

Sermon

May 27, 2018

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Title: Passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death – Psalm 23:1-6 and John 10:11-18

Introduction

When Pastor Jon asked me what I would like to preach about I told him I wanted to ride on my most favorite horse: Psalm 23. I believe everyone knows this Psalm by heart and you might have heard it preached several times, especially at funerals. It's my most favorite not because it's easy to preach on, but because every time I preach about it God gives me a new revelation.

My focus today is to walk you through the two main life vicissitudes that David puts across in the six verses of the Psalm. I will call it the **big change** or the **big transition** from **SUMMER** to **WINTER**. Please take note of how life changes from verse 1 to verse 6.

TEACH

There are two fundamental needs in the life of a sheep that David dwells on – the pasture and water. Everything in the 6 verses revolves around the sheep's access to these two basic necessities. The main reason for writing the Psalm here was to appreciate the shepherd for his role in ensuring access to the two basic provisions so verse 1 starts by saying: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."

In verse 2 David justifies why he the Lord is his CONSUMMATE SHEPHERD.

"He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters."

I need to explain why the green pastures and still waters were important in the life of a sheep. Before that I want you to understand the setting in which verse 2 is presented. This is a SPRING/SUMMER setting. In springtime there is an abundance of green pasture, and usually the sheep are allowed to graze near to the villages. After the grain is reaped, and the poor have had an opportunity to glean what is left for them, then the shepherds bring in their flock, and the sheep feed on certain fresh growths, or dried blades, or the few ears of grain that the reapers may have left, or the gleaners might have overlooked.

Now let me quickly bring you to the **COMFORT OF THE GREEN PASTURES!**

- In Israel sheep were kept mainly for wool, meat and milk. But for the sheep itself wool provides warmth and comfort when it sleeps – a sheep is a wimp when it comes to cold weather and dry surfaces. The woolen fleece was cut off in spring so they moved into summer with very thin layers. In other words they got into summer without their natural mattress. The green summer pastures were therefore a very good substitute for their missing wool – hence he says "He makes me lie down in green pastures." So the green summer pastures served two purposes – palatable food and comfort when sleeping.

- Although sheep thrive in dry, semi-arid areas, they still require water. The body of a sheep is composed of about 70 percent water on an average. If the supply of water drops off, bodily desiccation sets in. This dehydration of the tissues can result in serious damage to them. It can also mean that the animal becomes weak and impoverished. When sheep are thirsty, they become restless and set out in search of water to satisfy their thirst. So the overflowing summer streams remove all the hassles because drinking water is available near the homesteads.

PREACH

I will preach a bit here. David is very clear that he exalts God well above the capabilities of the human shepherds. No human shepherd would be capable of making the pastures green. If anything the human shepherd would only fleece them of their wool. No human shepherds would fill the streams with water; otherwise they would be happy they are saved from filling up the drinking troughs. So when you wallow in the comfort of green pastures know it's not man, but it's God.

TEACH

Now trouble started with the setting in of FALL. The sheep would have totally ruined the pastures by eating every blade of grass down to the soil - so no more palatable food, no more comfortable rest/or sleep; and no more still waters. What a BIG CHANGE! Most of the sheep would start showing severe signs and symptoms of stress – I guess to the extent of losing their soul. So verse 3 starts by saying:

“He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.”

PREACH

God is at the center of the BIG CHANGE. Because He is, there are certain things that I do not because I can't but because He is. Even if I have run out of the green pastures there are things that I cannot do because of his names sake....

TEACH

When the source of food is exhausted then the pasture is sought in other places. The wilderness of Judea which is located along the western side of the Jordan Valley is carpeted in the spring with a certain amount of grass and this turns into standing hay as the hot weather comes, and this becomes food for the sheep during the last part of summer. In fall and winter time the only place with standing hay is the Arabah Valley which is 103 miles in length stretching from the Gulf of Aqaba to the southern shore of the Dead Sea. It covers almost the entire length of what is today called the Jordan Rift Valley.

It wasn't safe moving from the villages into the wilderness of Judea. It was even more dangerous moving from the wilderness of Judea into the Valley of Arabah because this transition always coincided with the difficult hunting season for the predators. When the tall grey/brown hay provided good camouflage for the prey, most predators which relied on sight for hunting would go for days without a good meal. Because of the new fur that would be growing after the shave the sheep were very colorful and easy to

be spotted by the hungry wolves, bears and lions, which would lay in ambush along the way from the wilderness to the base of the valley. That made the valley a very dangerous place to be.

So what the shepherds did was to go in front of the flock in two rows. On each side the shepherds would draw boundary lines on each side. The sheep were supposed to move in between the two lines. Now safety lies within the boundaries set by the shepherds using the staff and also in the might of the rod that the shepherd kept as weapon to fight the predators hence he says in verse 4:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You *are* with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

PREACH

Now in life:

Every sheep has to pass through the valley of the shadow of death;
Your marriage has to pass through the valley of the shadow of death;
Your career has to pass through the valley of the shadow of death;
Your finances have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death;
Your health has to pass through the valley of the shadow of death;

And you think God wants you to die – No He wants to take you out of the comfort of your man-made provisions. He wants you out of the comfort of your community, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your physicians, and your employers.

TEACH

Once they get into the Valley of Arabah the shepherds move around making a boundary line which communicates same message to two groups with totally different interests. To the sheep the line means “you cannot graze beyond this line.” To the wolves, lions and the bears it means “you cannot hunt beyond this line.” The line was like a boundary fence. As long as the sheep are grazing within the boundaries they shouldn’t worry about the enemies outside the boundary fence that are salivating for a meal – that’s why in verse 5 he says:

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.”

PREACH

Now we have a shepherd called Jesus. He who says in John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.¹² He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf

coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters *them...*”

You are what you are today because Jesus wants you not to depend on your own means. He prepares a table for you in the presence of all forms of adversity. The world today is living in the Dispensation of Enlightenment and Knowledge. The human race is trying to remove God from its advancement in technology and materialism. But for those that he so loved he has put in some reminders so that they don't forget God is God. That is why today:

You have money in your bank but money is not answering all your problems

You have the highest level of education but it's not answering all your problems

You have high tech but it's not answering all your problems

You have very good hospitals but they are not answering all your problems

With all those material and intellectual endowments the world is still afflicted with pain, disease, war, famine and hunger, and so forth. You are still passing through the valley of the shadow of death, and you are eating on the table while adversity surrounds you. God wants to depend on Him and on Him alone. He sent his only begotten son to be a shepherd for you. Jesus will always be with you in the wilderness and the valley of pain, disease and all forms of affliction, and when you are surrounded by the worst things in life – even at the point of death. That's why Paul says in Philippians 1:21 “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

David concludes it by saying in verse 6:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD
Forever.”