

28 JUNE 2020

UNDERSTANDING OUR PATH [PSALM 23]

Intro – The Weight of a Weathered Testimony

There is weight to a weathered testimony isn't there? There is a steadiness, richness and dependability that comes from a perspective that has endured thick and thin.

A year and a half ago I was preaching at Bobbin Head and had the pleasure of meeting Greg, a much loved member of the church family down there. Greg is a retiree and after the service told me something of his life story and how he came to know Christ.

Greg was a wealthy and successful doctor in a big town in rural NSW. He had a beautifully architecturally designed home, lived in the best part of town, owned a share in a ski lodge down in Thredbo, and frequently enjoyed nights out with his wife, soaking up the best of the social life in the town. So that he could enjoy these nights out with his wife and make trips down to the ski lodge, the family employed the services of a Nanny named Queenie who would look after the children when they went out or away.

Now Queenie's life couldn't have been any more different to that of this family. She had been abused by her alcoholic ex-husband, and had to work hard to make ends-meet. Yet she had a peace and a joy about her that Greg and his wife couldn't resist or emulate. So one day, Greg went up to her and said, "Queenie, we seem to have everything, but we do not have the peace that you have, where do you get it from?" Greg then recalled, with tears and quivering lips, "She said four words that changed our lives, 'I am a Christian.'" And right then and there Greg gave his life to Christ.

There is weight to a weathered testimony. For Greg, hearing and seeing Queenie bear witness to the goodness, love and reality of God despite everything she went through, was compelling. Similarly, for me, as I spoke to Greg, a man advanced in years and not lacking in experience, hearing and seeing him tear up as he spoke of God's goodness to him in Christ, reminded me again that God really is good, that God really is faithful, that God really is loving.

There is weight to a weathered testimony. It's not that young people can't bear witness to the love and faithfulness of God, after all, Jesus commends child-like faith. But there is a richness and sturdiness when someone who has experienced the pain of a failed marriage, the grind of chronic illness, the grief of losing a loved one, the uncertainty over prolonged unemployment or the confusion of seemingly unanswered prayer, yet through it all they wholeheartedly say and believe, "God is good. In all his ways He is loving and faithful." They are like trees whose roots sink further down into underground water supplies in times of drought, and so become towering and sturdy.

There are plenty of things in life which can threaten our unshakeable confidence in the goodness of God, aren't there? In times such as these it is easy to *say* we believe the goodness of God at a head level, but in reality, really struggle to trust God's goodness at a *heart* level. So this morning I want us to give weight to the weathered testimony of David in Psalm 23.

1. David's Song

Think about it for a moment, David's story is a weathered one - here is a man who went from shepherd boy to national celebrity after he killed Goliath. Yet from national celebrity he became public enemy number one, as the crazed King Saul tried to hunt him down. From outlaw he then became Israel's greatest King, only to then later be cast out of his Kingdom and hunted down by his very own son. David knew failure, and he knew regret, especially from his failings as a parent. He knew family breakdown, he knew the darkness of depression, he was often beset with physical sickness and lived under siege from his many enemies.

Yet through it all, this weathered man bears incredible witness to the goodness of God. So what has this weathered man come to know and understand about God? Let's begin with verses 1-3,

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.**

Firstly, he has come to know God as his shepherd. Even in our urbanised setting, we understand this analogy don't we? As it is with sheep and their shepherd, it is even more so with God and his people. He loves us, cares for us, watches out for us and provides everything we need. When we wander off, he comes to rescue us. When we are hungry, he feeds us. When we are weary, he gives us the rest we need. He is good, he is powerful and we can trust him to lovingly provide for us.

Yet Secondly, David knew that having God as his shepherd did not exempt him from being lead into and through incredibly dark valleys.

**Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.**

Yes God leads us along right paths, but there are seasons when these paths move through such steep and winding ravines that the light of the sun and the direction in which are heading becomes shrouded in darkness.

Yet having traversed many dark valleys with his shepherd, he has come to know that no matter how distant God might feel in the moment, the reality is that God remains with him. God never has, nor ever will leave him or forsake him. This knowledge enables him to stand firm where he would previously be crippled by fear.

In the dark valleys David is further buttressed by the knowledge that his shepherd wields weapons – a rod to protect him and a staff to correct him. We can thus know that even our worst adversities and adversaries will not ultimately be able to consume us, because God's rod stands guard over us. We can know that even in our worst moments, God wields our circumstances as a staff of correction to increasingly orient our hearts toward following our shepherd and walking in his ways. He wields his rod and staff for our good. David knows this and it brings comfort to him.

Lastly, and perhaps this is the most astounding part of the Psalm for me, David knows that ultimately it will not be his foes who remain in pursuit of him, but rather the goodness and love of God. V 5-6-

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

**⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow [lit: pursue] me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

Isn't that remarkable? Here is a man who lived his life being hounded by enemies, be they King Saul, foreign armies, local insurrectionists and even his own son Absalom. Not only so, but David was hounded by past mistakes, physical sickness and likely depression. But through it all, he loudly proclaims that there is a bigger dog on his case than all of these. It is God's love and faithfulness that will hound him, that will chase him down and keep chasing him all the way into eternity.

Through thick and thin, drought and harvest, God won't stop pursuing David and hunting him down in his love. This is David's weathered testimony as to the goodness of God. Do you believe it?

Jesus' Song

But remarkably, though Psalm 23 is initially David's weathered song testifying to God's goodness, ultimately it is Jesus' song. You see, we give weight to Psalm 23, not primarily because of David's weathered experience, but rather because of who is the ultimate author (cf. Hebrews 3:7 and 10:15). David penned Psalm 23 inspired by the Holy Spirit, and as he described his experiences as Israel's king, by God's Spirit he pointed forwards to the experiences of Israel's true anointed King.

Nowhere is this divine authorship and foreshadowing more powerfully seen in the Psalms than in Psalm 22, which is a companion to our present Psalm. Notice the way that David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, anticipates the suffering of the Lord's true King of Israel, by describing his own -

Verse 1 – My God , my God why have you forsaken me?

Verse 16 – They pierce my hands and my feet

Verse 18 – They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment

More than Psalm 22 and 23 are David's songs; they are actually Jesus' songs. Though initially written by David, they are ultimately authored by God. As David wrote by the Spirit of his own sufferings as God's anointed King, he anticipated the sufferings of the Lord's true anointed and awaited King.

Psalms 22-23 thus show us that though Jesus was forsaken on the cross in the words of Psalm 22, he was never alone and outside of God's righteous plan and paths. Psalm 23 shows us that Jesus endured the scorn and shame of the cross for the joy set before him; he knew he would dwell in God's presence forever. In fact as the one who has died and risen again, his enemies have been vanquished forever.

Our Song

But here is the beautiful part; on the cross Jesus went through the valley of the shadow of death for us so that Psalm 23 might become *our* song also.

You see, no one has the right to automatically claim God as their shepherd, that privilege belongs only to the King to whom the Lord had made covenant promises. Yet Jesus died in our place to take our sin so that we might stand in his place and receive all his benefits as God's Son and our King.

Jesus died on the cross that we might know Him as our shepherd (John 10), that we might be able to claim Psalm 23 wholeheartedly as our own. On the cross Jesus secured the truths of Psalm 23 for us.

Because of the cross, like David and like Jesus, you can know that God is in pursuit of you, he's chasing you down and he's not going to stop chasing you in his love.

When you stray, he'll seek you out. When you faint, he'll pick you up. When you're overwhelmed, he'll keep you going. Yes there will be and have been dark valleys, but he will never leave your side

and never let you ultimately be overcome. He has not destined you to remain in the dark valley, but will bring you to his heavenly banquet where you will be with Him forever.

In particular, parents, take heart from Psalm 23. There are many for whom isolation has been a positive experience, but there are many for whom it has placed your parenting challenges front and centre.

Remember who it was who penned this Psalm, whose weathered testimony we are reading. David had immense difficulties at home, after all, his very own son Absalom was trying to kill him, talk about rejection! That's on top of living and dealing with regret from his failures as parent, see for example the incident of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13.

For parents who grieve their children walking away from the faith or are deeply concerned over their damaging life choices and trajectory. For those who feel at a loss with their children and don't know what to do and how to respond, don't let go of your confidence in the goodness, love and faithfulness of God. He will never leave you nor forsake you. You might feel in the midst of a dark valley with no discernible end, but Jesus promises that he is going to give you what you need. When you need rest he'll bring it, when you need pasture, he'll provide it. When you need wisdom he'll supply it and in even the most challenging circumstances his rod will protect you and his staff will correct you. Whatever may happen, know that he will keep chasing, and chasing and chasing you down until he chases you all the way into eternity.

May David's words and Jesus' words be on our lips and in our hearts with ever increasing conviction, "The Lord is *my* shepherd, I shall not want."