

REFLECTIONS ON THE 23rd PSALM

I wonder if it was in the TWILIGHT of his life, AS King David sat there on one of a hillsides in Judea, looking out into one of the nearby valleys, that he saw a very common SITE in his day (and still TODAY in the Holy Land): a flock of SHEEP being led through the valley by a faithful and loving SHEPHERD? And maybe, as he watched this sight, David remembered his OWN days as a shepherd, tending the FLOCKS of his father, Jesse. And maybe, as he WATCHED that shepherd and his SHEEP, it DAWNED on King David: *AS that SHEPHERD is to those SHEEP, SO has the LORD been to ME.* And I can just HEAR King David saying: *The LORD is my shepherd; I SHALL not want. He makes me LIE down in GREEN pastures.*

Now, MOST of us don't know very much about SHEEP these days. But when I was in the Holy Land, I had a wonderful opportunity to sit DOWN with a life-long, Palestinian SHEPHERD, an old man -- and a young boy translated. And I learned a LOT that day about SHEPHERDS and sheep, and WHY this most beloved of ALL the Psalms is WORDED the way it IS. I learned that there are a COUPLE of ways to look at this statement: *He makes me lie down in GREEN pastures.* First, we know that SHEEP are DUMB. Unlike cows and OTHER grazing animals, SHEEP not only eat the grass, but the ROOTS of the grass as well. SO, they can DESTROY a pasture in NO time. And THAT'S why shepherds always keep sheep MOVING to GREEN pastures. But, are WE any DIFFERENT? I suspect that Mother Earth would say, "NO! WE are just like sheep, DESTROYING our own pasture, even though WE ought to KNOW better."

But there's also something CHALLENGING about this phrase. It almost SOUNDS as if we, SHEEP, are being FORCED to lie down in green pastures AGAINST our WILL. But then again, maybe GOD, like a good shepherd, knows that there is a SHEEP in ME, and that there's something about my SHEEPNESS that would cause me to TROT on BY the GREEN pastures of life, just as I OFTEN trot on BY the ROSES of life, without stopping to SMELL them. *But GOD, says David, is SO committed to BLESSING us with the blessings of GREEN pastures that God even FORCES us to lie down in them. God MAKES us stop TROTTING through life, and MAKES us LIVE in a certain PASTURE for a time.* Sometimes there are certain PERIODS in our lives, certain SEASONS, when we don't see the BLESSINGS at first. When I was first married, and then when we had our first CHILD, I remember LONGING at first for the FREEDOM of my COLLEGE years. But after awhile, I came to realize what a GREEN pasture I was LIVING in, and TIME with my children and family became so IMPORTANT to me. The empty NEST felt that way at first ALSO, when the children had GONE. But NOW, I realize that THIS is a GREAT time of life! There are many BLESSINGS in these green pastures of my 50's. And I'm GLAD that God is FORCING me lie down in THIS pasture for awhile. Sometimes we don't REALIZE how GREEN our pastures ARE, especially at first.

David ALSO said: *He leads me beside STILL waters. He RESTORES my soul.* It seems strange, but I learned from the shepherd that in fast-moving water, sheep CANNOT feel their wool getting HEAVY. Therefore, they sometimes go into the water TOO deep and end up DROWNING. But in STILL waters, they FEEL their wool getting HEAVIER, so they move BACK toward shore. Well, I worry that WE are the SAME. I mean: our SOCIETY is just SO fast-paced these days, and it's so EASY to get SO caught UP in all the busyness that we DROWN in busyness, OR simply miss OUT on what RESTORES our souls. And let's face it: we can only be CREATIVE for so LONG before we NEED a break from it, just as GOD rested in the story of creation. We need REFRESHMENT time! We need SABBATH time! And we need it REGULARLY. And it CAN'T be filled UP with all sorts of activities, or maybe even TV and all the OTHER input we usually get. In the past, I've led a Confirmation Retreat, during which I TEACH the kids the art of MEDITATION, contemplation and PRAYER. And there's a lot of SILENT time during that weekend. Well, the kids are always AMAZED at how much MOST of them end up ENJOYING that experience, AND the SILENCE. And

these are tools that we ALL need to learn and USE, so that we don't DROWN in this fast-PACED lifestyle that we've created for ourselves. It RESTORES us, you see!

David also says: *He leads me in paths of righteousness.* When you travel through what's called the WILDERNESS of Judea, the desert hillsides between Jerusalem and Jericho, one of the first things you notice are a lot of very DARK lines criss-crossing the hills. And you soon LEARN that THESE are PATHS for sheep and goats that are CENTURIES-OLD. And you ALSO soon find out that there are 2 KINDS of paths: paths for SHEEP and paths for GOATS. Goat paths go along the side of cliffs and over crevices and LOTS of places where sure-footed animals can GO. But SHEEP are not very SURE-FOOTED, so SHEEP paths go on very SAFE terrain, where sheep are less apt to lose they're footing. And a SHEPHERD always leads his sheep on the RIGHT paths, on SHEEP paths. And the SAME is true for US. IF we will listen and follow, GOD will guide US on the paths that are RIGHT for US.

David also said: *Even though I walk through the VALLEY of the SHADOW of death, I fear NO evil.* Now, the FIRST thing you need to know is that *the Valley of the Shadow of Death* is an actual PLACE. That's right! There's a very DEEP valley on the OLD road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And it's CALLED *the Valley of the Shadow of Death* because it's SO dangerous! There are MULTITUDES of CAVES hidden in this sandy, rock, desert-like valley, and these CAVES are the perfect HIDE-OUTS for animals that PREY on helpless sheep, and ROBBERS that prey on PEOPLE. This is the place that Jesus talked about when He told the parable about the man attacked on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, who was BEATEN by robbers and left for DEAD. And a priest and a Levite walk BY on the other side. But a good SAMARITAN comes along and HELPS him. Well, for CENTURIES, shepherds and sheep have traveled THROUGH *the Valley of the Shadow of Death*. It's on their ROUTE to greener pastures at the OASIS of Jericho. But it's a SCAREY place! I've SEEN it! I have PICTURES of it! But the sheep FEAR no EVIL because their shepherd PROTECTS them with his ROD, which is his CLUB, and his STAFF, which is a long, hooked pole, like a giant CANE that he uses to grab onto the NECKS of sheep who have fallen off the path, or who are going astray where they might be in DANGER. And ALL the sheep need to DO as they pass through *the Valley of the Shadow of Death* is FOLLOW their shepherd, TRUSTING him to GUIDE and PROTECT them. And maybe that's something that WE need to do as well. But it's not EASY to follow and trust GOD, is it?

But there's MORE about the valley. Tell me: what IS a VALLEY? Well, we CAN'T be in a VALLEY unless we are POSITIONED between TWO hills or mountains. SO, whenever I'M in a VALLEY place in my OWN life, I try to TELL myself that it's ONLY because I've just left ONE mountaintop and I'm heading for ANOTHER. But in BETWEEN, there's this VALLEY that seems SCAREY, and often OVERWHELMING. It may be a valley of DISCOURAGEMENT or PAIN, GRIEF or RESPONSIBILITY! But it's a valley that has me STRUGGLING with life. But the POINT is that we can't STOP in the valley -- we can't just STAY there -- even though THAT may be our FIRST reaction: paralysis because we're SCARED or in PAIN. Remember, David said: *Even though I walk THROUGH the valley....* He DIDN'T say: *Even though I walk IN the valley....* We came in ONE side, and IF we keep WALKING, we will walk OUT the OTHER side. You see: our journey CONTINUES, EVEN in the VALLEY. And IN the valley, God is WITH us to GUIDE and protect us like a SHEPHERD, IF we will just TRUST God.

David goes ON in the psalm: *Thou preparest a TABLE before me in the presence of my ENEMIES.* You see: the FLOW of this text IMPLIES that, EVEN in the valley, EVEN with the SHADOWS lurking around us, EVEN in the face of difficult decisions, or in the midst of depression or confrontation, challenge or failure, God continues to BLESS us. God prepares a TABLE before us. Now to understand this, we need to think about the word, **BEFORE**. In ENGLISH, the word *before* can be one of TWO parts of speech. It can either be a **PREPOSITION** of LOCATION, OR, it can be an **ADVERB** of TIME.

First, let's look at it as a preposition of LOCATION. If you were invited to DINNER in that culture, you would RECLINE at a long, low table. And EATING was an EXPERIENCE! It was a time for FELLOWSHIP and sharing. And it was a very LONG, drawn-out affair, a time for INTERACTING with each other. Remember: they didn't have TV and all the distractions that WE

have. So, their MEAL was their EVENING'S entertainment. And DURING this time of fellowship, the ENTRÉE would usually be prepared in FRONT of you. In MIAMI, when we go to see our SON and daughter-in-law, we sometimes go to a JAPANESE restaurant near their home. And the COOK comes out with these long KNIVES and he's throws them around, FLIPPING them and CATCHING them. He's a wonderful ARTIST! And AS we watch, he prepares the most LUSCIOUS meal, before our very eyes. And it's GREAT entertainment! But HERE'S the CATCH. We KNOW that the main ENTRÉE is coming. We WATCH him go through all these very SHOWY preliminaries, and we HAVE some appetizers along the way. But in our minds, we KNOW that the main course is COMING. He sometimes even slices it up and puts it to the SIDE, and we can SEE it simmering there, but we KNOW that it's coming soon. Well, THAT'S the way GOD moves in the midst of our VALLEY times, in the midst of our down times and struggles. We don't always know what God is UP to, but we KNOW from past experience that, WHEN we're in a valley, God goes to WORK! And God PREPARES something for us, SOMETHING positive and GOOD out of this VALLEY experience. I mean: isn't that the POINT of the EASTER story we just lives through. The crucifixion/resurrection story offers us an ETERNAL metaphor to describe God's WORK in our lives. FROM our crucifixions, God makes RESURRECTIONS happen. And SO, we TRUST, even as we walk through the valley, that God is going to BLESS us. We've SEEN God's POWER to heal and deliver us, so we TRUST God to USE that power as WE walk through the VALLEY of the shadow of death. We just KNOW and TRUST that GOD is preparing a table **BEFORE** us. It's a preposition of LOCATION, you see.

But it's ALSO an **ADVERB** of TIME. In DAVID'S culture, it was not unusual for a shepherd to BED DOWN the sheep as twilight came. And WHILE they were resting, HE would go down the road to SPOT OUT a location for their NEXT day's GRAZING. And when he had found a good SPOT, he would CLEAR the debris from it and prepare a SPACE for his sheep to GRAZE. In other words, he would prepare a TABLE for them. And THEN, the next DAY, he would LEAD his sheep, and maybe through the valley, to this place that he had already PREPARED for them. Now, the SHEEP had no clue WHEN they would stop AGAIN. NOR did they know WHAT they would EAT when they DID stop. BUT, their SHEPHERD already KNEW, because HE had gone **BEFORE** them, and HE had prepared their TABLE. And so, the CHALLENGE for the SHEEP was to TRUST their shepherd, and simply to FOLLOW their shepherd until they got to their next TABLE. Well, the SAME is true for US, isn't it? Maybe we don't see WHERE God is LEADING us, because we're in a VALLEY, and we can't see our way OUT. All we can see is our challenge or our dilemma. But GOD knows WHERE we're heading! And GOD will LEAD us there. BUT, we need to watch and listen, TRUST and FOLLOW. Yes, GOD prepares our next TABLE even before we GET to it. So WE just need to walk with GOD to the place of our next BLESSING, and NOT give IN to the temptation to try to be in CONTROL ourselves, so that we wander AWAY from God, OR to STAY where we ARE out of FEAR or discouragement or laziness, but to follow and TRUST.

Now: not only does God prepare a table before us, but God prepares *a table before us in the presence of our ENEMIES*. You see: whenever SHEEP are around, there are ALWAYS wolves, coyotes and OTHER predators nearby. And WHEN the shepherd is there, the shepherd's ROD and staff PROTECT the sheep. But IF the shepherd is off preparing the NEXT table for the sheep, those predators can make easy PREY of his SHEEP, EXCEPT that a shepherd ALWAYS leaves his sheep with what they call UNDER-SHEPHERDS -- with young boys, shepherds-in-training, whose JOB it IS to GUARD the sheep, ESPECIALLY when the SHEPHERD is AWAY. Well, GOD does the same for US. When WE are confronted by OUR enemies: enemies like LAZINESS and addiction, illness and grief, pride and envy, and SO many more, IF we ALLOW God to DO so, and remain CLOSE to our Shepherd, God will PROTECT us. God will both CHASE them away God's self, AND give us one ANOTHER in this COMMUNITY of faith to be UNDER-SHEPHERDS for each other, to protect and help and support each other, day by day. When I'm struggling or hurting, or my FAITH is WEAK, I want YOU to be there for me, to hold me up and keep me moving. And I will do the SAME for YOU. Yes, the church is PRECIOUS in that way, so we need to CHERISH it, TRUST it, and PARTICIPATE in it. We need to be UNDER-SHEPHERDS for each other.

And finally, David says: *He anoints my HEAD with OIL*. And I learned from the old shepherd that, in those days and still TODAY, in that DRY and dusty terrain, sheep OFTEN run into briars and sticks that CUT their unprotected heads. After all, they have pretty thick WOOL protecting the REST of their bodies, but NOTHING protecting their HEADS and faces. And these cuts, in that climate and terrain, would EASILY become INFECTED. SO, EVERY night, the shepherd takes OIL and MASSAGES it INTO the HEAD of each and every sheep and lamb. And it's a moment of INTIMACY between EACH and every animal and its beloved SHEPHERD. Well, God WANTS to be JUST as intimate with each and every one of US. But how MANY of us will SLOW DOWN long enough to allow that to happen? How MANY of us will make TIME in the midst of our busy, stressed-out lives for an INTIMATE encounter with God, for COMMUNING with God. And the STRANGE thing IS that IF we would DO that, we would have FAR less STRESS and far MORE peace, EVEN walking through the difficult VALLEYS of life. Yes friends, let GOD take you, hold you and anoint your head with OIL. Let God HEAL you, and give you PEACE. Let God be intimate with you.

Friends: the 23rd Psalm, the most beloved of ALL the Psalms, is a VERY powerful and meaningful poem, with MANY lessons to TEACH us. And SO, I invite EACH of us to PRAY on it, to MEDITATE on it, to REFLECT on it, and to LEARN it's MANY lessons. And WHEN we DO, we will find out that old King David was RIGHT: *The Lord IS our shepherd*. And therefore: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us ALL the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the HOUSE of the Lord FOREVER*. Trust that wonderful and eternal WISDOM, my friends, that you may have LIFE, and have it in ALL its FULLNESS. Amen.