

The 23rd Psalm for Christian Living

Nearly a half century ago during a night I shall never forget, I could not sleep. I counted sheep, sang hymns, quoted scripture, and prayed but did not sleep. Near daybreak a new plan came to my mind. I began to quote the 23rd Psalm aloud and stop with each phrase to meditate on its meaning to me. When I finished, I went to sleep.

I have continued that spiritual discipline for the past 45 years, including through Joan's sickness and death and my four years of living alone. We all have our down times. My testimony to you this morning is what the 23rd psalm has meant to me and what I recommend to you.

First of all, like most of you, I learned the 23rd Psalm as a child from the King James Version of the Bible translated in 1611; so it was that version that I quoted phrase by phrase that night and will use today. The KJV is not the Bible's most accurate version, but it is the most beautiful; indeed, it has been called the noblest monument of English prose.

The Lord is my shepherd.

In many areas of the country, we don't have much first-hand knowledge about sheep, but when Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, he said I know my sheep and my sheep know me. He went on to imply that God is not up there or everywhere but is down here with us and knows all about me, even the number of hairs on our heads. We have no secrets from God; he knows us and he still loves us. He calls our name and leads us out to security and safety.

- Young people with social media are having a hard time really knowing who they are. They need the image of the Lord as their shepherd.
- People in the midst of life crises like divorce, loss of job, or notice from our doctor that our disease is inoperable and terminal, we need to hear another voice. We need to sense an echo of God's presence. Jesus told us My peace is with you; not as this world gives you.
- Whatever our life situation, we are shackled with some heavy burdens-- of regrets for old decisions that still have scars, burdens of guilt for our sins, and the burden of sheer loneliness or fear.

With all the words and codes and symbols that might lead us to frustration and fear and inferiority, **if we can really internalize that the Lord is our shepherd, we can know that we are loved and cared for by our heavenly father.** As is true of a shepherd of sheep, Jesus said to us, I am the gate; he leads us out to new ventures, new relationships, new communities of residence, and sometimes a new church... Then, when we are in the dark, scared, frustrated, angry; the Lord as our shepherd at the gate leads us in to a safe place where we find emotional security and a sense of comfort, love, peace, and care.

We sometimes think of God's whispering to our heart—not audibly but the Deep of God whispering to the deep in us. Our religious emotion depends on our disposition and the church we are in, but we all need the peace that passes understanding. We need, in the words of a great hymn, to tune our heart to sing his grace. We need to bind our wandering hearts to our Maker, Our Redeemer and our friend.

I shall not want.

The psalm says, "I shall not want", but we do want.

- We **want** bad things not to happen to good people. I received a text early Friday morning that my next door neighbor's fifteen year old son had a wreck on his dirt bike and the swelling of his brain required removal of half of his skull. His mother has want.
- Two hours after her call, I learned that the 90 year old father of a good friend did not wake up Friday morning. His son has a **want--**to have had a chance to say goodbye to his dad.
- We **want** some of our bad decisions to not bring us such bad consequences.
- I **want** this church and my home church and thousands of others crippled by COVID and denominational divisions and WOKE theology to grow in attendance and membership.
- St. Paul **wanted** his thorn in the flesh to be removed, but it never was.
- We want it to be well with our soul regardless of circumstances

However, my basic want list always takes me back to the first church I served when I was nineteen years old. We had a man who lived in the tuberculosis sanitorium in Jamestown but could still be brought to church to Sunday night worship. Naturally, his want list was to be healed of tuberculosis. Our custom at that service was to let people request the hymns they wanted sung. Isaac Dennis every Sunday night called for the same hymn. It was a hymn by Fanny Crosby, who was blinded as a child by a doctor who applied too strong a poultice on her eyes. Day after day, year after year, she dictated over 8000 hymns to her caregiver. Isaac's hymn because a foundation stone in my own faith.

1. Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth or song?
2. As the burdens press and our cares distress and the way seems weary and long?

Then our mill village congregation raised the tempo and sang the answer to Isaac that he could take with him in his dreary days and weary nights in the sanitorium:

O Yes, He cares, I know he cares, his heart is touched with my grief

When the days are weary and the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares.

I still meet and occasionally have funerals from that congregation. They were children when I was pastor, but they still remember the relief from want that Isaac received and they still sing, "He cares, He cares, O I know he cares; his heart is touched my grief." Often in the seventy-two years I have been a minister, people have told me that God becomes the closest when our wants are the worst.

God cannot change the circumstances of our wants but listen to the next verse of the 23rd psalm!

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

In repeating the 23rd psalm before I sleep, I move quickly from my wants to God's answer. **Say it with me, He makes me lie down in green pastures.** My first one was during the very year that my dad died. You see the year we began the sixth grade, not only was my Dad dying, but at school I was always the last boy chosen at recess time whatever game people were choosing sides to play. We had a teacher who provided me the metaphor of green pastures as my comfort zone. My sixth grade teacher kept me in one day at recess time and gave me the copy of a speech. She told me to memorize it, and she would teach me public speaking. I did and she did. After she had trained me, Mrs. Joyner took my friend, Carlene, and me to Stoneville and we both won the county speaking contest—Carlene in the girls competition and me in the boys. It was my first life achievement. Materially speaking, we were the poorest that year of any year in my life. and it came when my I shall want list was for my daddy to recover from terminal cancer. However, he did not recover. On September 6 of my seventh grade year, my daddy died. Mama and I had no income and did not own the house we lived in.

Then came more green pastures or blessings. By the spring of 1948 I was active in the 4-H Club and the county 4-H director became like a second father to me. The 4-H Club gave me 100 baby chicks provided by Sears Roebuck to the 4-H club. I had to care for them, cull them at six weeks, and provide a roosting and lay house. The 4-H director drove from Reidsville to Glencoe and then to Leaksville for me to emcee our weekly 4-H program on WLOE—which meant wonderful land of Eden long before the town was named that.

My first public speaking contest speech was about green pastures that, in my high school Future Farmers of America teach was taking us to local farms to replace broom sedgefields with grass for grazing. **In our marriage and the lives of our three wonderful children, and in my ministerial career I have continued to be blessed— people and open doors for which I use the metaphor “green pastures.”**

In the midst of your wants, what are your green pastures?

- Is it well with your soul; Could you die in peace?
- Rainy dad funds for care givers or a retirement home?
- Family members who care for you?
- Friends in whom you can confide?
- A hobby that provides therapy?
- Reading your Bible perceptively

If to all of those, you must answer, NO, then you have some homework to do. We all need green pastures for nourishment, safety, and rest.

But there is more...

He leaded me beside the still waters.

I learned one time from a shepherd in Scotland that sheep are frightened by running water. The shepherd had to find water that was still so when they drank and still hear any danger around them.

Our culture, even our worship, conditions us to sounds—voice, music, etc. **However, the Bible often reminds us of the spiritual power of silence of being beside still waters.** The word still is in The King James Version exactly 100 times. In our times of anxiety, fear, and even ecstasy, we need to turn off the chatter; we need to shut down the social media that invades our privacy. We need to factor into your media that some time everyone needs *"to Be still and know that God is God."* That may be a walk in the woods, sitting in a rocking chair, watching a sunset as a part of God's creation, or seeing a mountain, watching gentle ocean wave, or whatever else is the still, small voice of silence.

When we are still, we are more open to sensing God's presence, to hear his whispers to our heart and hear God as an echo in our soul. We need a place, a spot, an environment where we are in tune with the infinite. We need a willingness to listen as the Holy Spirit mysteriously instill an inner peace.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.

A better translation is He leads me in the right paths.

In the Lords's prayer, we pray, Lead me from temptation and deliver me from evil. One translation of the word Satan is trickster. According to the 23rd psalm, the rod and staff that the shepherds used are metaphors for God's guidance and rescue in our lives. This resists the Old Trickster who tempts us to leave the right paths. The **rod** of God is our conscience, our go, caution, and stop light as we face temptation. The **staff** has a crook in it for rescue when we have sinned and need forgiveness. Remember with God's rod, he keeps us in line; with his staff he rescues us when we fall.

Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

This verse is the somber reality that we must walk in the shadow of death—both the deaths of loved ones and the reality of our own mortality. Deathbeds are coming for you for me. My favorite question to people concerned about eternity is, "Have you finished your homework with God?" There is a peace that passes our human understanding. If we are shackled by a heavy burden of guilt, or bitterness, or fear of our future, we need to sense the touch of the Master's hand. With, proverbially speaking, God's rod and staff—one of discipline; one of rescue. Tune your heart to

hear his voice of grace that brings forgiveness, peace, and preparation for the shadow of death.

He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

Sometime in everyone's life:

- foes arise,
- critics bruise us with words that hurt,
- broken marriage vows can destroy our assumptions for a permanent family life
- friends can betray our confidence or simply drop us when we don't know why
- we backslide, caving in to the devil who knocks at the door of our heart and says temptingly, "Hi, I'm back. Remember me?"

Well, the psalm says that God has set the table for us to be helped, saved, healed. How so?

He anoints my head with oil.

In ancient times, there was a worm that got into the sheep's nostrils when they were grazing. It laid eggs that hatched larvae that led to the sheep's becoming weak, sick, even dying. But the shepherds had an oil and if they anointed the sheep's nose with that preventive oil, the worms did not come into the nostrils. **I like that story.**

God has several oils with which he anoints us. Being saved is not a one and done experience. We need means of grace to keep fear and doubt and guilt and temptations from contaminating our soul. God is trying to say to us: "Keep in touch".

Here are some of the anointing oils for me:

- **Search the scripture**, not just to learn the content of the Bible, but to hear God's speaking to us as we mediate on a verse here and there. Use a highlighter as you read your Bible. You might need that verse again later. This good book is more than a good book: It is the word of God for the people of God.
- **Don't carry your burdens alone** Have at least one person other than your spouse or your parent or child who is your soulmate. You can trust a soulmate with your secrets. You know they care for you, love you, and will keep a confidence. Feel their hugs; reach out to them when your way becomes hard.
- **Attend church.** The ancient Jews believed that in the Temple, heaven and earth met. To me the church is the house of the Lord. The stained glass windows. speak to me when I focus on them. The cross reminds me that my sins are forgiven. The candles remind me that Jesus was both human and divine and that all the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of one little candle. Let this be your meetinghouse between you, God, and friends.
- **Regardless of how spiritual or lack of spiritual you see yourself, try reading the 23rd psalm every night. Give your mind time to mediate**

on it verse by verse. It changed my life when I did this at my lowest hour. It can change yours too.

If practice these means of grace, our cup will overflow with blessings. Make new friends but keep the old; one is silver and the other gold. Keep romance in your marriage and some openness with close friends. Move beyond the words of the Bible and let it become the Word of God for you. **Time** does not heal, but the Holy Spirit can heal us in **time**. God will wipe away the tears from our eyes, and we shall live in the house of the Lord forever.

If we live by the 23rd psalm then we shall see the goodness and mercy that God can bring into our lives regardless of our agenda, assets, and aspirations. Be sure to measure your days by quality more than by quantity.

Then, when we leave this world, something comes next.

We shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.