

(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!