

(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.