

PSALM 23

The Shepherd of Our Souls

A Glimpse Into Jesus' Restoration Work

By

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Opening.

The 23rd Psalm is a beautiful picture of Jesus Christ as the Shepherd of Our Souls. And this is David's mindset precisely: the Lord God of Israel, *Yahweh Elohiym*, is the Shepherd of my soul!

Essay— The Shepherd of Our Souls.

David in v. 1 has an intensely personal perspective on his relationship with the King of Kings. **“The Lord is my Shepherd”** — ‘*Yahweh* is my Protector, *Yahweh* is my Provider.’ And what does a shepherd do? He provides and protects. He leads his sheep to places of *rest*, to lands of refreshment and renewal. **“I shall not be in want”** or, more literally, **“I will never lack.”** We might even give this the free translation of, “I cannot be in need when Christ is in the lead.” Like a Good Shepherd {Jn. 10}, **“He makes me lie down in”** the lush grass of **“green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters”** that will not disturb the stillness of my soul {v. 2}.

Restoring the Soul: the Divine Return.

“He restores my soul...,” 3a. In reading through this v., in quoting this v. from memory in Sunday School, we miss this phrase most the time, don't we? We give it almost nothing more than a fleeting thought, just a brief glance in its direction. **“He restores my soul; He renews my life.”** That's what my Jewish Bible has {which misses the whole ‘soul’ aspect, however, which is crucial}. He **“restores”** me, how? The basic meaning of this verb is of a movement back to a point of departure. In Genesis 3:19, e.g., *Yahweh* tells Adam and *Eve*— **“for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** *Our souls have gone astray.* This is the point I'm making here. And I don't just mean way back there in the Garden, when the human Race got sidetracked by sin and rebellion. I mean the course of our own lives, in relation to the warfare in which we live and breathe, has taken a serious turn for the worse.

What was it God had in mind when He created you, when He brought your soul into being? Because there was a Plan at work, a purpose in mind. God is telling a Story through each human Life, unfolding an Adventure, fulfilling His will and glorifying Himself, one way or another. **So, what is it He wanted to say through you? Where is it our lives, our souls especially, have been de-railed? In the area of His image: in what He wants to reveal and reflect through His image within us.** It's very simple, really. So simple we seem to have missed it completely. Through a Man He reflects His strength and honor, His courage and commitment, and His fierce loyalty to those He loves and those He leads. Through a Woman He reflects His beauty, His goodness, His glory, and His grace. All of the tenderness, mercy, and compassion

which flows from a woman's heart. And all of this is to be realized not apart from Him but *in* Christ Jesus, in *communion* with our Creator.

This is the Path He set us on the moment He gave us Life, which is the same moment we first came under assault. Listen to me, and listen to me close. From the earliest innocence of our lives {not *sinlessness*, but innocence} we have been under assault by a deadly enemy. *Satan is the enemy of God*. And of all those who are beneficiaries of His goodness, His glory, and above all, His grace, all those who have experienced the majesty of His mercy and the lavishness of His love.

This is why Peter commands us in 1 Peter 5:8, to **“be self-controlled** [‘be calm and collected in soul’] **and alert....”** *Gregoreo* means- ‘be *vigilant*, stay *awake*,’ it’s the same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 16:13 when he says, **“Be on your guard; stand firm in the Faith; be Men of courage; be strong!”** Because **“your enemy** [‘your adversary’ {NAS}] **the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”** The verb *katapino* means literally- ‘*drink down* the blood, *destroy* and *devour* with greed.’ *Katapino* is used by John in another passage concerning the devil where it says, **“the Earth helped the Woman,”** meaning the saved of Israel in the time of her Tribulation, **“by opening its mouth and swallowing the river which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth”** {Rev. 12:16}. It’s a word implying total extinction. This is nothing less than what our enemy desires: our total extinction from his kingdom. He knows the battle for our souls is lost, therefore, he’s waging war against our lives and against the One who gives us Life.

We would do well to remember these three things as the backdrop to all our beliefs: [i] **We were born into a world at War;** [ii] **There *is* an enemy {full of hatred and malice for all the things of God};** and [iii] **We *will* get wounded.** It’s this wounding part I want to deal with. You see, ‘innocence’ is not sinlessness; it’s simply the time in our lives before the arrows of the enemy had been fired into the deepness of our hearts. **Every person you’ve ever known has taken a wound right to the centre of the soul. For most of us, many wounds.** There is no getting around this; it is a fact of Human existence. And it makes absolutely *no* sense if there is no real enemy and we are not in a Conflict of epic proportions. If we were not created to be the intimate allies of the Almighty in this Battle between *God* and *evil*, then the universal nature of our wounds — and even the wounds themselves — are without meaning.

This is where the subtle shift in your soul took place. Something happened, maybe early on in childhood, maybe later on in life, but whatever the case you were in many ways {spiritually, emotionally, intellectually} young and defenseless, or merely naïve enough for an enemy who knows how to wage war against your heart to attack with great success. It can be a crisis {let’s say your family loses everything they own}, a tragedy {abuse, rape, molestation}, or just an instance of deep shame and humiliation

{a girl becomes the laughingstock of her class, a boy gets beaten up in front of his friends}, and your soul began to veer, just a little, from the path God had for you. After all, I mean we have to find some way to protect ourselves, right? We have to make sure this doesn't *ever* happen again, to *control* the circumstances around us {which is the *last illusion* in life, let it go and you will be free}? This is where most Christians, most people period, are living their lives. There is no freedom, no wholeheartedness, no Life! **This is the place in our lives where the *lies* of the enemy meet up with the deceitfulness of our own sin-nature. And now here we are.**

I've got good news and bad news. The good news is our heavenly Father wants to restore our souls and release in us His strength; the bad news is you're going to have to go back *into* and *deal* with the wounds, in utterly ruthless honesty, in order to do it. Jesus wants to bring us back to the point of departure, to heal us right there in this very place, the place of our deepest wounding. A bit of wisdom for you: **Whatever it was that took you off track, no matter how slight you think it is, do not *minimize* your woundedness or the effect it's had upon you.**

We need to know and understand something crucial here: the Father is fierce in His commitment to us, to leading us down a purifying path. Call it a 'forging of His Children in the fires of love.' It is a fierce commitment to restore and release the masculine heart of His Men and the feminine heart of His Ladies. Here are a couple of keys to hold on to.

- A. **A wound unacknowledged and unwept is a wound which cannot heal.** Solomon said, there is "**a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance**" {Eccl. 3:4}. It's a natural scene in the circle of life. It's also a healthy necessity for cleansing the soul, for *grieving* the loss of something substantial: your father, your brother, your friends, your innocence.
- B. **A wound you have embraced {*internalized* as your own} is a wound which cannot heal.** Children often do this with their parents' divorce; Ray Charles did it with his brother's death, bought the Lie that it was his fault. God tells us to take responsibility for our *own* actions {Gal. 6:7}, not for someone else's. If this is true for you, how much more so for those who have wounded you?
- C. **A wound you believed was *deserved* is a wound which cannot heal.** These three truths are so closely connected it's almost impossible to separate them. If you deserved it, then it's your fault. *That's the lie.* It was *not* your fault. Hear what I'm saying. It was not. So, let go of the shame and the guilt which has been feeding on this subconscious belief that somehow if you had done better or done different, or been better or been different, whatever it was that happened would not have happened: the divorce, the abuse, the abandonment, the betrayal.

Let it go, and let the Holy Spirit go to work. He is a garbage collecting God and He knows what to do with it!

I'm reminded here of Brennan Manning's words, "to be alive is to be broken;" and "to be broken is to stand in need of grace. It is only through grace that any of us could ...hope" to "become more like Christ." The problem I see so often is most of us deny our wound the kind of spiritual light and illumination it needs to be exposed. We pretend it didn't happen, we minimize the damage done {the hurt which was wrought}, and we refuse to admit it's *driving* us this very moment. And so when God initiates a Man into the Life He's called him to, into a larger place in a much larger Story, He takes a very cunning and what feels like very cruel course. **He will cut, and cut deeply, in the *exact* area where you were wounded. But this time— *this* time— the wound is designed not to *harm* us but to *heal* us.**

Shuww means- '*cause to return, bring back:*' He brings us back to the place of departure so He can heal us right there ...at 5, 10, 14, 24. So those young and fractured places in the heart can be healed. *Shuww* also means- '*restore, refresh,*' and figuratively, '*repair.*' Our Lord leads us back, He draws us back, He causes us to return to the things we don't want to face, the things we've tried so hard to *hide*, and to *hide from*, so He can restore us. **Only when our souls have been restored can they be released into the freedom of His grace.** Only when our hearts have been made whole, brought back together and mended by the hands of Mercy, our darkness dispelled by the Light of the Father's love, can we live as He intended us to — in the fullest sense of the word.

Let me expand the translation of v. 3 for you: **"Christ restores my soul, He returns it to the place from which it never should have departed,"** so He can guide **"me in Paths of Righteousness for His Name's sake"** — for His might, His majesty, and His glory. So He can honor Himself by releasing His strength through our lives. **"Even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me** [And, lest we forget, 'You always will be.']; **Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me,"** v. 4. The **"rod"** is a weapon; the **"staff"** is there as a protection against straying into dark and dangerous territory. Simply put, His **"rod"** and His **"staff"** are there to *guard* and to *guide*.

The House of Grace.

What happens in vv. 5-6 is the metaphor moves, as David reveals an even deeper intimacy with the Son of God, into a fabulous feast in the House of Grace. At the start of Psalm 23 he shows us the gentle faith and affection a sheep has for its shepherd; he ends with the mature trust a soldier has in his Commander, a warrior in his King. He sees his God now as Provider, Protector, and Promoter, as generous beyond our comprehension.

You have three symbols in v. 5: the first is *provision*; the second is *promotion*; and the third is *capacity*. David in v. 5 says, “**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies** [A banquet ‘table’ of grace, full of the bounty of divine provision]. **You anoint my head with oil...**” This was a common courtesy for an honored guest in the Middle East {Lk. 7:44-46}; it symbolizes the ultimate in divine promotion.

When he says, “**my cup overflows,**” this is a sign of *tremendous* generosity. In this last phrase we have the phenomenal picture of a Believer’s capacity. At a banquet in the ancient world, your status in the eyes of the host was demonstrated to all those in attendance by the size of your cup. And so, when the servants poured the wine, if you had a thimble-sized cup, a thimbleful of wine was what you ended up with. The one with the largest goblet was seen as being the most important person in attendance. Oftentimes, you would see a host display his gracious and lavish generosity, by filling the cup of this person and then pouring and pouring more and more until the wine ran over the sides. It was his way of saying, “Don’t worry about that. Don’t sweat it. Pay no attention to the spilt wine, there’s plenty more where that came from. This man, this woman, is worth every drop.”

The analogy is this: **The size of your cup is the capacity of your soul.** What gives us the capacity to receive in the future? **Our gratitude for what we’ve been given in the present.** We have to learn to live in the here and now, to be present in the moment, awake and aware!

“Surely,” he says in v. 6, “**goodness and love** [‘loving-kindness,’ NAS] **will follow me all the days of my Life, and I will dwell in the House of the LORD forever,**” v. 6. We have “**goodness and love.**” In New Covenant terms these would be ‘mercy and grace.’ Why these two? Because mercy removes from us what we *do* deserve, while grace gives us what we do *not* deserve. Mercy deals with judgment; grace deals with blessing—the judgment which belongs to us, and the blessing which by all human reason and logic should not, and yet does.

“**Love**” comes from a magnificent term in the Hebrew, *chesed*. *Chesed* is one of the most powerful words for *grace* in all of Scripture. You have three ideas in constant interaction with one another: **strength; loyalty; and love.** *Strength, loyalty, and love.* In our relationship to the Father of mercies it pictures His profound faithfulness, His kindness and caring, the glory of His grace and the loyalty of His love. Those are all ideas embodied in this one little word. Do you see how inadequate even the best English translation can be when it comes to a concept like this? As Tom Wolfe once wrote,

“The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man’s search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh,

not merely the lost father of his youth, but the *image* of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united." *The Story of a Novel* {Italics mine.}

"In my own childhood and boyhood my father was the refuge from all the ills of life, even sharp pain itself. Therefore I say to son or daughter who has no pleasure in the name *Father*, 'You must interpret the word by all that you have missed in life. All that human tenderness can give or desire in the nearness and readiness of love, all and infinitely more must be true of the *perfect* Father— of the maker of fatherhood.'" George MacDonald, *The Heart of George MacDonald* {Italics mine.}

Finale.

Most of us can relate to God as Sovereign, as Ruler, as Lord, but not as Father. Not as a tender and caring Father who knows all the failures and follies of your Life and still reaches His arms out to embrace you. But this, I believe, is the image of God we need *above all*, the true image of a final and perfect Father— Luke 15:20. How I pray you can embrace this by faith, that you can trust this with everything in your soul and make it your own. **The Father's arms are open in a gesture of complete and total acceptance, of *uncompromising* compassion and *unconditional* affection. Will you trust Him with your heart? This is what He wants and this is what He's been waiting for.**

In the February 2006 edition of *Touchstone*, the newsletter of *Committed to Freedom*— a ministry dedicated to adult survivors of sexual abuse— founder Sallie Culbreth speaks of the 'Beauty of Spiritual Memory' saying, "Sometimes we must remind ourselves what is real. When we are connected to God, committed to Truth, and in pursuit of freedom, our perspective becomes healthier." She then offers an interpretive translation, a very modern and potentially healing paraphrase of Psalm 23. She calls it "a Psalm of Openness and Truth for all survivors."

I call it bold and beautiful.

Psalm 23: From a Mortal's Heart

God is in a position to guide me through this Life. To follow God puts things into perspective until I am clear about what is and is not important—
v. 1.

In places of beauty, God reveals Himself. God brings me to a place where I am in the open and can no longer hide. It is in the openness into which I have entered that all the dark secrets are no longer empowered. It is in this

truthful place that the chaos is silenced and deep healing works its way through my soul and back out into the world— v. 2.

Where God leads me is a Sacred Journey toward an intimate destination where our spirits are inexplicably entwined, joined as they were always meant to be— v. 3.

Through the darkest of the dark nights of my soul, I know it is impossible for You to abandon me. We are inextricably one. This suffering, hellish realm in which I am forced to live no longer defines me. I am finally comforted to know my true self because I followed Your Path— v. 4.

Because we are one, I have the audacity to walk in Freedom right in front of the very ones who thought they owned my soul. It was never theirs to own. It was always mine to give and I gave it to You. My soul is not famished, it is well-nourished and tenderly cherished by both You and me— v. 5.

Your Kingdom is within me. It is not a place I go, nor a creed I speak, nor a ritual I perform. You and I are fused together in such a way that I see Your goodness and Your love at all times. It is impossible to be without You, because the Path I am on is Yours. My life makes sense now— v. 6.

Indeed, it does. And the full Life God designed us for should make sense to our souls. Now and forevermore.