

(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.