

## The Lord Is My Shepherd



Gary Wilkerson April 19, 2021

### Leading a Life of Perfect Peace

Every Christian has known mountaintop peaks and deep, dark valleys in their walk with Jesus. In my experience, it's the valleys—the low places, trials and difficult times—that teach us how to be people of prayer, hope and courageous service. In other words, the valley is where we learn to be God's faithful witnesses in turbulent times because it's there we learn his faithfulness toward us in our deepest needs.

Like so many followers of Jesus, I treasure the opening of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (*Psalm 23:1, ESV*). We're assured we have a faithful shepherd to guide us through all storms and hardships, one who skillfully maneuvers us through every situation. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (*23:2-3*).

What powerful images of peace in times of tribulation. Our shepherd leads us into these wonderful places, yet the same shepherd leads us into difficult places as well. This produces in us a powerful testimony: "Even 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (*23:4-5*).

Note these passages speak of the darkest times in life: evil, death, enemies. God doesn't remove us from any of these things. Instead, he demonstrates his faithfulness to us through it all. Personally, I would prefer to lie down in green pastures all of the time, but that isn't reality. Dark times come to each of us, and Psalm 23 assures us that when things are in chaos and turmoil, the Great Shepherd is faithfully leading us always.

### **In the presence of "enemies"—a pandemic, economic turmoil, the loss of loved ones—we learn the depths of God's faithfulness to us.**

Psalm 23 mirrors to us the history of God's people. The Lord promised the children of Israel he would lead them out of bondage and into the Promised Land, a sweet existence of milk and honey. Imagine how excited the people got about this. Yet the promise they looked forward to didn't happen immediately.

In fact, at a certain point, it seemed their future would be just the opposite. When they should have been going north to Canaan, God led them south to Sinai, a dry wasteland with no food or water. Why would God lead them to this place of painful lack?

Something similar happened to the patriarch Joseph. He was given a heavenly dream that others would bow before him. Before that came to pass, however, Joseph was kidnapped by his own brothers, thrown into a pit, sold into slavery and finally cast into a dungeon after being falsely accused. What on earth was the great shepherd up to?

In such times, our hearts mourn and groan in anguish, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. No one seeks out "valley of death" experiences, and our culture says we should avoid them at all costs, that the ideal life is a never-

ending experience of happiness and joy. In truth, God does deeply creative work in the valleys. In fact, that's where some of his most important work in us takes place, leaving deep imprints of peace that can inform the remainder of our lives.

In Israel's desert experience, God was creating a people to be a light to the nations. They learned about his great forgiveness through their own awful sins. They learned of his wisdom through his righteous judgments. They learned about his everlasting mercies through all their tribulations.

In Joseph's trials, God was removing pride and arrogance from a talented and favored man so that when the time came, Joseph's gifts would save an entire nation from famine. The Lord was probably also creating empathy in Joseph so that at a crucial moment he would forgive and deliver his brothers, the men who would become the tribes of God's chosen nation. All of his choices for us are wise and merciful and accomplish his purposes.

## **I've learned that the deep peace being formed in us through our trials usually comes in three stages.**

As we undergo trials, we often have trouble holding onto our peace. This is the first stage in how God shepherds us through difficult times. I call this stage the *problem of peace*.

In Matthew 10:12-13, Jesus instructed his disciples, "As you enter (a) house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you." As I read this, I equate the condition of a household to the condition of a heart. God wants every heart to receive the peace of his living Word. But not everyone is willing to receive what he says, including some of us who follow him.

We have to ask ourselves whether we're open to his direction and leading, his nudges and discipline. After all, he might lead us into a desert wasteland instead of a green pasture. Do we avail ourselves of his power, purpose and plan for our lives, or do we fall short of trusting that he has our best interests in mind?

God's peace will never come to us if we pursue it as a problem to be solved or a dilemma to be understood. In fact, Paul tells us, "The peace of God, which *surpasses all understanding*, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (*Philippians 4:7, my emphasis*).

This leads to the second stage of having God's peace. I call this stage the *price of peace*. We don't have to struggle, search or strive to find the peace of the Lord. Jesus paid the price for us to have it on the cross. We're to apply that price—the shed blood of Christ—to our hearts and abide in his peace, which comes to us from heaven. With his peace, our hearts can't be shaken.

The third stage of having God's peace is the *promise of peace*. Jesus assures us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (*John 14:27*).

Make no mistake, Jesus is true to his word. If he refused his peace to even one of his children, his word would not be true. We know that is not possible. As Paul says, "Let God be true though every one were a liar" (*Romans 3:4*).

So, what is the fruit of this three-stage peace process? If we remain open to his voice and leading—even if it means a desert experience—we're promised "the peaceful fruit of righteousness." "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the *peaceful fruit of righteousness* to those who have been trained by it" (*Hebrews 12:11, my emphasis*). By yielding to the leading of our shepherd, our lives become a living testimony of his righteousness, marked by immovable peace and selfless sacrifice.

## **Your heart might be wide open to all of these truths, and yet still you don't feel his peace.**

Peace is like any other fruit of the Spirit; it involves maturation. Just as your wisdom matures, so does your peace. God is adding to it continually through all your experiences, the way any fruit is grown. Think about how a seed gets sown for a flowering plant. As it sprouts, the winds blow against it and rains flood it, yet God has fashioned it to withstand and grow through those regular pressures. He will sustain that plant, and eventually it will bear

amazing fruit.

I take comfort in the words of the psalmist who assures every heart that's open to the shepherd's faithful leading, "Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there is a future for the man of peace" (*Psalms 37:37*). A faithful Christian may be shaken and seem blown around by troubles, but God's future for that servant is peace.

If you don't feel peace, just wait. It will grow. The promise of peace comes from God himself, and Jesus has already paid the price for it. Your tests and tribulations are building a future where you'll not only walk in continual peace but bear its fruit, performing works of righteousness that will stand into eternity.

Submit to God's leading, and trust in his creative work in you. It's all part of the purpose he has in mind for your life. "If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?" (*Jeremiah 12:5*). We're created to run a race with his sustaining peace in our hearts.

We live in a time and place that preaches "prosperity, prosperity, prosperity." But valleys come to us all; and as God's people, we know there is great purpose in our trials. That's where the Lord's merciful creativity happens. The valley is where we face the problem of peace, remember the price of peace and walk in his promise of peace.

There is no greener pasture than the heart that's able to sow the peaceful fruit of righteousness. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (*Psalms 23:6*).

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