

## A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART - PS. 23

### THE LIFE OF DAVID IN THE PSALMS #1

Henry VIII, the king of England, was in a difficult situation. He was in the midst of a disagreement with the Pope which was very disturbing to him. Yes, it was certainly true that Henry had gotten himself into this mess. Henry had been married to Catherine, a princess from Spain. As Catherine was now in her 40's and they were yet to have any children, Henry began to panic. He was desperate for an heir to the English throne. So Henry had appealed to the Pope in 1527 for an annulment to his marriage with Catherine so that he could marry the young and beautiful Anne Boleyn. The Pope, surely pressured by the king of Spain, had refused Henry's request for an annulment. So Henry had just divorced Catherine anyway and married Anne as he had already planned to do. The Pope, in retaliation for this obvious snub, had excommunicated King Henry from the Roman Catholic Church. Now Henry was a very religious man - and this excommunication distressed him greatly. So he decided to send one of his loyal and respected subjects as an emissary to the Pope in an attempt to patch up this breach in relationship.

The Earl of Wiltshire was chosen for this important mission. So he with a royal entourage left England to journey to the Vatican. The Earl also brought his dog who was his constant and close companion with him - a move that proved to have disastrous consequences. You see, everything went along fine at first. The Pope was pleased with Henry's overture and received the Earl of Wiltshire graciously. And the Earl quickly fell to his knees to kiss the toe of the Pope as

was the custom when meeting the Pontiff. But when Pope Clement VII thrust out his foot towards the Earl, the dog misinterpreted the action as one of aggression. The Earl's dog jumped forward and bit the Pope on the foot. One of the Swiss guards who was always by the Pope's side sprung into action to defend the Pope and swiftly and immediately killed the dog. Well, the Earl of Wiltshire was crushed and angered at having lost his favorite companion, and he stormed out of the Vatican and back to England, sealing the rift between King Henry and Pope Clement. Within a short period of time, the Church of England was born.

Now when you read history books, they will invariably contain a chapter on King Henry VIII and his leading England religiously away from the Roman Catholic Church to the formation of the Church of England. Many reasons will be offered for the split - his marriage and family reasons will be outlined, the financial pressures will usually be mentioned, even Henry's personal character and arrogance will sometimes be offered. But seldom is the Earl's dog mentioned.

Yet at this most critical moment when reconciliation appeared to be close at hand, it was a dog's mistake and a man's love for his animal that actually helped to redirect English history.

We are all aware of the bond that can grow between a person and his or her pet animal. Many right here in this Sanctuary have a close relationship and affection for a dog or a cat or some other animal. Our dog, Bach, has become an adopted member of the Rowland household. Animals can be loyal and constant companions. And animals can help humans to learn a lot about themselves and about life in general.

It is not happenstance that God chose to prepare David for a lifetime of leading people by giving him the job of herding sheep for the majority of his childhood. God had used this methodology already with great success. You remember how God trained Moses, don't you? 40 years of herding sheep out in the wilderness before he was called to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. And God chose a similar pattern for David as well. David spent the greater part of his childhood days shepherding the family flocks.

Now there certainly were many disadvantages in being a shepherd in David's day. It could be about the most boring job in the world. It was monotonous. It was mundane. There was nothing to do most of the time. All the shepherd basically did was sit around and watch sheep. It was no wonder that Nomadic shepherds had a reputation for being lazy and even dishonest. An ancient Rabbi named Bar Hamma said *there is no more contemptible office in Israel than that of the shepherd*. We know from archaeological finds that nomadic shepherds couldn't even vote in many parts of Israel on civil matters - they weren't even regarded as citizens. So it was a humbling experience being chosen to watch the family flocks - it was as if you weren't good enough for anything else.

But there were also some great advantages and opportunities being a shepherd. A shepherd had a great deal of time on his hands with nothing much to do. He could either become very lazy and undisciplined - or he could become extremely proficient in certain fields if he disciplined himself. David took advantage of the opportunity given to him by developing self discipline.

\*Instead of sitting around doing nothing, David made himself a music

instrument and began to practice hour after hour until he became one of the most skilled musicians in the whole country. When King Saul was having those severe emotional depressions and a musician was needed to calm his spirit and soothe his soul, David the shepherd was called upon. Out of all the musicians in the whole country, a shepherd was chosen because he had developed great skill as a musician - and every musician knows that those kinds of skills come only from hundreds of hours of practice.

\*Instead of sitting around doing nothing, when he got tired of playing his harp, David set up targets on the stones and practiced hitting them with his sling until he became one of the premiere marksmen in the whole country. He had such confidence that he alone was willing to face the giant, Goliath, when every other soldier shrunk back in fear. David had confidence in his abilities with the sling - the kind of confidence that only comes with hours and hours of practice. David was so proficient that he was able to hit a couple of inch square area on Goliath's forehead on the dead run.

Now you might have been called by God to perform a rather menial task. Your work might be boring and tedious. And it might be true that most of the people that you work with are undisciplined people with severe character deficiencies. They might have given into the desires of the flesh as evidenced by the magazines that they constantly read and the pictures that surround them on the workplace wall. They might have let their minds go as evidenced by their limited vocabulary and the profanity that they constantly use. But the next time you are tempted to be overcome by boredom just think of David's example. A mundane

job gives many opportunities to the worker. If you develop your self discipline, just think of all you could accomplish. Just think of all the Scripture you could memorize. Just think of all the languages you could learn. David became the most skilled musician and marksman in all of Israel not playing in the Jerusalem philharmonic orchestra or studying at the Israel military academy, but out on the hillside watching sheep.

Now we don't know exactly when David wrote Psalm 23 in his life, but we can be sure that this Psalm reflects spiritual lessons that he learned during his childhood because that was the only time when he was active in herding sheep. And it is clear from this autobiographical statement of his spiritual life that David was a man who had a special relationship with the Lord. But his was a relationship that each of us can have - for God desires for all of us as members of his flock to know Him as our Shepherd.

There are many different ways to look at Psalm 23. There are many commentaries on this familiar passage. Leupold, Alexander and Kidner are 3 of my favorites. Philip Keller has an excellent little book looking at this passage from a cultural point of view. But I want to take a few moments to look at this Psalm through David's eyes this morning as we look at 3 spiritual lessons that David learned as a shepherd.

1. David first learned to rely upon the Lord for all of his physical and emotional and spiritual needs in life. vs. 1-3

PS 23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

PS 23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,

PS 23:3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

\*David begins this Psalm by speaking of the Lord who meets all needs so that he has no wants.

\*He then begins to point out specific needs that the Lord meets.

\*He gives physical nourishment and contentment by making him to lie down in green pastures.

\*He gives life-giving refreshment by leading him besides the quiet waters.

\*He gives emotional strength and stability by restoring his soul.

\*He gives spiritual direction by guiding him in paths of righteousness.

\*In short, David was willing to admit that he was a needy person. And he learned that the Lord was able and willing to meet all of those needs in their fullness so that he wouldn't be in want in any area of his life. This, very simply, is one of the most important lessons that any person can ever learn in their relationship with the Lord.

Now we might think this to be such an obvious lesson, but it is one that is so difficult for us to learn. For part of the core of our sinful human natures is a strong desire to be self-sufficient, totally independent of anyone or anything outside of ourselves. Every person has a strong inner desire to be in ultimate control of his or her life.

You see this desire in the heroes that we have invented. Just think for a moment of the fantasy heroes that have been invented and accepted by our youth. When I was young, Superman sold the most comic books and had a regular series

on TV. He is making yet another comeback today in a movie that is scheduled soon for release. Superman has endured the test of time as an American cultural hero. What is it that makes Superman so appealing to us. He is self-sufficient, isn't he? He has powers and abilities to defend himself and he even can save the world all by himself. Superman doesn't need God. You have never seen him pray. He doesn't need to pray. He can do whatever is needed to sustain life by himself. And most of us growing up entertain this same fantasy in our minds. We all have the desire for self-sufficiency, and this keeps us from having the relationship with God that we can have and that David did have.

The reality is that there isn't another mammal born on this planet that is in a more helpless condition than a human baby. There are some animals born that can scavenge for food immediately - not so with a human baby who is totally dependent upon the mother's milk. There are some animals born that can get up and walk right away - not so with a human baby who must be carried by a parent. There are some animals born that can function rather independently right after birth - not so with a human baby who cannot even see or think rationally until months after birth. And this dependency that is realized at birth is just typical of the kind of dependency that we have on God throughout our entire lifetimes. We don't want it; we didn't vote for it; we often resent it; but it is fact. It is reality. We are dependent upon God for every heartbeat and breathe for our entire lifetime. The One who gave life to us at conception is also the One who sustains that life until He gives to us our final breath. And the quicker we come to grips with this in life, the better off we are. For accepting our human condition releases us to find

all of our needs met in the Lord who desires to be our Shepherd.

Now David learned this great lesson as a youth shepherding his father's flocks. A sheep left to itself in Palestine would quickly die. It either would be consumed by hungry predators - sheep are totally defenseless animals bogged down by heavy coats of wool. Or it would starve to death. It is absolutely necessary for flocks to follow migratory patterns in Palestine in order to get sufficient nourishment. Sheep, by emitting a unique odor from their hooves, have a tendency to go back to the same location to feed day after day for security rather than venturing out to new pastureland. Or it would die of thirst - sheep have a natural fear of any moving waters and don't want to go near them. Or it would be controlled and dominated by parasites - sheep are natural harbors for all kinds of parasitic animals and are totally defenseless against them. The nasal fly, for instance, will come and lay eggs in the moist recesses of a sheep's nose. When the eggs hatch, the maggots that crawl around cause such irritation that sheep will literally beat themselves senseless smashing their heads against trees or rocks unless that parasite is controlled.

David knew all this - he took care of sheep for years. He fought the bear and the lion who were trying to prey on his helpless sheep. He knew the migratory patterns that Palestinian shepherds must follow in order to provide adequate pastureland for their flocks. He knew where the pools of water were where the sheep would drink without fear of drowning. He had his special recipe of oil and sulphur and tar which he would use to rub on his sheep's head to ward off the dreaded nasal fly. And somewhere along the way, as David was caring for the

family flocks, the truth dawned on him that in God's eyes, he was like one of these sheep. That God looked upon him just like he looked upon one of the members of his flock. That he was just as dependent upon God as his sheep were dependent upon him. And this was a tremendously freeing truth for David. For it both allowed him to see life as it really was, and it also put him into a position where God was able to release his strength and power into David's life in a whole new way.

You see, as long as a person is convinced that he can live life in his own strength and is committed to trying it, God just stands back and watches him fail. For the one thing that God will not do is give His glory to another. And if God gave the self-sufficient person His omnipotent power, that person would claim credit for it. That person would claim to be superman. But when a person admits his or her inadequacies and weaknesses and comes to God requesting divine strength and power, God is always ready and willing to come to that person's aid. What an important lesson to learn in life - to rely upon the Lord for all of our physical and emotional and spiritual needs.

2. But let's move now to a second lesson that is revealed in this Psalm. David learned to trust in the Lord when he had anxieties and fears in life. vs.4

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup>

Now this passage is often used in the context of facing death. In fact, I often use this passage when I deliver funeral messages. Part of the time it is because Psalm 23 is the passage requested by the family for it is such a beloved and well-

known text. And part of the time, I use it because it is so well known. If people who usually don't go to church know any part of the Bible, it probably is Psalm 23. And this verse does have a good application concerning death and the courage that a person can have in facing death if he or she is following the Lord as shepherd.

But the primary application of Psalm 23:4 is not in facing death. The valley of the shadow of death was a name of a road in ancient times. It was the name of the road that joined the cities of Jerusalem and Jericho. It was the very road that the Jewish man in Christ's story was walking down when he was robbed and rescued by the Good Samaritan. The city of Jerusalem has an elevation of a couple of thousand feet above sea level. Jericho is near the northern border of the Dead Sea which is below sea level. The Valley of the Shadow of Death was the road between Jerusalem and Jericho that falls several thousand feet in 30 - 40 miles. It is a road that often has treacherous footing, is very windy, and has steep cliffs and crevices sprinkled along it. It was a natural place for bandits to lurk. There were plenty of hiding places. And it could be especially lucrative when the pilgrims came to Jerusalem during the special feast days carrying large sums of monies for offerings and sacrifices. That is one of the reasons why pilgrims usually traveled in large groups - for protection as well as company.

The point that David is making here reflects the migratory patterns of Palestinian shepherding. The conscientious shepherd had to move his flocks from the higher elevations of summer to the lower elevations in the winter. The most natural routes would be through the valleys that had the most gentle slopes and

were the best watered. But there were many dangers lurking there for the sheep. Predators who were always ready to prey upon the helpless; poor footing which could lead to stumbles along the way; steep crevices which could quickly end one's life. The sheep would naturally be fearful of making such a journey - but it was for their well being for better pastureland on the other side. But as long as they were with the shepherd, they needn't have fear - for he would guide and protect them. Even if they had to journey down that most dreaded road - the valley of the shadow of death - they need not fear if their shepherd were with them.

David was a man who knew what fear was. He knew the clutching grip of terror. As we will see later as we look at some very Psalms that were written by him as he was fleeing for his life from Saul, David was a man who knew the realities of life's dangers personally. But somewhere along life's journey, David had also learned the comfort of having the Lord as his shepherd. So David learned to place his life in the hands of the Lord. This freed him from anxiety and fear. This allowed his mind to think swiftly and logically in an emergency. David was not a man who was paralyzed by fear. He was a man who was at his very best under pressure. This was enabled by his knowing the Lord as one who could free him from anxiety and fears.

I needn't belabor the obvious application to this point long. How many people are hindered in reaching their life's potential by fear? All of us to some extent I would imagine. But many are stymied and paralyzed by their anxieties and fears. Yes, there are many dangers in life and they are real and foreboding.

But if we know the Lord as our Shepherd, and if we are walking with Him in fellowship, we can even walk through the valley of the shadow of death with confidence.

3. We just have time for one more lesson that David evidences in this Psalm.

He learned to hope in the Lord for what lay ahead in the future. vs. 5-6

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

How much of the details of David's future was known at this time we can't be sure? Did he know of the decade or so of his life that he would spend running from the sword of Saul? Did he know of all of the battles that he would have to fight in order to deliver the Israelites from the influence of the surrounding nations? Did he know of the internal battles that he would have to suffer with his own sinful flesh and depraved desires? Did he realize that members of his very own family, his own flesh and blood, would one day rise up against him in an attempt to take his life? We don't know how much David knew when he wrote these words. But we do know that David knew the Lord as his Shepherd. And knowing the Lord as his shepherd gave to him to confidence to face the future with hope. David knew that goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of his life because he had confidence in the Lord as his shepherd. And I'm sure that just as David might not have known all of the trials that lay ahead of him in life, he surely didn't have any idea of the glories that were in store for him. Could he in his wildest imagination have dreamed of the honor and glory that he would

experience being the king of Israel? Do you think he would have ever guessed at how easily the Philistines would be subdued after decades of domination over Israel? Could David's mind have ever conceived of the riches that he would accumulate in his lifetime- with enough left over to build the glorious temple of God. Do you think that David ever envisioned the palace that he would live in one day as he slept out under the stars on those Palestinian hillsides with his sheep. No, I'm sure that David never envisioned all of the glories that lay ahead for him at this point in his life. But because he knew the Lord as his Shepherd, he could face the future with absolute confidence.

And far greater than the prospect of having goodness and love follow him all the days of this earthly life, David had the confidence that he would one day dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And that assurance alone makes all the trials and struggles of this life bearable.

Is the Lord your Shepherd this morning? Do you have a personal, living relationship with a personal, living God? If you do - then you also can rest in the assurance that God will meet all of your needs (physical, emotional, spiritual), you can have the confidence that he will guide you through life so that you needn't worry or fear, and you can have the hope of a glorious future.