

A Second Look at the 23rd Psalm

I have always treasured the imagery and promises of the 23rd Psalm. And I have always viewed it as having three sections or distinct paragraphs.

1st – the green pastures, quiet waters, soul restoration and safe pathways as being the first paragraph.

Then the 2nd section contains the dreaded valley of the shadow of death – which we will all encounter at some time. At the time of my Mother’s passing, I learned that the valley of the shadow of death is not traversed so much by the dying person (who is rescued out of the middle of it into the glorious Presence of the Lord) as it is the necessary passage through grief for the living. But even more than that, it is also the passage through the many shadows of life – illness, loss of relationships, financial hardships - even aging has its valleys of shadows.

The 3rd section is the feasting and anointing and dwelling in the Lord’s house forever.

But lately, I’ve been seeing a different side of the Psalm. One that I think is crucial to our understanding, not only of life but even more importantly, of our Great Shepherd. If you talk to someone from the middle east who understands the type of shepherd David was, they visualize this Psalm quite differently. They see it as the cycles of one year. The lambs are born in springtime, in green pastures with abundant water. And they grow quickly as the season changes into summer. Now the once green pastures are stressed from the grazing flock and the heat of the sun. Now that the lambs are growing rambunctious and the flock is easily mobile, it is time to head to fresher pastures higher up the slopes. And so, leading the flock carefully, in paths of the shepherd’s choosing, the darkened valleys and rocky ravines are carefully crossed to reach the table land the shepherd has prepared in advance for his flock. The tablelands are where the lambs can grow to full stature and healthy maturity. Even so, the valleys of shadows and ravines of troubles are in our lives also necessary for us to reach maturity. This process may happen a number of times as summer progresses, each time leading up to new more abundant pastures and new levels of growth, strength and maturity.

And yet, I can think of times when I (and lots of other Christians I know), having hit a dark stretch or a rocky part of life, start to wonder “what I have done wrong?” “Why is the Lord mad at me?” “What happened to the promise of green pastures, quiet waters and restoration of my soul?” But the truth is, God’s not mad at me (or you) at all! He’s just leading me up to a new level of maturity, of anointing, and yes, the green pastures at a higher level.

Being a little sheepish is kind of natural for us humans, and one thing sheep do not have is great eyesight. How quickly we forget the dying grasses of the lowlands, and the dried-out watering holes. If we would think it through, we would not really want to be in those pastures in the blazing heat of summer. Next time I find myself facing the dread of a valley dark with division, danger and all kinds of shadows, rather than dwelling on what my life was as a tiny lamb, I should be able to by now understand that my Good Shepherd knows the seasons that don’t make any sense to me. He sees the strength and maturity that is growing in me, and He chooses paths that lead me up to the tablelands which He Has prepared for me. There is a greater anointing, greater fulfillment and always His Presence to comfort, provide for, defend and protect me. Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow me - as I follow Him - through all the pathways and all the days of my life.

I hope these simple thoughts will encourage someone else to travel confidently up to new pastures with Jesus.

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