

## PSALM 23 pt.3 6-1-14

### *“Waters and Restoration”*

Psalm 23:**1-3** *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. 3 He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.* Today we will go over 2b and 3, **2b** *He leads me beside quiet waters.* **3a** *He restores my soul.* One of the things I think makes this psalm so popular is the rich and beautiful imagery that is used to describe the happy condition of all who belong to the Lord. We can just see ourselves lying down in a soft, green pasture. We can picture ourselves enjoying the serenity of a lovely pond or a gently flowing stream. And even though we don't know much about sheep we can relate to those things that they enjoy. Last time we talked about the green pasture and how important that is to the sheep. Today let's look first at the matter of quiet waters. The sheep is rejoicing that all his needs are met by the Shepherd. What is the significance of quiet waters?

The water part of it I think you understand. As creatures who are made up predominantly of water we know how vital it is for our survival and our happiness. There really is nothing more basic than this is there? We must have water and without it all the gold and jewels and prestige in the world will mean nothing at all. Water is the first biological essential. And, as Scripture often does, it teaches us about the spiritual realm via physical analogies. So, we read about that which is water for the soul and we read about a spiritual thirst. Isaiah the prophet cried 55:**1a** *Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters.* And Jesus, you may know, utilized this analogy as well. In John 4 He spoke to a woman at a well and told her that He could provide her with living water. **13-14** *Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”* What I believe Jesus is getting at here is that He offers to men and women a water, a substance that meets their needs, that fulfills their longings, that satisfies, not the body but the soul. In John 6:**35** *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. 7:**37** Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.* What is the point of that? He is saying that if you have a needy soul, if you feel that need and are thirsty, then come to Him and He will meet it. The Lord meets in abundance our most basic needs of body and soul. That is again the major idea behind **2b** *He leads*

*me beside quiet waters.* But why do you think it says “quiet waters” or “still waters”? One reason may have to do with the basic needs of sheep. Being timid animals, sheep are not at all drawn to fast-moving rivers. The noise of the rapids or the swift current are enough to run the sheep away. Sheep, to be filled and satisfied, require gentle streams or still ponds in which they may fill up without fear. A second reason why the Psalm refers to “quiet waters” may have to do with the needs of human beings. Our emotions are undoubtedly affected by our surroundings. Some scenes produce in us a sense of hurry or busy-ness. Others engender a serenity or calmness. There is a reason why we go to certain places and not others to pray, or to share a picnic. Your spirit picks up on the character of your environment. For me, and I bet for you, water that is moving quickly, water that comes in rapids or crashing waves has a tendency to accelerate the heartbeat and pump the adrenalin; whereas still water and quiet water, or even a shallow trickling stream has a calming effect. Nothing soothes the soul like looking out over a calm lake . And it is the peace of the quiet waters that our Shepherd provides.

It should be noted that there are other waters. The polluted world in which we live can offer you waters advertised to meet your needs. These are waters that look very exciting. Interestingly, the world seldom offers quiet waters. It specializes in the fast moving, the big and the roaring, the kind that gets your adrenalin pumping furiously. The world is good at that stuff but let me tell you the difference between the waters of the world and the waters of God - only the still waters of God can satisfy. What is offered in the world can entice but never satisfy. It can excite you for an hour or a day but it leaves you feeling empty and thirstier than ever. So many go from adrenalin fix to adrenalin fix, finding it ever harder to get the charge they feel they need. Some of you find yourself in that description. When you go after the waters of the world two things will happen: your shepherd is grieved and you will be frustrated. Jeremiah 2:**13** *“For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water.* A cistern was usually a large underground tank for holding water. They are needed most where water is scarce. Here God describes the spiritual adultery of his people in this way: they have forsaken the one who is a fountain of living waters. And they have trusted in cisterns which had holes in them. That is such a great way to describe the pursuits of the flesh - they are as broken cisterns. When you first fill them up everything looks great but they soon run out and you are left high and ...dry. But those who trust in the Lord are in touch with a never-ending supply of spiritual refreshment! Our shepherd leads us beside quiet waters and there we will know peace and abundance.

Now all this flows nicely into our next thought as we move on to the phrase, *He restores my soul*. Most commentators on the psalm believe that what is envisioned here is the estate of the stray sheep. To be restored you have to first be lost. And I don't think he is speaking here about conversion. There may be that element to it, but David talks about the Good Shepherd restoring the soul of his sheep. Now, the obvious question is why would anyone who belongs to the Lord ever stray? Why would we leave One who leads us into green pastures and quiet waters? Why would thirsty people forsake the fountain of living waters? Good question. I could offer all kinds of answers but suffice it to say that sin doesn't make sense. Sin is stupid. Those cows we talked about last week who stuck their necks through the fences to get the musty hay - what is the reason? That is just sinfully stupid and so is the forsaking of God's way. We do it because we are, whether you want to admit it or not, selfish, foolish sheep. Isaiah 53:6 *All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him* We all stray to some extent and in some direction. We don't all stray the same way but we all manage to distance ourselves from the shepherd at some times and to some extent. We leave the green pastures for the dusty wastelands of evil. We leave the still waters for the waves but when we drink it, like saltwater, it leaves us more thirsty than before. Malcolm Muggeridge is a famous British journalist who became a Christian in mid-life and is one of the most articulate social critics of the last century. The first volume of his autobiography is entitled, "Chronicles of Wasted Time." In it he tells this story. He said he was in India teaching journalism. He had longed to have an illicit relationship and had told himself that some day he would do it while he was many miles from the one he loved. One day he came out of his room early in the morning to go for a swim in the river and there he saw a woman in the distance, alone taking her morning bath in the river. His imagination was stirred by the image and he decided to give in to his lusts. Knowing she was a poor woman, he figured he could just buy her. So he swam toward her, debating his choice in his heart with every stroke. Eventually he emerged from the water just about three feet away from the woman who was absolutely shocked to see this white man swimming toward her in the early morning hours. And then Muggeridge got the shock of his life when he realized that he was staring into the face of a leper – the eroded nostrils, the worn-down fingers, all of the features looking like that of an animal. And there stood Muggeridge disgusted at first with the sight of her, but then more disgusted with himself. Oh, my friend that is the grace of God! That is grace when God will not let you enjoy your sin. We pursue the delicacies of this world and our Lord makes them as dust in our mouths. When He abandons you to your lusts you are clearly not his sheep. But his sheep he will

chase down and He will deal with as a Shepherd. When we stray we pay. We suffer emotionally and relationally and even physically. Furthermore, we put out the shepherd who becomes grieved over our waywardness. But here is the amazing thing. Here is the grace thing - The Shepherd restores my soul. Even though He warned me not to stray. Even though he told me of the dangers which could befall me, even though he provided all my needs and gave me every reason to stay close to him and even though I went against all that and left He still comes to get me. You are familiar I think with the story in Luke 15 of the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go look for that one crazy stray sheep. That speaks of the love of God for sinners. It speaks of how our Father deals with wayward children. It describes the happy experience of every imperfect sheep in God's flock. We stray. He finds us.

Understand too that this is the only way that stray sheep are going to make it back into the flock and to the shepherd. You have heard these stories I'm sure of cats and dogs who travel hundreds of miles to get back home. That doesn't happen with sheep. Sheep, once they are lost, cannot get themselves back home. The Shepherd has to go out and find them. We don't restore our own souls. He is the Restorer. The classic example of this in Scripture may involve the very one who wrote Psalm 23. David himself became seriously stray at one point didn't he? He wandered away from the Lord and drank from the popular but poisonous waters of sexual immorality. David did not immediately repent did he? Instead David continued his sin and sought to cover it up. He became a backslidden believer for some period of time, in fact it seems he remained a stray long enough for Bathsheba to give birth to the product of their immorality. For nine or ten months David went without the light of God's face upon him. And then what happened? What did David do to restore his soul? David did nothing. God sent the prophet Nathan to David. God sent his servant with a word of rebuke and (this is critical) a word of pardon. Foolish David strayed from the Lord, grieved the Lord, brought shame to God's name but the Lord restored his soul. Has God ever done that for you? Can I hear an amen? This is precious to those who know Jesus. For we see that we would never have what it takes to get out of the pits unless the Lord reaches down His mighty arm and lifts us.

3a *He restores my soul.* Apart from restoring stray sheep there is one other condition of sheep and humans which may be addressed by this verse. In Psalm 42 David calls out, "Why so downcast Oh my soul?" We talked about that last week. Today too but for a different reason. In the King James Version of Psalm 42 we read about a soul that is cast down. Did you know there is also a condition among sheep which goes by that name? These insights I get from Philip Keller in his

book on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. He says the word “cast” is an old English term for a sheep that is on its back and cannot get up by itself. Can you picture such a pitiful critter? Being a Floridian, I am more familiar with seeing cockroaches in this position, feet pawing the air in frightened frustration. That is a cast sheep and I’m told that if such sheep aren’t helped in good time they will die. Keller says this is one reason that a shepherd must count his flock every day. If one is missing the shepherd’s first thought is, “One of my sheep is cast. I must find it and get it back up on its feet.” This is an urgent matter since in warm weather a cast sheep can die within hours or even more quickly if it is discovered by a lucky wolf. Cast sheep are easy prey and very popular among predators and scavengers.

Philip Keller, in *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* writes: *The way it happens is this. A heavy, fat, or long-fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little hollow or depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw frantically. Frequently this only makes things worse. It rolls over even further. Now it is quite impossible for it to regain its feet.* ( p.61) Now that is not quite the equivalent of straying is it? To stray the sheep has to walk off in the wrong direction, but it can become cast through only a moment’s carelessness. Just so, when we are not attentive to the matters of our hearts, it is possible for depression to slip in or apathy, or coldness of spirit. We may not feel as guilty about these things but they leave us no less vulnerable and needy. Gordon MacDonald, in his book, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* describes a man I bet could be any number of us. Listen to what this man says about himself: *There was a time in my younger years when it all seemed to grab my imagination, Christ and faith, I mean. I really wanted to make my Christian commitment the absolute center of everything. But, I've lost it, and now I perform more out of habit than anything else. The only thing that drives me to keep on is that I'm getting to the point where it is too late to change. My family life is all centered on Christian activities, and I don't want to hurt my wife or the kids. And besides, life has been good to me. Why upset the routines that have gotten me this far? So, I just keep chugging along.* (p.20) There is a man who may not have strayed in the normal sense but has lost his spiritual legs. He is just pawing at the wind in his relationship to God. Maybe you have been where he is? Maybe you are there now. Here is the good news - if you belong to Jesus you have a Shepherd who can restore your soul. Keller writes about how he used to help his cast sheep. *Tenderly I would roll the sheep over on its side. This would relieve the pressure of gases in the rumen. If she had been down for long I would have to lift her*

*onto her feet. Then straddling the sheep with my legs I would hold her erect, rubbing her limbs to restore the circulation to her legs. This often took quite a little time. When the sheep started to walk again she just stumbled, staggered and collapsed in a heap once more. All the time I worked on the cast sheep I would talk to it gently, "When are you going to learn to stand on your own two feet? I'm so glad I found you in time, you rascal!" And so the conversation would go. Always couched in language that combined tenderness and rebuke, compassion and correction. Little by little the sheep would regain its equilibrium. It would start to walk steadily and surely. By and by it would dash away to rejoin the others, set free from its fears and frustrations, given another chance to live a little longer. (p63)* That is part of the rich imagery of the shepherd who restores my soul.

As we move into application of our passage I could talk about how to avoid straying and becoming cast down but that seems to me beside the point. Today is on what you do if or when you lose your soul, if or when you aren't walking near the Shepherd. What you do is you bleat. That's right . You bleat and bleat and bleat again. That is the sheep's way of calling the shepherd for help. We commonly refer to it as prayer, which is, of course, an exercise of the heart. This means you want a "bleating heart." Get it? Bleating heart. Oh well. There are two things the sheep must understand about its condition for it to bleat. First it must recognize that it cannot find its way by itself. It has to see its own need. Pride is the greatest deterrent to prayer. When we are proud we refuse to ask for help. Maybe you ladies have been on a trip with your husband and you seem lost so you suggest he stop somewhere and ask for help. What do you get? *Oh no, I can find my way out of here. I know where I'm going.* Uh-huh. Another one is, "*Oh, I can fix that by myself. I don't need help on the car or the plumbing.*" Those of you prone to be do-it-yourselfers need to make sure that doesn't carry over to your religion. We must ask for help! We must cry to the Shepherd in full awareness of our dependence on him.

The second thing we must have in order to bleat effectively is hope. We must have hope that the Shepherd will come, that he cares and that he can help. If we don't think the Shepherd hears or we don't think the shepherd can do much we won't call and this is why many people don't pray. Read the word! The Lord restores souls! Keller says that sometimes a cast sheep will bleat for help but usually it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration. Does that describe some Christians you know? They say they are struggling - at least that is what they call it, but they aren't really praying. They aren't calling out to God for help and I wonder if this is you, does your silence reflect hopelessness? Unbelief? This psalm is a remedy for that. My counsel to you stray sheep and cast

sheep is to pray loud and long until God hears. There may be other things to do but certainly this is a must. And it works because the Lord restores souls. So you bleat, fellow sheep.

Secondly, if you want the Lord to restore your soul then listen for his voice. Between bleats listen for him calling you. That is hard to do in our media-driven world. Check this out (show cartoon) A big part of what this means for us is that we stay in the Scriptures with trust and obedience. We keep reading God's word, we keep putting ourselves around solid teaching even when we don't hear him speaking, even when the reading seems dry as dust because if He does speak a word of restoration it will likely be thru His word and you don't want to miss it! In Psalm 19:7, look at it **7a** *The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul.* The law of the Lord is a synonym here for the Scriptures. **7a** *The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;*. **7** *The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.* **7b** *The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.* That's the same thing it says the Shepherd does and I believe the correct way to understand it is to see that the Shepherd restores the soul by means of His holy word. This, my friend, is why spiritual disciplines like Bible study are so important. You do them even when you don't feel like it, especially when you don't feel like it because the word and prayer are God's appointed means to restore your soul and revive your spirit. Unfortunately, many times, because we are so used to operating by feeling, when we get a little astray or we get downcast the first thing that goes is our time in the word, and our time with God's people. Our Shepherd is great enough, He has and He does often restore us without these but those who stay constant in the word and prayer make themselves more restorable and face far less spiritual danger.

My final word to us all is just a call to rejoice, to celebrate what the Lord is to us and to give Him thanks. We need and, praise God, we have such a loving Shepherd! Some of you have not yet understood this. You still operate under a devilish deception that your Shepherd will abandon you or destroy you when you stray. Not our Shepherd! He restores His sheep! He lifts up the heads of those who are downcast. Some of us are wise to do some serious bleating today. Call for His help. Some of us would be wise to be quiet and listen for His voice. All of us need to be glad in our shepherd and commit ourselves to stay as close to Him as we can. You take time now to consult with the Lord according to your need and then I will lead us in prayer in just a minute. - Hymn 46, note vs.3