

Psalm 23

Written by K B Napier
Monday, 21 March 2011 21:00

This is probably the most well-known Psalm, and best known literature in the world.

Only a man completely in harmony with his own soul and the mind of God could write this Psalm. David knew immense fear, and yet God's peace at the same time. God's peace does not always displace human fear, but controls it. At times it will displace fear, but our human frame does not give us an easy time!

Verses 1-3

1.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

This Psalm is magnificent. All the psalms are wonderful but this one is supreme, as it paints a broad picture of God's mercy and grace. For David, and for us, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."

'Jehovah is my ra'ah': A shepherd guides his flock to places of plenty and safety. It also means that God is our teacher and ruler, our friend and companion. Many critics say God is an old man with a white beard, far removed from the world. This is a fallacy and a deceptive image. God is forever current, always modern, knowing more about us than we know. He knows what we will think, say and do, before we wake from slumber. The Holy Spirit is always alert within us, showing us the right path and warning us away from the wrong path, and even moving us along the right path, whether we know it or not.

Psalm 23

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God tells us that we need not worry about our daily needs, because He has provided them. He knows what we should have before we know it ourselves, and starts to bring about the provision even before we ask. He is there before us, though we may not be aware of His presence! As our shepherd, God guards and takes care of us. It is what He does, not because we demand it, but because He loves us.

When He looks at us from His heavenly abode He looks kindly, even when we do wrong and act foolishly. He watches as we stumble along, pretending to enjoy our sin, and gently waits for us to realise our error. We repent, and He clasps us to Himself with genuine love and joy. Is this how we see our brethren who act foolishly, and perhaps do us wrong? When God looks after us, he makes sure we do not want. That is, we will not lack what is necessary; in this text 'want' means a need.

As a shepherd God moves us along a path of beauty and care. Not for us the failing crumbling paths on the edge of the precipice. No, he takes us gently through pleasant places, close to life-giving waters. He causes us to "lie down in green pastures". These are places of rest and composure... God never takes us along a path of anxiety and fear (we usually manage that ourselves!).

As the description tells us, the green pasture has fresh new grass, good for the body and soul, and is where we should spend our time. But, how silly we are – we sometimes stroll into a place of less worth, deluding ourselves that we act well! We eat the rotting vegetation in a worthless pasture and wonder why things go bad! The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, always gives us fresh life. So, why do we go after what is less, when our Lord gives us what is far more?

The green pasture speaks of hope and newness, comfort and joy, God's hand of help, a place of pleasure. It is almost a synonym for paradise. As sinners we do not deserve such wondrous gifts, but God gives them anyway, because He loves us, and puts up with our silliness every day. Knowing how foolish we can sometimes be, He actively causes (rabats) us to lay down in these green pastures, which shows that we are often unwilling to do so, because we think we know better! But, He knows what is good for us, and so brings about His will for us. Only then do we realise just how good is the life given to us by the Lord.

Similarly, He does not just tell us to go here or there: He "leadeth" us. This is an active term, meaning that God takes us by the hand so that we actually enter into His restful place to enjoy what He is giving us. The word 'leadeth' means to bring to a watering station for rest, guidance,

Psalm 23

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food and refreshment. It is to bring us to a luscious wadi in the middle of a desert.

No matter what happens in this life to upset, scare or reject, God is always with us. The wadi is within, and it is where the Holy Spirit waits to give us sustenance and help, comfort and peace. So, no matter what awful things go on in life, we have a place of peace and rest that no trouble can reach. It is how God intends us to live; it is His gift to our soul; it is His sheer pleasure, because we belong to Him.

In this text God leads us “beside the still waters”. The word ‘waters’ can have one of several meanings; in this text it is refreshment. The waters are “still” – not raging or tumultuous, but restful and quiet, affording comfort and ease. Thus, it means a condition of rest. In other words, a place where God takes us to enjoy His presence and to know His holy care and tranquillity. Again, how foolish we can be, as we avoid this rest and instead try to bring about things our own way, which is always filled with tension and humanly-caused problems.

In biblical language a place of rest is our permanent habitation, not a temporary abode. Yet, we love to find new things outside God’s will, thinking we know better! We leave the best possible place, for passing pleasures or human desire. Oh How marvellous that God, knowing our human frailty, allows us to taste what we should not, and then to return, repentant. But, do not think we can do so blatantly all the time – God will, in some cases, refuse to have us back in His presence, so that we will know the bitter taste of sin, even unto death. Why not remain in the green pastures beside the still waters of peace? It does not make sense to let go of our Father’s hand, when He gives us a place of refuge and peace!

In these places of rest, God refreshes and rebuilds what sin causes us to lose. “He restoreth my soul”. This tells us that God *expects* us to do foolish things that tear-down our peace and well-being. The fact that He restores our soul tells us how longsuffering He is, and how loving. He restores us – shuwb; He returns us to our rightful place, our position in His presence, through repentance. Thus, we shed the sin we accumulate and are refreshed.

As part of this process, He leads us “in the paths of righteousness”. It is necessary, and should be a joy, for us to live our lives totally in His presence and according to His will. The ‘path’ is our walk in life and way to the destination (Heaven). It is our duty and joy to walk along God’s path, safe from harm and sin. Why? Because that is what He demands and expects. We must do it “for His name’s sake”.

Psalm 23

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How often do we pray “In Jesus’ Name”? Well, this is the same thing. We must live righteously “for his name’s sake”... for the sake of His good reputation and glory. Every time we sin, we shame the name of the Person Who saved us. We bring Him into disrepute and cause the unsaved to scorn God. When we act for His name’s sake, we bring Him glory and are a living memorial to the Gospel of Christ.

Verses 4&5

1.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

2.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

When we thus walk righteously in life, we know the many benefits of being righteous. We receive God’s blessing and help. And even when we “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” we will “fear no evil”. That is, when we come to hard times when we think all is lost, He comes to us in comfort, so we will not fear.

The “shadow of death” is one word, tsalmaveth. It means a deep shadow, or death-shadow. It figuratively refers to deepest distress or great danger, but it also means the fear of something, and not the ‘something’ itself. At such times of personal horror or grief, God gives us rest and comfort.

There are times when each of us walks in the shadow of grief, a grief that almost overwhelms us. Have you known this? I have and I do not wish to repeat it, but I came to know God’s peace through it. The valley itself implies mountains on either side, too great to climb, but casting a shadow along our path. We can only crawl our way through the bottom of the chasm, with the shadows of the mountains chilling our bones and mind. We think it means our demise, but it is not.

Psalm 23

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A mountain, though tall, has a known top and base. Likewise, every trouble we have is known in its entirety to God, our Father. The valley between has an entrance to the grave shadows, but also an exit to sunshine. When we keep on going, God will be with us, and we will leave the shadow behind, as we again walk in the warmth of His love. All along, though we felt the chill of grief or trouble, He was still with us.

Whether we feel trouble or grief, or the heat of the sun, God is with us. I realised this when I became a believer almost 50 years ago, and I wrote a poem in the Bible I had then. One of the lines spoke of God being in the chill-wind. And it is true. We love to think of God being with us in the sun, which He is – but He is also with us through our darkest moments. Never forget it.

The 'evil, ra', in the text is not always something absolutely wicked; it can also refer to anything we see as unpleasant, miserable, or something that turns our world upside down in turmoil, maybe causing us injury. No matter! God is still with us. As we suffer, we must remember Him in praise and with hope: "For thou art with me".

He is present with His rod, shebet, His sceptre of divine authority, and His shepherd's crook that wards off dangers. The rod represents the help and support He gives. It also represents an instrument of chastening. He at once helps and protects us, and disciplines us, because both are necessary.

His "staff" is a similar implement or action: it is anything He does to support us, and can also include food and drink. It also carries the idea of leaning on God in times of trouble, as the more distant root, sha'an, implies, and it links to the idea of rest. The staff indeed helps, nacham: it consoles and comforts, no matter how grieved a person feels. God is always with the righteous.

Even when we are surrounded by enemies, He prepares a table for us! So often, when we are in trouble or fear, we cannot see God for our own anxiety. I know this from my own life. We tend to panic, instead of wait patiently for God to answer. Verse 5 tells us that whatever is grievous to us is as nothing to God, and nothing in this life will get in the way of His help and comfort to us.

Psalm 23

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Amusingly, we can think of the way a Victorian Englishman in the African plains would set up tent and always have his servant make a tray of tea! He would act similarly when in battle. The aim was to show fortitude, and to show the enemy that he would not be intimidated – all will carry on as normal for an English gentleman!

This is similar to what God does: He makes sure that our spirits are free and active, and not cowed down by our circumstances. It is a way of setting-up His battle standard for all to see. Do YOU do this? Do you show others that you trust in God, and do not reduce yourself to fear and stumbling in the sight of your enemies, or Satan's ploys?

At these times God "anointest my head with oil". The act of anointing implies prosperity, good, and 'fat', the oil being olive oil as a medicine and symbolic of fruitfulness. That this is the correct interpretation is found in the latter part of the verse: "my cup runneth over". The cup represents one's life and circumstances.

In this case, it "runneth over"; what God gives us is over-abundant. When God gives us blessings they are always in abundance, overflowing, drenching, saturating; ravah. God does not know 'only just' – He only knows 'abundantly'! And that is what we can expect when we call upon Him for help and rest.

Verse 6

1.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

David ends this very short song with the word 'Surely'. He is showing his trust in God and is saying that if he lives righteously then God will 'surely' reward him. This is exactly what God says to us, so David was right to be assured. Because he was righteous, God gave him goodness and mercy all his life.

"Goodness", towb, is everything nice and pleasant, what is agreeable and excellent, ethically and morally right. As a result of living righteously (holy and pure) we can expect God to give us

Psalm 23

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kindness and goodness in so many ways, not just spiritually. Yes, we sin and break the direct bond, and yes, we act stupidly at times, but God is still with us, even if distant. When we are righteous, God walks beside us and gives us our heart's desire. How different!

Not only that, but we will "dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." Strictly, this applies to the Temple, the earthly abode of God. David said he would 'dwell' in God's abode; this means to sit down or remain. Sitting is a way of saying his place was assured all the days of his earthly life. It does not specifically refer to Heaven, as in 'eternal, but in terms of life on earth.

We, too, are assured plenty and goodness from the hand of God in our lifetimes, if we are righteous. Can you now see what makes this Psalm so special?

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