

April 20

Psalm 13, 17, 23, 26, 28 & 31

Hey everybody – Mark Ashton here coming to you with the April 20th edition of Project 4:4 as we're marching through the Psalms and right now I'm driving on my way home from our district conference. I'm somewhere in the middle of rural Iowa, which is entirely appropriate for this Psalm.

Because what I'm going to do – I'm just going to focus in on one Psalm this time and that is Psalm 23. Now this is a classic Psalm – it's oftentimes spoken at funerals – many of you have it memorized, but I'm just going to unpack it a little bit line by line for you and hope that that's a blessing to you as you continue to read the Psalms today.

It starts off by saying, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." And, of course, you know this Psalm was written by David who himself was a shepherd, grew up as a shepherd boy – so he knew the shepherding analogy really well. He dips into his own experience as a child and he says, you know, God is a lot like the shepherd – we're a lot like the sheep. And I think he thinks of us as the sheep for one key reason and that is – sheep are stupid and so are we! Sheep would die if it wasn't for the shepherd. Sheep will, as a whole herd, go into a dead end position where all they have to do is turn around to be able to get out – and they're not smart enough to turn around. They will starve to death before they'll look the other way and go out. Human beings are a lot like that. So David says, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." I like how the NIV puts that, "I shall not be in want." It's not "I shall not want" it's not that we lack desires – it's that God provides the things that we need so we lack nothing as we move forward from that place.

Well, next he says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." And sheep would lie down in green pastures for two reasons: one would be to eat the grass that was there – it would be just a place of feeding – and the other thing is that they would lie down for rest. And there's an image that goes along with Sabbath rest and that God presses us into a place where we're forced to rest so that we can, in fact, have maximum impact with the lives that he's given us.

But there's a very interesting parallel in the Book of Mark. If you're taking a look at where Jesus fed the 5,000 – I'd encourage you to fast forward and look at that passage a little bit later on today because it speaks of how Jesus made them sit down in the green grass just when he was about to feed them miraculously and clearly there are some illusions between Mark's mind and Psalm 23 in this passage.

Well after that, David said, "He leads me beside quiet waters." Now you know why quiet waters are so important for a sheep because their head was covered with all of the wool that was around their head and neck and face. If they were to go by a babbling brook that was filled with water that was rushing and their head was going to get wet, they are too stupid to walk away before their head becomes so heavy that they would fall into the water and kill themselves. And so he says, "He

leads me beside quiet waters." A shepherd would have to do that in order for his sheep just to survive. And I think God is gracious to us in that as well in that when we first come to faith – he doesn't give us all the waters all at the same time! He doesn't shoot a fire hose of spiritual growth at us. He doesn't show us all of our sin all at once – because if he did – we would be dead meat. We couldn't handle it all at the same time. But He gives us a little bit to drink and a little bit to drink and we continue to grow in that regard. He leads us beside quiet waters and, of course in so doing, he restores our souls.

You imagine Him in the next line, "He leads us in paths of righteousness for his namesake." That's reminiscence of Proverbs 3, 5 and 6 of God leading us on straight paths as we look to Him as the one that we trust – as we look to Him as a shepherd. And the path that God will lead you on guaranteed every time if you follow the shepherd – is the path of righteousness.

Well he says that, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake" and then he says, "Even though I go through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me." That's an interesting way of phrasing that, isn't it – because he says, even though I go through or I walk through the valley of the shadow of death – David is never worried about getting stuck in the valley of death – he goes through the valley of the shadow of death. If you're somebody right now who's experienced a recent death in your family, if you've experienced the death of a dream, the death of a vision – you know that's not a place that you have to wallow forever. You go through the pain and you experience that shadow for sure, but when the shepherd is with you – you know you're going to come through the other side. And you know that it's temporary and that there's hope that you'll not wind up in this valley forever.

Along with that, it says, "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Now you know what a shepherd used a rod and staff for, don't you? He used it to guide the sheep! He would use the hook on that staff to grab them and pull them close, he would use the butt of that staff to knock them in the butt when they were going to wrong direction, he would guide the entire course of the sheep using his rod and his staff. And sometimes it was easy going – sometimes it was painful, but David said as a shepherd I need your staff and I need your rod because they bring comfort to me. They show me that you're here and that you're guiding me on these paths of righteousness even through the midst of the pain.

Well, it continues on to speak about the hope that he has – that his head is going to be anointed right in the presence of his enemies, that his cup will overflow and surely goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life and he will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. This is a picture of hope at the end of Psalm 23 that drives David mentality – that something like the valley of the shadow of death is temporary, but being in the presence of the LORD is not. Victory over enemies is something that is going to be permanent and there will be a day that David and all of us together with him will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. And that's the good news that we look forward to.

These are some of the reasons why Psalms 23 is one of the most beloved and cherished and read and memorized Psalms in the history of the world and I pray that it's been a blessing to you today.

God bless everybody.