it a month in advance – but He met their daily needs. With regard to food, they were not lacking.

It is possible to go to the desert and spend a week or a weekend in luxury. I once accompanied my wife on a business trip to Arizona. We stayed at a place called ‘*the Boulders*’ that could only be described as luxurious. But luxury was not the lot of the Israelites – yet they never went hungry or lacked any necessity.

You know, a sheep – really – is sort of a pathetic animal – which is why a sheep is such a good analogy of us. Unlike a lion that is powerful and fearless, a sheep is completely dependent on the shepherd. Sheep cannot defend themselves, they cannot find their own food or water, and quite frankly, they are stupid – nice but stupid.

Providing for the flock is the responsibility of the shepherd – not the responsibility of the sheep – and in order for the LORD to be our Shepherd, we must realize that we are the sheep – and therefore, we are dependent on Him.

Realizing we are sheep is often the crux of our problem. A sheep is all of the things we do not want to be. A sheep is defenseless... dependent... dumb... and dirty. While most animals have a rather effective means of defense – sharp claws, teeth, speed, the ability to hide, keenness of smell or sight, great strength or ferocity, sheep are awkward, weak, slow and devoid of any defense. You never see sheep performing at the circus; you never teach sheep tricks. Why? Because they are too dumb. They regularly wander away and easily get lost. They think they know what is best for them, but most of the time they are wrong.

Defenseless, dumb and dirty. Cats, birds, dogs, elephants, and most other animals will clean themselves, but sheep will stay dirty forever unless the shepherd gives them a bath. And to have the Lord as your shepherd, you must be willing to admit you cannot clean yourself ... you need help.

We would rather be lions, bears, or even a dog or a cat, but we are sheep, desperately in need of a shepherd. And only when the LORD is our shepherd shall we not want for anything. The promise of this psalm is that the unchanging, all-sufficient one, is our shepherd ... and we must depend upon him and him alone.

David clearly states the personal nature of the shepherd-sheep relationship with the small word “*my*.” The Lord is “*my*”... There is a personal relationship here. It wasn’t enough for David to know that the Lord is a shepherd or even the shepherd. David wants us to say with him, “the Lord is my shepherd.”

Sometimes we get so taken up with the details of this psalm that we actually ignore the shepherd. We are delighted at the prospect of green pastures and quiet waters. We respond to the promise of an overflowing cup. The rest, restoration, comfort, guidance, and protection of the shepherd become more important than the shepherd himself. But he is at the center of the psalm. All the blessings are ours because we are each one of his sheep. The gift without the giver is not only worthless, it is impossible.

When Lloyd Douglas, author of ***The Robe*** and other novels, attended college, he lived in a boardinghouse. A retired, wheelchair-bound music professor resided on the first floor. Each morning Douglas would stick his head in the door of the teacher's apartment and ask the same question: "***Well, what is the good news?***" The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of the wheelchair and say, "***That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat. The piano across the hall is out of tune, but my friend, that is middle C.***"

You and I need a middle C. Yahweh, who ruled the earth in 2019 is the same Yahweh who rules in 2020! The LORD who ruled in times of health and prosperity is the same LORD who rules in times of pandemics and uncertainty. He has the same convictions, the same plans, and the same love for His sheep. He is the same shepherd – our shepherd; the LORD is our middle C. A still point in an ever changing and uncertain world. He is more than enough to meet all our needs and to give us a happy life. Trust him and be dependent upon him. He is your personal shepherd!

(Devotional #3) Psalm23: The Secret to a Happy Life – Part 2
The Psalm of the Great Shepherd

Opening Scripture Reading:

*Behold I Myself will search for My Sheep and seek them out.
As a shepherd cares for his flock in the day,
when he is among his scattered sheep,
So I will care for my sheep, and I will deliver them,
from all the places to which they were scattered
on a cloudy and gloomy day.
I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries,
and bring them to their own land;
I will feed them on the mountains of Israel by the streams,
and in all the inhabited places of the land.
I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground
will be on the mountain heights of Israel.
There they will lie down on good grazing ground,
and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.
I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,
declares the Lord God – **Ezekiel 34:11-15***

We are studying Psalm 23 ... Last week in verse one, we learned that the LORD Himself provides for His people, as a shepherd provides for his flock, in good times and in bad times. As Psalm 23 continues teaching us ‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE,’ we see that the constant care of our Shepherd is the source of all good blessings.

Verse 2 – “He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.”

This is how we are used to reading this verse, but the way these two phrases are written in Hebrew is a little different: they read: **“In the Green Pastures, he makes me to lie down; beside the still waters, he leads me.”**

Now this doesn’t change the meaning, but it does change the emphasis – The emphasis is on the green pastures and the still waters – not on the sheep. When in verse one, David taught us that the LORD meets all of our needs, such that nothing is lacking, he was telling us to rest in faith in Jesus Christ.

In verse 2, he is telling us that God has made provision for us so that we can do just that – depend on Jesus in good times and bad.

So, the sheep are lying down in these green pastures ... but sheep do not lie down to eat – so this verse must be about something other than EATING – and it is – it’s about RESTING. The Green Grass is for resting. He tells us: *‘Lie down, rest’ – all the work has been done by your Shepherd.’*

In 1998, Robert Sullivan reported in *Life Magazine* the following facts: *“It afflicts 70 million Americans and is faulted for 38,000 deaths each year; it annually costs Americans \$70 billion in productivity; 64% of teens blame it for poor school performance; 50% of the population over 65 are impacted by it; and treatments for it range from mouth guards, to herbal teas, to medication.”* What is it? Well it isn’t the Coronavirus; it’s **Insomnia**. America can’t get to sleep.

In 2010, researchers called America, “*the culture of exhaustion.*” Americans spend nearly \$24 billion a year on sleep-related goods and services, buying \$5,000 mattresses, 600-thread count sheets, and high-end sound machines that simulate the surf or chirping birds. Over the next few years, the market for insomnia drugs is expected to grow by 78 percent, to nearly \$3.9 billion. Probably the most famous solution right now is called “*My Pillow.*” How many of those commercials have you seen while being sequestered at home? Americans can’t sleep! And since we can’t get to sleep, our bodies are tired, our minds are exhausted, and our souls ... well, you get the point!

We live in a hectic, hurried, harassed age in which we are restless – sleepless in Dallas, Lake Highlands, Frisco, Highland Park, Richardson, and Plano ... or wherever we are. You want rest? Take Lunesta (*or buy a new pillow!*)

We are like David’s sheep, and unless the shepherd “*makes us lie down and rest,*” we won’t. So that is exactly what our loving, compassionate, almighty shepherd does – he makes us lie down.

God will put circumstances in our lives that rob us of our independence and self-sufficiency, until we realize we cannot fix our problems on our own and we must depend on Him. God will bring us to the end of ourselves so when we look up, He is all we see ... and He is more than sufficient to meet our needs. Could it be that God is using COVID-19 to do exactly that?

Sheep have another odd trait – They are scared of moving water and they won’t drink from a stream that is flowing, if the flow is in any way intimidating. They will stand by a river until they die of thirst! (*I told you sheep were stupid.*)

We had a cat once that was afraid of bells. We didn’t know she was afraid of bells until we bought her a collar that had a little bell on it. When we put the collar on her, the cat was paralyzed with fear – she stood absolutely still so the bell wouldn’t ring. She wouldn’t eat; she wouldn’t drink, and I am convinced she would have stood in place until she died if we hadn’t disposed of the collar.

A good shepherd takes his sheep to waters that are still and quiet – and there the sheep will drink.

Notice the shepherd *leads* the sheep. In Israel, a shepherd walks with his rod and his staff ahead of the sheep, and the sheep follow him. Only in Israel do flocks of sheep follow their shepherd. In every other country, the shepherd walks behind the sheep, driving them forward with his rod – but in Israel, the sheep know their shepherd, and they follow his voice because they trust him, and they know he provides for them. God is not behind us yelling, “**GO**”! He is ahead of us bidding, “**COME**”! Where he leads us, even in times of uncertainty, is to the quiet waters that sustain and nourish us. *The Lord’s sheep are not driven by fear but by trust.*

Verse 3 – ‘He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.’

‘*To restore*’ is the Hebrew word, ‘*shub*’ (pronounced ‘*shuv*’). It means, ‘*to turn back, to cause to recover, to refresh.*’ But even more, it means ‘*to be restored to the design and purpose for which we were created.*’ God designed the first man with the capacity to know and enjoy fellowship with his Creator. But sin broke that fellowship and ruined man’s ability to know and love God. After Adam disobeyed God with respect to the tree, man no longer could function in accordance with his design. He was separated from God. His human spirit died, and physical death followed spiritual death into the world through Adam. But David said: “*He restores my soul.*”

In David's declaration, *the subject* – *the one who does 'the restoring'* – is the Great Shepherd. It is He who seeks the lost sheep and saves it. The cross is what makes restoration possible – but on a practical level, man needs *restoration moment-by-moment* because we still possess our Old Sin Natures. The New Testament speaks clearly to this in 1 John 1:9 – (*when we sin*) ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,"*** thus restoring our fellowship with God.

Like sheep, we need restoration when we stumble and fall. Philip Keller tells the story of "*a cast sheep*." This is an old English term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself. Lying on its back with its feet in the air, it flays away, frantically struggling to stand up, but without success. If the shepherd does not arrive on the scene within a reasonable time, the sheep will die, for it is not only the shepherd who keeps a sharp eye on the sheep, so do the predators – wolves, vultures, coyotes, cougars ... they all know that a cast sheep is easy prey. Our adversary is a prowling lion looking for lunch; therefore, restoration by the shepherd is crucial to our spiritual well-being and our lives.

This is the restoration David speaks about. It is a restoration that has two parts – and in fact, the Hebrew word itself – '*shub*' – has two meanings. It can mean, '*to turn away from something*,' but it also means, '*to turn toward something*.' In other words, we are to turn away from what is bad, and to turn toward what is good.

1 John 1:9 is a Grace-proposition – *but it is not an 'abracadabra' magic formula*. In other words, Scripture does not *legitimize* the fallacy Paul condemned: ***"Let us sin more that grace may abound"*** (*Romans 6:1*). God's Grace in forgiveness must not become for us *an excuse to sin*; rather it is *a means of restoration*. (*The difference is subtle but dramatic*.)

Tony Evans illustrates it this way: *"We are like a baby with a soiled diaper, and the mother who changes the diaper is like the Lord, our Great Shepherd. As messy as we may be, He does not turn away, because the Shepherd loves the sheep. God in his grace will make you lie down, He will clean you up ... and then it will be time to play again, because that's what grace does. Grace gives people back their souls, clean and refreshed (God is More Than Enough pg. 37).*

"He leads me in the paths of righteousness." God's Righteousness is the Perfect Standard against which all morality and ethics are measured. The '*paths*' refer to our '*walk*' with the Shepherd.

In the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, a path can lead to life or it can lead to death. The Shepherd leads us down the safe path – the path that avoids the pitfalls and dangers (*wolves if we are thinking like a sheep*) –

"For His Name's Sake." I think this should be understood like this: '*Jesus Christ is a Man of His Word*.' If you grew up in just about any age but this one, you know what that means: a man's word was as good as a written contract. There was a time when people actually told the truth, met their obligations, and meant what they said – it was a matter of REPUTATION. Men didn't twist words – (*we call it 'SPIN' today – but spinning is just another way of telling a lie*).

The point is this: We can trust our Shepherd because He has an impeccable reputation: He keeps His Word, and He is True to His Covenants.

"The Shepherd's leadership grows out of His personal relationship with the sheep." The shepherd does not give a map to the sheep and say, "*have a nice trip*." The Shepherd leads the sheep personally. God establishes a personal relationship with us so He can guide us personally.

He does this for *“His Name’s sake”* ... in other words, God always acts in a way that brings Honor to His Name. Since the Shepherd guides the sheep along the right paths for His own glory, how should we respond to the Shepherd’s leading? Simply put, we need to listen to His voice and follow Him.

My phone has a GPS, linked to Google Maps. When I do not know how to get to my destination, I type in the address, select *‘Go,’* and the system gives me directions. Then in case I have a hard time reading a map, *my phone ‘speaks to me’* and gives me the proper directions, audibly. All I have to do is listen and follow the directions. If I do not recognize my surroundings, or if I have never been on a particular road, all I have to do is listen and follow. So, in the midst of this *‘pandemic uncertainty,’* when contradictory information abounds, listen to your Shepherd; follow Him, and He will take care of you.

Jesus is the Great Shepherd; He is our spiritual GPS. He not only knows *the way, He IS the way.* So, he says to us *“Follow Me.”* Wherever He leads, we are to follow.

So, what is ‘THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE’? It is living, even in these uncertain and troubled times, with complete confidence in the goodness and sufficiency of our Great Shepherd ... Jesus Christ. He will PROVIDE all that we need; He will give us REST amidst today’s turmoil, and when we lose confidence and feel frightened or discouraged, He will RESTORE our souls. And He will lead us in paths of righteousness. Listen to Him and follow.

(Devotional #4) Psalm 23: The Secret to a Happy Death
The Psalm of the Great Shepherd

Opening Scripture Reading:

*They cried out to the LORD in their trouble;
He saved them out of their distresses.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and broke their bonds apart.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness,
and for His wonders to the sons of men – Psalm 107:13-15*

In studying the first three verses of Psalm 23, we have learned that the LORD Himself provides for His people in good times and in bad times, just as a shepherd provides for his flock. Furthermore, we have seen that the constant care of our Shepherd is the source of a host of wonderful blessings.

In our last two devotionals, the focus has been on *the Secret of a Happy Life*, which we experience by following the Great Shepherd. Today we turn to the second observation made by John Phillips and consider *the Secret of a Happy Death*. Now it may seem odd to think of ‘*death*’ and ‘*happy*’ together, especially in a time when the Coronavirus, and the great loss of life it causes, is all we hear about on the news. But Psalm 23 looks beyond our human fragilities and promises that *even in death, we can trust our Great Shepherd*.

Verse 4 – “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff – they comfort me.”

Notice how verse 4 is connected to verse 3. The paths of righteousness down which the Shepherd leads us are not always full of sunshine and light. Sometimes they are dark and fearful. We are never promised there will be no evil, but with the Shepherd as our guide, we can rest assured we do not need to fear evil.

There is no question this verse has brought comfort to many as they or a loved one have faced the stark reality of death. And this is fitting – for God gives the believer special Grace at the time of death. But when David wrote, “*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, he was not dying. So why does he refer to “*the Valley of the Shadow of Death?*”

The phrase ‘*the shadow of death*’ is a single Hebrew word: (*tsalmawet*). There are two theories regarding the origin of this word:

- (1) The first argues that this is a compound noun made up of the Hebrew words for (a) ‘*Shadow*,’ (*tse*) and (b) ‘*Death*’ (*mwt*), which would render the translation we all know.
- (2) But perhaps more likely, *tsalmawet* may be derived from an Akkadian word that means: ‘*Deep Darkness*.’ *In fact, this is quite likely.*¹

If this is right, then the translation would be: “*Yea though I walk through the Valley of Deep Darkness, I will fear no evil.*” I believe this is a better translation. It applies to all forms of human distress, suffering, fear, and even death itself, and it is consistent both with the context of Psalm 23 (*David was not dying but he was in great danger*), and it is consistent in meaning with approximately twenty other occurrences of the term in the Hebrew Old Testament.

¹ *Tsalmawet occurs approximately 20X in the Old Testament with this exact meaning ... ‘Deep Darkness,’ implying ‘Great Danger’ (cf. Job 10:21 and Jeremiah 2:6 for examples of this use of tsalmawet).*

A walk through this dark valley is inevitable (*we all must do it*) ... and we may visit this valley more than once in our lives. The fact that this verse is not limited to ‘*a deathbed-application*,’ does not weaken its ability to comfort us in the presence of death – Instead, the fact that it applies to more than just the death experience means we can count on our Great Shepherd any time we face difficulties, not just at the time of death.

In the context of this Dark Valley, I want you to recall the words of the psalm we read at the beginning of our first devotional: “*The LORD is my LIGHT and my Salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Whom shall I dread?*” – *Psalm 27:1*

Verse 4 begins with a temporal conjunction. This means it has to do with time and motion, so a better translation is: “*Even when I walk in Deep Darkness*” – *Even then My Shepherd walks with me.*” David is asserting that even in times of the most intense pressure and stress – when things are as bad as they can get – even then we can know the reality of the Presence of the LORD. For the Great Shepherd never leaves His sheep.

Therefore, “*I will fear no evil*” because “*Thou art with me.*” Some people become so fearful of life that they prefer death. I believe there is a very important lesson taught by this verse: ‘*No matter the situation, we never should prefer death over living in the Will of God.*’

Fear is a negative emotion, and many today are paralyzed by the feelings it creates. With the news cycle’s never-ending focus on COVID-19, the ever-increasing death toll, the stress on first responders, the need to ‘Social Distance,’ the disastrous impact on our economy, the loss of jobs, and the cloud of uncertainty under which we are living, it is no wonder so many are filled with fear. Notice David did not say, “*there is no evil,*” only that the presence of the Shepherd enabled David to overcome his fear of evil. As a result, fear did not dominate and control his choices.

What David wants us to understand, in the very depths of our hearts and souls, is this: ‘*Whatever your emotional need may be, and however long it has lingered within you, when the LORD is your Shepherd, He is more than sufficient to meet all your emotional needs.*’ He does this by His continual presence, and by His power and grace.

Shepherds carry two implements that are ‘*tools of their trade*’: *a Rod and a Staff* – Many commentators have argued that the rod was used to chastise the sheep, when they did something of which the shepherd disapproved. But this is not consistent with the context. Both the rod and the staff are used ‘*to comfort*’ the sheep, not to chastise them.

The rod was used to destroy the sheep’s enemies, in other words, to protect the sheep. The rod was a weapon of power, and in the psalm, it represents God’s Power – the awesome Power of Almighty God. How powerful is God? He is Omnipotent – He is All-powerful. This is how He is depicted in Psalm 62:11 – “*Power belongs to God.*” Both in life and in death the sheep are protected by the Great Shepherd.

With his staff, the shepherd restrained the sheep from wandering, hooked their legs when necessary to pull them out of holes into which they had fallen. With it he pulled away branches and brambles, when the sheep got entangled in a thicket ... and with his staff, he beat the high grass to drive out any snakes that might be there. The primary purpose of the staff was to guide (*and when necessary*) to rescue the sheep.

The shepherd’s staff represents God’s grace. Have you ever been trapped? At some time in your life, were you caught in something from which you could not free yourself? But then God’s

Grace delivered you? Perhaps He reached into ‘one of life’s many thickets’ and pulled you out ‘the brambles’ to safety. Grace happens when God gives you what you don’t deserve. Grace happens when God is good when you are bad. Grace happens when God loves you when you don’t deserve to be loved.

Our Shepherd is Jesus. And it is human nature to want to see our protector – yet we cannot see Jesus physically while we are living in this world – But it doesn’t matter. The entire Eleventh Chapter of Hebrews tells us that faith is greater than sight. “***Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen***” – ***Hebrews 11:1***. David never saw the LORD, but the reality of their relationship was even greater than Peter’s when Peter was walking on the water with Jesus². Seeing Jesus physically didn’t help Peter at all – and when faith failed, Peter sank³. But in contrast to Peter, Daniel in the Den of Lions had faith in the LORD he could not see⁴. And the Shepherd stood side-by-side with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace⁵, and his Rod and his Staff protected them.

David wants you to know there will be emotional highs and there will be dark shadows ... danger. But even in the seasons of the darkest shadows...God in his love for you has a plan and a purpose for your time in the valley...God always is bigger than your need.

Verse 5 – “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

Who or what is our enemy? Our enemy is anything that threatens our sustenance and security. Living in the 21st Century is a dangerous adventure! We might even say, ‘*Life itself is dangerous*’! Enemies abound – car accidents, plane crashes, hurricanes, tornadoes, terrorist attacks, suicide bombers, financial upheavals ... and the newest pandemic. It is dangerous to be alive – life can kill you ... or at the very least, bring about depression. David wants us to know that in this type of environment – in a time of danger – our Shepherd is with us to protect us.

It also is the responsibility of the Shepherd to feed the flock. But in none of the previous verses has the subject of feeding the sheep arisen. In verse 2, the Shepherd led the sheep to green pastures – but that was to rest in the grass – a metaphor for resting by faith in the Great Shepherd. But now it’s time to eat.

It is interesting that the table is prepared and set before David while he is still in the presence of his enemies – Apparently, he is still walking through the dark valley – No Scripture has told us that his trials and tribulations have ended – in fact, his enemies are still ‘*in his presence*.’

While still in deep darkness, David is (1) ***Comforted by the Shepherd***, (2) ***Protected by the Shepherd***, and (3) ***Fed a King’s Meal by the Shepherd***.

In the Bible, a banquet or feast is a symbol of fellowship and communion. David’s enemy is still present, but the enemy is not David’s problem – the Shepherd will deal with the enemy (***remember, he has a rod***) – Circumstances need not interrupt fellowship with the Shepherd.

“Thou anointest my head with oil.” In the time of David, this was part of the hospitality that was offered to guests of the home. The oil was fragrant and was a welcomed luxury after a long, dusty journey had come to an end – ***[When you have time, read Isaiah 61:1-3 to better understand this***

² See Matthew 14:22-33

³ See Matthew 14:30

⁴ See Daniel Chapter 6

⁵ See Daniel 3:19-30

tradition] I don't ever recall being anointed in this way as a guest, and I've never done it to a visitor in my home – the practice simply is not done today – So perhaps we should simply recall that in the New Testament, oil was symbolic of the Holy Spirit – *in fact, the word 'Christian,' in addition to associating us with Christ – means 'anointed ones.'*

"My cup runneth over." The Table is set, our heads are anointed, and our cups are overflowing. This is a picture of ***'blessings in excess'*** – And it is a picture of a mature relationship with Jesus Christ over a lifetime. It is not a picture of a life without difficulties, but a life well-lived, a life of blessings in excess. It also is a glimpse of heaven.

'My cup overflows' means I have more than enough. God knows how to give in abundance, and no matter what our situation may be – He provides for us right where we are ... now.

The Shepherd is a great giver of gifts. He lavishes his bounty upon us. Haddon Robinson once said: *"With him the calf is always the fatted calf, the robe is always the best robe, the joy is unspeakable, and the peace passes understanding. There is no grudging in God's goodness. He does not measure his goodness by drops like a druggist filling a prescription. It comes to us in floods ... (and) if only we recognized the lavish abundance of his gifts, what a difference it would make in our lives!"*

- For our sin, there is abounding grace – Romans 5:20-21.
- For our service and giving, there is abundant grace – 2 Corinthians 9:8.
- For our suffering and hardship, there is sufficient grace – 2 Corinthians 12:9.
- For our relationships and struggles, there is abounding hope – Romans 15:13.
- And for all the trials, tribulations and tests of faith (*even pandemics*) you face, there is abounding joy – 1 Peter 1:8.

Revelation 19:9 reads: ***"Then he said to me, blessed are those, who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb."*** Here the metaphoric roles are changed. In this context, Jesus Christ now is the lamb – but He is the sacrificial lamb, who has won victory over death – and He is hosting a feast for us in heaven. ***This is the reason even death can be a time of rejoicing.*** Fear is a thing of the past, and joyful fellowship with the Lamb of God, Jesus, our Great Shepherd, is our future. ***This is the Secret of a Happy Death*** ... because death is not our final destiny. We need not fear when we walk through that dark valley, for the Great Shepherd walks beside us, even when that valley ends in physical death.

"One thing is certain. When the final storm comes, and you are safe in your Father's house, you won't regret what he didn't give. You'll be stunned at what he did give you. (Traveling Light, by Max Lucado, page 138.)

(Devotional #5) **Psalm 23: The Secret to a Happy Eternity**
The Psalm of the Great Shepherd

Opening Scripture Reading:

*Behold, the LORD God will come with a strong hand,
and His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
and His work before Him.
He shall feed his flock like a shepherd;
He shall gather the lambs with His arm,
and carry them in His bosom; and
He shall gently lead those that are with young – **Isaiah 40:10-11***

*I am the good shepherd;
the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*

*I am the good shepherd,
and I know my own, and my own know Me.*

*I have other sheep, which are not of this fold,
I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice,
and they will become one flock with one shepherd.*

*No one has taken my life away from me,
but I lay down my life of my own initiative.
I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.*

*This commandment I received from My Father – **John 10:11, 14, 16, 18***

*John Phillips described Psalm 23 as providing answers to three difficult questions: How to find **the Secret of a Happy Life**, how to discover **the Secret of a Happy Death**, and how to know for certain **the Secret of a Happy Eternity**. It is to this last question that we turn our attention today, as we examine the final verse of Psalm 23. As in our previous devotionals, we will follow the main theme of Psalm 23: **Yahweh, the Great Shepherd, Directs the Lives of His People**.*

Verse 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.”*

David said with confidence: *‘I know goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.’*

He doesn't say *maybe*; he doesn't say *possibly or perhaps*; he doesn't say *hopefully*; nor does he say *I have a hunch*. He could have used any of those terms, but he didn't. He says *surely* or *I know*– It is a matter of **Biblical Certainty**.

There's no guesswork here ... no doubts, no wondering, no hesitation no question marks ... just certainty. David is certain that goodness and mercy will be his daily portion, forever and ever. No matter what comes, he is sure that goodness and mercy will characterize God's treatment of him.

Some of the worst theology ever expressed lies in the expression, *“God helps those, who help themselves.”* Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, *‘God helps those, who have no possibility of helping themselves’!* God helps the helpless. And he does so actively, not passively. In every aspect of our lives, God is pursuing us, looking for opportunities to bless us.

The word *'follow'* is not sufficient to communicate the strength and vitality of the Hebrew text. The word translated *'follow'* means, *'to pursue with vigor.'* The Hebrew word in question is *'radaph.'* The goodness and mercy of God do not follow us like a puppy follows its master. They gallop after us like a celestial stallion. They chase us down labyrinthine paths like the hounds of heaven. They stay hot on our heels. The goodness and mercy of our Shepherd 'RAPAPH US' all the way to heaven's gate and into the arms of our Father.

David envisions God as ACTIVE. Dare we do the same? Can you envision God pursuing you, charging after you, tracking you down in order to bless you with goodness and mercy all your days? Even during pandemic days, stormy days, and uncertain days, God remains active, un-sequestered. God is not simply following along behind, watching us do well at times, while failing at other times. He is in hot pursuit, committed to showering us with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

C.H. Spurgeon called *goodness and mercy, 'God's Footmen.'* They pursue us throughout the course of our lives.

- *'Goodness'* guides our steps – God's goodness is his favor towards us; it is much like grace. It includes all the benefits that accrue from God to you. It is all his acts of kindness toward you. Now this doesn't mean everything that happens to us is good. But all things do work together for good – *Romans 8:28.*

A gourmet cook may combine many ingredients that by themselves might not taste so good; but in the hand of this cook, they are blended together into a delicious meal. So in like manner, our Great Shepherd orders the events of our lives so that we become what He wants us to be.

- *'Mercy'* covers our many stumbles – Frequently in Scripture, mercy is called, *'loving-kindness.'* It is the Hebrew word is *hesed*, and it is one of the richest words in the Hebrew language. It speaks of God's loyal-love, His covenant-love, His unending commitment to us. It means that the Great Shepherd is committed to us unconditionally. There are no *'if's.'* On your best day, He is committed to you; on your worst day, He is committed to you.

It is this God, who seeks us out, who follows after us with goodness and mercy. Have you sensed Him following you? Perhaps in the beauty of a sunset? The commitment of a spouse? The smile of a stranger? The touch of a friend? A whispered prayer on your behalf?

God's Footmen are with you every day of your life. God always is at your side. Even in these days of quarantine, God is by your side. Goodness and mercy are following you – not on some days, not on most days – but all the days of your life. God's pursuit of us is not sporadic or temporary; it is constant. David says, *'God's blessings have pursued me ALL the days of my life.'* What I have seen as a fact in the past is what also will govern my future. God has been faithful to me all the days of my life, and He will continue to be faithful in all the days that make up my future. *(And here David is looking not just to an earthly future, but to a future beyond his remaining years.)*

The last line of the Psalm looks past our earthly life into Eternity: *"I will dwell in the House of the LORD forever."* David cannot be referring to the Temple because his son, Solomon, will build the Temple. It is possible he may have in mind the Tent of the Tabernacle, but He says He will dwell there *'forever.'* For David, the House of the LORD meant *'his relationship with God.'*

It is an idiom for Fellowship. It is a fellowship that begins in life and continues into Eternity ... *'forever.'*

The story is told of three adopted children, who for a number of years, lived in foster homes, where they were well cared for, but when they were adopted, the oldest child said of his new home – *This is my forever home*. Birthdays remind us of how temporary life can be ... how fragile it can be. Pandemics, disease, and death remind us that this is not our permanent home; really, we are just passing through. Birthdays are one of the ways God keeps us heading home-ward.

At times of uncertainty and even fear, we can be certain of our future, for we have the promise of a permanent home with our Shepherd in glory. It is as certain as God's goodness and mercy that pursue us daily, so we can live with peace in the present.

David's view of life and his relationship with the Lord was not different in any measurable way from the notes written by John Phillips' Mother in the margin of her Bible, a story I mentioned briefly in our first devotional on Psalm 23. David viewed his relationship with God as the foundation for *'a happy life, a happy death and a happy eternity.'*

The same should be true for all Christians in the Church Age. If we ignore the Word of God and do not tend to our relationship with the Great Shepherd, we will suffer spiritually, and the details of this life will overwhelm us. But by consistently and persistently taking in the Word of God and applying it – our journeys will be guided by the Shepherd – and why would anyone want anything more than this?

Have you noticed how the Presence of the Shepherd transcends Life's circumstances?

- When we are weary, the Shepherd gives us rest in Green Pastures;
- When we are thirsty, the Shepherd leads us to drink from the still waters;
- When we have spiritual needs, the Shepherd restores our souls;
- When we struggle with sin, the Shepherd leads us down paths of righteousness;
- When circumstances – and even DEATH overshadow us – the Shepherd walks beside us through the Dark Valleys;
- When we need comforting, the Shepherd comforts us with his Staff;
- When we need protection, the Shepherd protects us with his Rod;
- When we are hungry, the Shepherd feeds us the Meal of a King, *banquet-style*;
- When we are weary, the Shepherd anoints us with oil;
- When trouble surrounds us, goodness and mercy are our footmen, sent by order of our gracious Lord, to bring us through the every dark valley;
- And when at the end of our days, death appears to be an end unto itself, we have the promise of our shepherd that we will dwell in the House of the Lord ... *forever!*

Despite ourselves or our circumstances – in the Person of the Great Shepherd, God is faithful, and we will dwell in His house forever. *'Our cup of blessings runneth over'* ... forever.