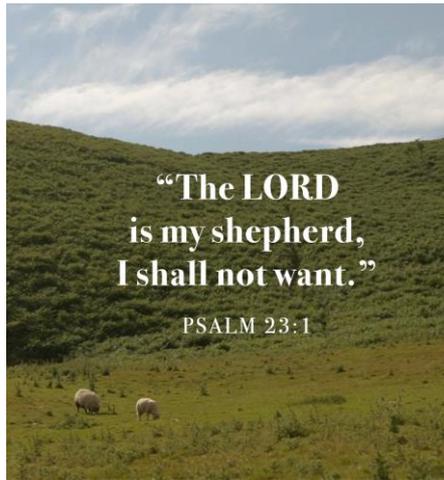


Sunday July 10th 2022. Scripture: Psalm 23 The Good Shepherd.



There are places in Scripture that are powerful and deep - Psalm 23 is one of those places. It is a very personal Psalm. You may note there are no references to “we” or “us” or “they” but only “my” and “me” and “I” and “You.”

For this is David’s testimony, his personal experience with God. It is a precious Psalm, a balm for wounded souls. And

what makes this a constant friend is that it covers all of life, with simple beauty. It speaks of green pastures and stilled waters as well as dark valleys, enemies and adversities. The comfort come from David as he writes from his experiences of God.

Have you ever written down experiences you have had in life – the good and the not so good? If so, has the information ever been used to explain your hope in God to someone else?

This is David’s song – he is telling us in this Psalm what he has experienced and where his hope is.

Slide 1 – Judea and sheep

David grew up as a shepherd, caring for his father’s sheep, making sure they were well-cared for.

So he penned this Psalm from that experience knowing that those who would sing or read it, could relate from their experience at that time.

The interesting thing is that he writes as a sheep. So let's use the analogy of sheep in the wilderness, needing to have good pasture, water and protection.

There are 7 statements:

Statement 1: The Lord is my shepherd – I shall not want.

When the Lord is my Shepherd, all my wants are taken care of.

There is nothing more that we need – as a sheep you just have to follow where you are led because the Good shepherd is with you.

Statement 2: He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the stilled waters, He restores my soul.

The climate in Israel is semi desert. The shepherd has to plan his daily schedule around the availability of water in the middle of the day.

The good shepherd leads – he doesn't drive the sheep. **Nor does the Lord drive us.** The shepherd leads by walking slowly ahead of his sheep and either playing his own 10 second tune on a pipe or singing his own unique song or call. Each sheep knows his shepherd's tune or his pipe – they know his voice. **Do you know God's voice to you?**

Shepherds often gathered together around a watering hole where they all mingled. When a shepherd decided to leave, all he had to do was give his call and his sheep would immediately separate from the rest of the flock and follow him. On their own the sheep couldn't find the tasty green grass, nor could they find water and a place to rest.

When you are mixing and mingling with those “of the world” how have you been able to separate when you hear God calling you?

Once again David is thinking as a sheep – sheep are afraid to drink from moving water, even if it's shallow. They know instinctively, if they get caught in that water, their wool will soak it up and they will drown.

Where there is a stream, the shepherd will dig a short, dead-end channel that leads away from the stream. All the sheep will line up and drink along that channel.

How has God quenched your thirst when you have needed it?

Slide 2 – channel for water

Statement 3: He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

David is saying a lost sheep cannot find its way home, nor the right paths, once it has strayed off the path. The shepherd must pick the sheep up and carry it safely back home, as usually the sheep is too traumatized to walk on its own.

There is honour and shame in the culture as a Shepherd. He has a reputation to uphold. The good shepherd goes and finds the lost sheep. The bad shepherd does not.

When has God picked you up from the ground and carried you to safety?

Slide 3 – finding the lost sheep

Statement 4: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

Slide 4 – Valley of death

In certain places in the Holy Land, where there is sandstone that has been carved by wind and rain for centuries, there are deep, dark valleys of danger that are perilous for people and sheep.

They are known as “Valleys of the shadow of death because the valleys were so close together they kept out the sun.

The shepherd knew from past experience that predators could be taking cover in these valleys and prey on the flock. He knows they are subject to sudden storms and flash floods that send walls of water rampaging down the slopes. Rockslides, mud or other natural disasters could destroy his sheep.

But, David says, in spite of such hazards this was the best way to take the flock to the high country and green pasture.

Once again the sheep trusted the shepherd to take them through safely.

When we are walking through some unfamiliar valley and the shadows linger – fighting an illness, having to make a big decision, handling addictions, family disfunction, bullying, loneliness – we need to remember that God as our Good Shepherd has appointed every hard times as one of the paths of righteousness. He leads us through this valley for reasons that probably don’t seem to make sense, at the time. But He is taking us to the high country, where the sun is warm and the grass is lush., Every valley is a pathway to something better.

Statement 5: Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

A shepherd's rod was a 2 foot club made of oak, with a rounded head that was whittled from the knot of a tree and hard sharp bits of metal pounded into it. This club was used to defend the flock against attacks.

This is a picture of the shepherd's power wielded against overpowering enemies. The sheep would have witnessed perhaps many times, how the Shepherd used his rod to protect them.

David is saying here that we can have no fear in adversity because of the comfort of God's power, protecting us from that which would ruin us.

To keep the sheep on the right path, the shepherd has a crook with a hook on the end. This was used to guide the sheep to keep them on the right path. Just a gentle tap on the lamb's side would move them back into the fold.

The crook was also used to gather up a lamb or sheep from where it may have fallen. The sheep would respond to his care and know that they were safe.

Have there been times when you have felt overpowered by circumstances and God has dispersed your enemy – doubt, fear, hopelessness?

Have there been times when you have been taking a path you thought was right and then you feel God's gentle touch to get you back on the right path?

Statement 6: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Now David changes from being a sheep, to being a guest. And God moves from being a shepherd, to being a host.

Slide 5: flatbread being served

To prepare or spread a table in the ancient near east meant no utensils. Everyone takes a piece of flatbread and tears off a small piece, which they use to lift food from the common dish to the mouth.

It is actually more sanitary than using utensils as each bite starts with a fresh piece of bread – you don't have to set the table.

The host knows that those watching are hostile towards both the guest and God also. But, as David points out – God loves us enough to bear the scorn of people who don't like us.

As David's host pours oil on his head, the enemies are infuriated. If that is not enough, waiters are hovering around him, ensuring that his cup is never empty – in fact overflowing with drink.

This speaks of God's constant care and celebration of us as His children.

As David thinks about how God has always cared for him, he thinks about the future and proclaims:

Statement 7: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

David knew that, as night came, he had to lead his sheep home. He has an assistant are the rear of the herd and even a dog, if he has one to protect from attack. This is the rear guard.

Basically he is saying, God has stationed two guards to follow me home – goodness and mercy. Goodness and mercy guide my flanks. They follow me all the days of my life. I am never without them.

If the Lord is your shepherd, you are known, loved and prepared for and cared for. And you have satisfaction, every day and forever.

When you find yourself weak, in the dark, uncertain of the future, when all of the colour has drained out of life and your soul is downcast – look up.

Fix your eyes upon Jesus, your Good Shepherd. Stick close to Him.

Trust that He knows the way through this valley and will see you safely through.

Believe that He has good reasons for taking this route, even though it is hard and unfamiliar.

And hold on to the truth that there is something better waiting on the other side of this valley.