

THE VALLEY OF THE VIRUS

INTRO: Turn your Bibles, or turn them on, to a very familiar passage, PSALM 23. Two weeks ago I preached from Psalm 46, on “The Truth About Our Troubles”. Today, I want to preach from Psalm 23, a sermon Titled, THE VALLEY OF THE VIRUS.

After today, you will notice an obvious shift in our subject matter. Starting next week, we will be looking at REVIVAL. I haven’t forgotten about our series in JOHN. We’ll get back there soon. But I believe, spiritually, God is wanting to lead us out of our current crisis into a place of real revival. And that will be our focus starting next week. And I can hardly wait!

ILLUS: Once, a Sunday School teacher asked her class, “How many of you can quote Psalm 23?” Several students raised their hands, including a little girl who was only four years old. The teacher called on her. She stood up and declared loudly, “*The Lord is my shepherd. I got all I want.*” She had the words a little mixed up but she certainly understood the message perfectly.

Most everyone has heard of the 23rd Psalm, even if they can’t quote it correctly. It has been called the sweetest psalm ever written. Abraham Lincoln read it often to cure his blues. President Bush read it publicly to calm the fears of our nation after 9-11. It has been called, the PSALM that CALMS.

This psalm is very familiar. And because of that, we often miss the depth of its meaning. And because it is set in a world of sheep and shepherds, many of us city slickers completely miss the relevance of its message. Are you aware the Bible refers to us Christians, as sheep, nearly two hundred times? This is not usually a compliment, because sheep stink, they are stubborn, and pretty stupid.

Well, read with me today this beautiful Psalm...

Psalm 23 *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. 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. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

King David is the human author of this psalm. As a boy, he was a shepherd. However, he writes this beautiful poem from the perspective of a sheep grazing and gazing at his caring shepherd. The psalm moves from victory to valley and spans the whole of life, from womb to the tomb. David knew what it was to go through difficult times. He had more than a few dark and difficult valley moments. But in his valley experiences, he had learned some valuable truths. As David contemplates his life, one of being both a shepherd, and now, a sheep, notice what he has to say about his time in the valley with the GOOD SHEPHERD... Valley experiences will come. Nothing we can say or do will stop that inevitable descent into the dangers and darkness of those deep ravines. But when we find ourselves down, and looking up, the truths that David learned in his life, are good for you to know as well.

NOTICE...

I) THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROVIDES: vv 1-3 Here, David starts out by saying, *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."* Who is our Shepherd? The LORD! In a prophecy about the coming Messiah, we read in, **Isaiah 40:11** *"Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes"* And Jesus said about Himself in **John 10:11** *"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."*

Make no mistake, the Lord is our Shepherd... and Jesus is LORD!

And David makes a declarative statement from his valley, as if shouting it from the mountaintop... The Lord is MY Shepherd! MY MY, ME, OH MY! He is mine! You'll never know a truth more comforting in times of hurt and want, than that, Jesus is a caring, loving, PROVIDING Shepherd. MY Shepherd! MY, MINE... Is Jesus your Shepherd? Or is He just someone else's? He wants to be yours! Will you let Him?

ILLUS: It's important that we always remember who the Shepherd is. A few years ago, a young, fresh out of seminary, full of himself, pastor, met with the kids of Children's Chapel, just before big church started. He wanted to share with them a grand story from Psalm 23. He told the children about sheep. He told them that sheep weren't very smart and needed lots of guidance. He said that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing dumb things that would get them hurt or killed. And then he pointed to the little children in the room and said, you are sheep and need lots of guidance.

Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, "If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd?" He was pretty obviously indicating himself. A silence of a few seconds followed. Then one of the youngsters said, "Jesus, Jesus is the shepherd."

The newbie pastor was obviously caught by surprise. But then he regained his thoughts and said to the boy, "Well, then, who am I?" The little boy frowned and thought for a second, and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

David said, The Lord is my Shepherd! What a glorious thought. Notice what he says next, **V 1** *"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want"* David is saying, I have no needs, or even wants, that aren't PROVIDED for by my Shepherd! And that's a glorious truth! When we stay in close proximity to the Shepherd, all our needs are provided, and all our wants become what He wants, and they too are freely given by our GOOD GOOD SHEPHERD! It's only when we wander off away from the Shepherd that we find ourselves in need and vulnerable.

Now notice how He provides... **vv 2-3** *"He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."*

"He makes me to lie down in green pastures" - This pictures REST
"He leads me beside the still waters" - This speaks of REFRESHMENT
"He restores my soul" - This is the language of REVIVAL
"He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" - This is the constant REMINDER of who He is.

Even in the deepest, darkest valleys, The Good Shepherd is an all sufficient provider!

I) THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROVIDES: vv 1-3

II) THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROTECTS: vv 4-5a *“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. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil...”*

When we come to v 4, we see a couple changes. In vv 1-3, the sheep are in the sunshine. But then in v 4, they are in the shadows. God not only PROVIDES for us through delightful times, He PROTECTS us through the dark seasons of life.

Notice how the pronouns change. In the first half of this Psalm, David is extolling the virtues of the Shepherd, using “He” and “His” to refer to the Lord. But when we come to the second half, he is no longer speaking about the Shepherd, he is speaking to Him: *“You are with me, your rod and your staff...you prepare...you anoint.”*

When times became tough, God became more real to David. Have you ever experienced that? I know I have! In my interview with Dallas & Kristal, and sweet little Janey, they spoke of the comfort that God provided, as He PROTECTED them from the harsh reality of death, during the sickness and passing of Dallas’ mother. Dallas testified of the peace of God that just overwhelmed him! Kristal said in the interview, I don’t even know if our marriage would have survived if it hadn’t been for God.

God is the GOOD SHEPHERD! And shepherds know how to protect their sheep! Notice... David says, in the darkest, most dangerous times in life, even with Death stalking him, that he would fear NO evil! How could he say that?

“for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” - Speaks of PEACE
“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” - Speaks to POWER
it may look like I’m surrounded, but I’m surrounded by you!
“You anoint my head with oil” - speaks of PREVENTION

Let me take a minute with this last one. It’s meaning is lost on us in the modern world. But in ancient Israel, shepherds used oil for three purposes:

- To repel insects. Sheep are really bothered by bugs because flies like to deposit their eggs into the tender membrane of their noses. When the eggs hatched, the maggots would drive the sheep mad, causing them to beat their heads against rocks and trees. The shepherd knows what flies can do so he covers their heads with an oil-like repellent.

- To prevent conflict. Oil was also used to prevent injury to the rams when they butted heads in their battle to win the affection of the ewes. Whenever the shepherd would hear two guys say to the same lady, “I want ewe, babe,” [come on, that was funny!]. He knew there was going to be a rumble. He’d quickly smear this slippery substance on their heads so the gladiators would glide off each other rather than splitting their craniums open.

- To heal wounds. Oil was also used as an ointment because the flock would get a lot of wounds and cuts simply from living in a pasture. Sheep would get pierced by prickly thorns and they would receive abrasions from the rocks. Oil would prevent infection and speed up the healing process.

What a beautiful picture of what the Shepherd does for us. HE PROTECTS!

I) THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROVIDES: vv 1-3

II) THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROTECTS: vv 4-5a

Not only does the Good Shepherd PROVIDE and PROTECT, He also...

III) THE GOOD SHEPHERD PRESERVES: vv 5b-6 "...my cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Here's a helpful thought for today. Look at the last part of v 5: "...My cup runs over." The word "runs over" refers to an overabundance, or a "state of overflowing." The Amplified Version renders it this way: "My brimming cup runs over." A shepherd would often carry water to drink and would share it with his sheep. He would be generous because he knew they had to have liquid, or they would perish. This is a picture of the Good Shepherd not withholding anything back from His sheep. Not even that which belongs to Him. How true this is of Jesus!

Romans 8:17 "And if [we are His] children, [then we are His] heirs also: heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ [sharing His spiritual blessing and inheritance], if indeed we share in His suffering so that we may also share in His glory."

Look at v 6a "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life..." "Surely" is an emphatic expression that can be translated, "Yes, indeed!" The goodness and mercy of God are two of the most comforting attributes of God, especially when we're walking through the valley of the virus.

"Mercy" is a covenant term often translated as "loving-kindness." This attribute is beautifully repeated 26 times in Psalm 136. As recipients of His mercy, we don't receive what we deserve. If God gave us justice, we'd be consumed by His righteous wrath. Thank God for His Mercy!

To "follow" literally means, "to pursue or to chase after." One paraphrase puts it like this: "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life." What a picture! Aren't you glad God chases you with His goodness and mercy?

Goodness supplies our sustenance while mercy blots out our sins.

C H Spurgeon - Goodness and mercy are but two guardian angels always at my back and beck.

V 6b "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" In Christ, the Good Shepherd, we have help for today and hope for tomorrow. The word "dwell" means "to reside, to settle down and be at home with" and "shall" is a promise it will happen for those who belong to Him.

How many of you have pets that are like family? Sheep, for the shepherd, is supposed to be a source of income and food. That is, until the Shepherd falls in love with the sheep. When that happens, he thinks of us as family. This changes everything! From that point we leave the pasture and move into the penthouse! When we give our heart and devotion to God, something happens. We enter into a real relationship with Him. And He takes us out of the elements and gives us a home everlasting with Him. DO you have a relationship with Him today?