

He Restores My Soul

Psalm 23:1 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 will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever. (Psa 23:1-6)

I read a CNN article that said exhaustion is the new disease of the modern world. People working 16- 20 hour days, people who are online and connected almost constantly, the demands of living in a world that is getting more complex is creating a world of weary, exhausted, burnt-out people.

And that extends to the church. Christians come to the beginning of a year, and though we make resolutions, and plans, very often the secret in our hearts is that we feel as spiritually exhausted as we did at the end of a year. There is a spiritual exhaustion, a spiritual tiredness, a soul-weariness that is found in believers. It often shows up in apathy – dropping out of spiritual activities. It shows up in burn-out – people giving up on serving God. Most often, it is a tired discouragement.

But here in this psalm, David makes a boast in his God. He says that because he has a certain God as his shepherd, his soul is constantly restored. Because David has Yahweh as his shepherd, he experiences no lack, his life is characterised by the sufficiency, the fulness of what God provides. What does it mean to restore the soul? To release it from its burdens, and give it rest. Soul-rest. Heart-rest. “I do not lack, I am not in a state of anguished longing. Once Yahweh is my shepherd, I am content.”

There is something very particular about David's shepherd that leads to this kind of restoration of soul. When this Lord is your own shepherd, rest, restoration of soul, and a sense of sufficiency result.

A debate was being held at a conference in Britain on comparative religion. These wise and scholarly were debating the differences between religions. And then the question came up, what makes Christianity unique? Incarnation? No, other religions had some version of Incarnation. Resurrection? No other religions had some version of resurrection.

At this point, C.S. Lewis wandered into the room, a little early for his presentation. He asked, “What's all this arguing about?” They told him they were trying to find the difference between Christianity and other religion. Lewis looked at them and said, “Oh, that's easy. It's grace.” The room fell silent. Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim.

And it is the message of grace, of who this gracious God is, and what He provides for us, that brings rest to our souls. The message of religion, which is work harder, be better, try more, be more disciplined in the end exhausts and wearies us.

Jesus spoke to a group of people like that who were world-weary, soul-weary. They had tried their hardest to be good, to be pleasing to God, to be religious, and they had pierced themselves through with the effort. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, looked at that crowd, and gave them the New Testament version of Psalm 23:

28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."
(Mat 11:28-30)

If the Lord really does restore our souls, why do so many Christians feel the opposite of restored? Their souls feel deeply wearied, worn-out, exhausted. They are anything but feeling restored. They cannot say, I am content, I do not lack. The answer must be that many Christians are missing the point and the meaning of Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is all about what God does for David, it has nothing to do with what David does for God. Grace is what God has done, and is doing, and will do. It is not what David does that restores his soul, or gives him rest and contentment. It is what the Shepherd does. The implication is that David submits and yields and trusts the Shepherd. He places his faith in the Shepherd. But the rest he feels is a result of who the Shepherd is and what He is like.

I wonder how many Christians are soul-weary, world-weary, life-weary, because they've lost sight of this distinctive message: grace. At the beginning of a year, they decide they'll try again, try harder, try more. But the message of Psalm 23 is not try more, but trust more, rest more, yield in faith more. It's come back to the message of the Gospel that first unburdened you – see who your Shepherd is, and what He does for you.

I. The Gracious Shepherd Provides

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

Here is an image of rich provision and tranquil contentment. David as a shepherd knew that sheep do not lie down unless very content, and very secure. Shepherds tell us that sheep are by nature a jittery and restless animal. They are restless when they are hungry. They are restless if they spot any threats or predators on the horizon. They are restless if they are being tormented by flies and parasites. They are restless when fighting - Sheep butting each other will keep a whole flock from settling. They are restless when burdened down by their own fleeces if they get too heavy.

So an image of sheep lying down in green pastures, and drinking happily by still waters is a picture of real rest. The sheep have completely trusted the Shepherd to provide, and now they express that trust by eating, drinking and lying down.

So David says, my life is like that. My Shepherd provides, and I lie down.

Now, it takes some work to achieve this. Shepherds have to scout out the best land. They have to clean out polluted or clogged water. They have to brave difficult passes to get to the best grass. They sometimes have to simply farm the land to create the good pastures. Shepherds work hard, so their sheep can eat and drink, and then rest.

So what does the Lord Jesus do? What has He done, so that you can rest? The deepest restlessness of soul is when a human made in God's image, has no relationship with God. So the Good Shepherd has gone ahead of us, and provided the way. As we read in John 10, this is what He did.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. (Joh 10:11)

The Good shepherd provided the way back to God, by providing Himself as the mediator. He became the sacrifice, who took our punishment, and took our guilt, and provided us with His righteousness.

Every person who ever comes to Christ remembers the day of relief, when they realise that it is not their works, and their devotion, and their striving which makes them acceptable to God. It is God's provision.

“But one day as I was passing into the field, with some dashes on my conscience, fearing yet that all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, “Your righteousness is in heaven.” I thought I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God’s right hand. There was my righteousness. Wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me that I lacked His righteousness, for that was ever before Him. Moreover, I saw that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, *“the same yesterday, today, and for ever”*.”

“Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons, my temptations also fled away. From that time those dreadful Scriptures of God quit troubling me; now I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.” ~John Bunyan

The soul-weary, the soul-exhausted are those who think their righteousness is within them. It can even come back to Christians who have believed the Gospel and rested in Christ, but then they drift back into self-effort. They didn't work in their own strength to get their salvation, but now they work in their own strength to keep their salvation, or to feel worthy of their salvation. They didn't attract God's love in the first place, but now they feel they can make God love them more, or possibly make Him love them less.

But if you are to have rest in your soul, you need to know that the same grace that saved you from hell, provides what you need to live the Christian life now: the indwelling Holy Spirit, union with Jesus Christ, His presence, His promises, His enablement to obey. The same way you trusted Christ to save you on that day, you need to trust Him to keep doing that every day as you love Him and obey Him and follow Him.

Isn't this about physical provision as well? Sure, the Good Shepherd takes care of that too. He told a crowd of people that their concern for food and clothing was far too great.

33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Mat 6:33)

The Good Shepherd knows what you need. Someone says, “But I need a lot more than food and clothing! I need money to pay the bond, and the water and lights, and my insurance, and my medical aid, and my phone bills and school fees!” Yes, your needs are more complex than the first century Israelite. But are they too complex for God? God knows what you need to be fruitful for Him. He may give some more and some less. He may include plenty of sweat from your brow as a means of providing. He may include many trials and problems along the way as part of your growth – but He will provide.

We are restless not because we don't have, but because we fear we won't have.

II. The Gracious Shepherd Leads

He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 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.

Sheep are rather helpless and witless creatures. Sheep tend to get off the path of safety, off the pastures and find themselves in sticky situations. They end up on cliff edges, on steep ravines from which they can't return. They are prone to wander.

A big problem is that sheep tend to follow each other. Shepherds will tell you that often their problems centre on one wayward sheep that is fence crawling, or wandering off. That one sheep causes others to follow it. Sheep have a real mob instinct – they bolt if the others bolt, relax if the others relax, and follow each other. It requires a watchful shepherd to prevent sheep from leading each other into destruction.

Shepherds need to lead from the front, constantly using their rod and staff to get the sheep exactly where they need to be. A shepherd's rod was usually a weapon used for throwing or clubbing. With it he could target a predator, fight off animals at close range, kill snakes and even battle thieves.

The staff is a hook-shaped stick, that shepherds use for various things – but they are all good. They use them to lift newborns to their mother. They use them to draw timid sheep to themselves. They use them to lift and restore sheep that are fallen into a ditch or a hard-to-reach place. Sometimes, shepherds even use their staff like an extension of their hand – they will put it at the side of the sheep, guiding, even petting.

David says that his soul is at rest, and his life is a life of contentment because his shepherd leads him. David is not following other men. David is not following his own plan for his own life. David makes God his shepherd, and knows that God's leadership of his life is perfect. God leads him in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

He leads and guides my life for the sake of His name. Though that guidance may include valleys, pains, suffering, David knows there will be evil, his response is to say – I will not *fear* the evil. He is present. His rod of protection and His staff of chastening comfort David. I know I cannot end up destroying myself with You.

All that happens comes under His leadership.

Now the implication is that David is following the Shepherd. As God gives David direction in His Word, David obeys it. It isn't more complicated than that. God tells you His will in His Word. You obey it, follow it. When you obey His revealed will, you are following the Shepherd. Now as you obey His revealed will, He will step by step unfold His secret will – where you live, what job you do, who you marry, what ministry you have, all the things we really want to know and really worry about. But if you are following the Shepherd, He will lead you in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Nothing will bring you more anxiety, more restlessness, more soul-weariness than the sense that your life is out of control, going nowhere, unprotected. I don't know how the unsaved sleep at night, thinking that life is a purely random series of events with no direction, no order, no goal.

I have known what it is to be wayward, and to have His staff hook me and pull me back. I have experienced severe doubt and wondered what was true. But I have never really known what it is to live a life where I am a possible victim of the world at any moment, vulnerable to any calamity or wind of chance, with no sense of meaning, guidance or purpose.

That is a life of striving, a life of burdensome toil, a life of nail-biting anxiety, trying desperately to guide yourself, keep your own life on schedule, make things happen, protect yourself.

Certainly we Christians must have goals. We can have ambitions, we can chart courses, we can desire certain things to happen. But if you are resting in His gracious leading, you can say, “Where I am, what I'm doing, where I'm going, is where I need to be. God is not late, God has not forgotten me, God has not gotten lost while leading me.”

Don't we sing that stanza
*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home*

III. The Gracious Shepherd Rewards

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

There's a kind of double-meaning here, because preparing a table and anointing with oil can mean two things. Shepherds would sometimes take their flocks to rich table-lands at higher altitudes; vast, flat lands where rich green pastures existed. And often, shepherd would have to prepare those table lands by going ahead: he would take out poisonous plants, sprinkle salt & minerals onto the pastures, hunt down predators, clear out waterholes of twigs, stones and debris, open springs that have overgrown.

And anointing with oil is something shepherds did to their flocks, they poured oil on their heads to deal with insects. A fly called the nasal fly even lays its eggs in the sheep's nose. If successful, the larvae hatch and work their way up nasal passages and cause inflammation in the sheep's head. Sheep have even been known to kill themselves in their sometimes frenzied efforts to relieve themselves by beating their heads against trees, posts or rocks. So they would pour oil on the sheep's head and relieve it.

But the double meaning is that this clearly looks like a feast. A feast is at a prepared table, in ancient times, guests would often be anointed with oil by the host, and at a feast, your cup runs over.

So what is the idea? God in His grace provides the joy, the celebration, and even the vindication. In the presence of so many who scorn your faith, in the presence of spiritual enemies who wish your downfall, God graciously blesses your life with joy, with good gifts, with reward.

Do you know it is possible to have all the possible potential for joy, and to not have joy? Just ask Solomon. Solomon did a one-man joy and fulfillment experiment – looking for satisfaction, joy, reward, pleasure from whatever he could get his hands on under the sun. That is, excluding God. He tried music and entertainment, the sensual delights of food and sex, the renown and fame, knowledge for its own sake, art and beauty for its own sake, architecture, possessions and wealth. And at the end of his expedition he was weary, and his soul was burdened, and all he could say was “All of it is emptiness, lighter than air, striving after nothingness.”

That's the picture of every man who labours and struggles and fights to get his slice of joy, and get his slice of happiness from the world. The effort to get pleasure and happiness outside of God always seems to exceed the returns. You always seem to run at a loss.

Solomon understood why. He learned that you need not only the gifts of God to have joy, but you need God to give you the power to enjoy it as a gift.

19 As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor-- this is the gift of God.

20 For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart. (Ecc 5:19-20)

Remember when you'd get a toy for Christmas and there were no batteries included? That's what life is like for those who do not have the Lord as their Shepherd.

Joy, fulfillment, reward, satisfaction is a grace-gift. I don't have to strive for it.

I think some Christians have a hard time enjoying life, and rejoicing because they don't feel they deserve it. And so they feel guilty, as if joy and gladness is having something they did not earn. So what destroys their joy is their own legalism – they can only enjoy life if they feel they've merited it.

But David knows well that this is all grace. He says in verse 6, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” Goodness and mercy. God's grace, God's unearned, unmerited kindness will pursue him everywhere he goes. David could get on with the joy of life because he accepted that both the gifts of God, and the right to enjoy them were grace-gifts.

Grace provides. Grace leads. Grace rewards. And the final, and greatest grace-reward of all is at the end of the psalm, “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” First Peter 1:4 tells us that we have an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and that does not fade away, reserved in Heaven for us.

This psalm is not meant to make you say, I will try harder this year. It is not meant to make you say, “I will do less this year. I will let go and let God.”

It is meant to describe what faith in grace feels like. My Shepherd provides. I live under Him in faith and rest.

My shepherd leads. I live under him and follow Him, and rest in where He takes Me.

My shepherd rewards. I live under Him and enjoy His gifts for His sake. I want to arrive at the beginning of a year not feeling exhausted, but restored. So can you, if we live by faith in a gracious Shepherd.