

February 17, 2019 Revisiting An Old Friend Psalm 23

As a preacher/pastor/ teacher, I am always watching out for some new perspective on a familiar passage of Scripture. I have mentioned a couple of times that I am looking at material produced by Dallas Willard. He is a theology professor in the U.S., a friend and mentor of the American Presbyterian minister named John Ortberg. Dallas Willard wrote a book called, “The Divine Conspiracy”. In that book Willard shares a perspective that I have not seen so neatly laid out in print before, concerning Psalm 23. To put it in a single sentence, Dallas Willard says Psalm 23 is all about the goodness and the generosity of God toward people like you and me.

In my studies of Scripture I have always caught hints of that, but until I bumped up against Dallas Willard’s work, I had never seen it spelt out so boldly and clearly. So this morning I am doing something, I do not usually do. I am going to run through Psalm 23, phrase by phrase, sharing with you, things which to some degree we have always known from Psalm 23, but, I hope with a fresh vigour and in what I hope you will find a most encouraging message.

As we all know, Psalm 23 begins with that phrase, “The Lord is my shepherd.” In the Jewish culture that phrase means that God leads us. But the shepherd does more than lead. As we shall see, in the balance of the Psalm, the shepherd leads the flock in such a way as to provide for their needs, and

to protect them from any enemy which would attempt to bring harm to the members of the flock.

We, as Christians, read this Psalm slightly differently than our Jewish brothers and sisters. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.” There is another layer of meaning in that phrase as a title for Jesus. He is our leader. He provides. He protects. He saves. And HE saves not just because HE is a shepherd, HE is the really good one! The best! In other words, no matter what is happening, and no matter what we think is happening, HE pours out upon us what can only be defined as amazing grace. In the fulness of the love of God, He always has our best interests in HIS heart and mind. We read that opening phrase and understand it to mean, “The Lord Jesus is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

Notice this because it is important. That second phrase: “I shall not want,” is without qualification. It is carelessly loving and gracious in its scope. There is a promise in those words that I return to time and time again, which is precisely why I titled this message, Revisiting An Old Friend. The weight of the words “I shall not want” is this: I shall not want for anything. For food. For clothing. For shelter. For the mercy of God for my sin and my sinfulness. I shall not want even in coming face to face with my mortality or in the experience of dying, because Jesus has opened the door to the Kingdom of Heaven. In this life and the next, because the Lord Jesus is my shepherd, I shall not want. I am covered by the all sufficient

power and love of Jesus who is God. HE loves me, “this I know.” HE loves you with an everlasting love...today, tomorrow, and beyond time, in eternity.

“He makes me to lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside still waters.” Verse 2 is about food and drink. We spend a lot of time remembering that the shepherd of our lives and souls is Jesus. If HE is the shepherd, what am I? In the metaphors of Psalm 23, I am a sheep. There was a time when I was a lamb. I celebrated my birthday this past week, and the cards I received all reminded me that ship has sailed. I am not a lamb, I am a sheep, and a shaggy old beast at that. One birthday card reminded me, “Everything hurts, and what doesn’t hurt, doesn’t work! You feel like the morning after, and you didn’t go anywhere the night before. The twinkle in your eyes is the sun glinting off your bifocals. Your back goes out more than you do!” I am a wrinkled old sheep. And in spite of those letters after my name, the fact is I am at times not too bright. It takes Psalm 23 to remind me who it is that provides the food I eat, and the water I drink. According to Google, I can do without water precisely 48 hours. I have never in my whole life gone without these precious basics. A wise man like David reacts to that reality by confessing...and professing...God is so good. Praise the name of Jesus. For the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit have always made food and drink available to me. That is why my belly droops over my belt. I have not just had food, I have had it, (always had it) in a quantity greater than simple biological need.

The Good Shepherd, Jesus who is the Christ, “restores my soul, He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” It is true! God did not just create me with a soul, when I dragged it through the mud, and stained it in countless ways...(we all do!)...He restored it. He washed it. Made it work, gave it more insight than it ever had before. That is exactly what Calvary and the cross was all about. Soul restoring, soul renewing work. And if ever I have known what the right thing to do is, or was, or will be...it has been at HIS hand. The Bible tells me so. But the Holy Spirit of God confirms it deep inside my physical being in such a way that I know I have to proceed along a particular path, doing the right thing. Even when I rebel, and get stubborn, HE reveals to me and to us, that that is what we are doing. He doesn’t beat us or berate us. HE says, “Follow me,” and gently leads us down the right road.

“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.” If I understand what Jesus has done, even death cannot reduce me to shivering in a dark corner afraid and alone. Why? Because I will never be alone. You will never be alone in facing death. Jesus will be with you. He said, “I will be with you always, to the end of the age....to the end of time and beyond. God is so good. And I do not need weapons to protect my life. The Good Shepherd has a rod and a staff. HE stands between us and the forces that would seek to

destroy us, and HE says to those enemies.... "YOU SHALL NOT PASS!"

Verse 5 is important. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." My daughter taught me the phrase, "Jesus loves a good party!" Think of that in terms of the coffee hour following service, or the potluck suppers we share together. Opportunities to talk, to laugh, to share, and yes....to eat and to drink together. The image of the 5th verse is a reminder that when we participate and enjoy ourselves in such events we are in plain view of the forces that want to destroy us. The wolves are there. They are watching and snarling and angry. And they are angry and frustrated because they know they can do nothing. We are as it were untouchable. In plain sight and yet untouchable. Safe. And Jesus honours us. He anoints your heads with oil. HE fills your cup not just to the brim, but to the degree that it overflows. Blessing without end. No matter what the world would say about our weakness and vulnerability.

Verse 6 sums up what all this means. When it comes to what really matters....we are well off. All of us! Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. And when earthly life is over, I say it as plainly as I can, I am closer to the finish line in my race, than I have ever been. And when it is over....it will not be over. I will live where the Lord Jesus lives. That is not the future. That is beyond the future. Beyond time.

And we will live with Jesus in HIS home, not for a season, not for a year,.....but forever. This is big. Huge.

It is not about being good enough to make the grade. It is about following Jesus. That is what the sheep do. That is what disciples of Jesus do. We follow HIM. All the days of our lives and beyond....forever. To God be the glory.

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus, what you have offered and promised and given is so good, it is beyond our ability to actually describe. Thank you Lord for the abundance of blessing and blessedness that you pour into our lives. Be with us as we meet together as a congregation. Help us to rejoice at what you have done, and given us. Help us to be a blessing to our neighbours, our families and friends that they might discern it is YOU who loves us, shepherds us, and guides us.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen