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I Shall Not Want

Psalm 23

2014 Summer in Psalms Series

Pastor Bryan Clark

[Readers]:

The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He guides me along the right path
For His name's sake.
Yea 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;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Amen. (*NASB, Psalm 23)

[Bryan]:

Sadly, over the last several months, it seems like we've been reminded again and again of the words of James, that "life is a vapor—here today, gone tomorrow." It's why every day matters. Don't miss the moments. The past is past. I don't know that I have tomorrow. What I do know is I have today, and today matters. There will be moments today I will never get back again. I don't want to miss those. But, how do I do that? It's easy to talk about, but how do we actually live that way?

Well, there's probably several ways we could discuss this, but I've become more and more convinced, over the years, that one attitude that is absolutely necessary to capture the moments each day is the attitude of contentment. If I'm always looking at tomorrow, if I'm always looking at what I lack, if I'm never satisfied, I'm just not going to live in the moment. I'm not going to capture the moments today. So, what do we mean by contentment?

Contentment does not mean that we're just willing to settle—that I stop growing; I stop changing; I stop dreaming; I stop having a vision about tomorrow. To live that way would be, in essence, to stop living. That isn't contentment. Contentment is more the idea that I may have hopes and dreams and ways that I'm changing and growing, but what I do know is I have today and contentment is about wanting what I already have. Instead of being so focused on what I lack and what could be and what if, the one thing I do know is that I have today and such as my circumstances are, today. To be able to say with the Apostle Paul, "I've learned to be content in whatever circumstances I'm in," is to focus today on wanting what I already have. So, how do we do that? Well, I think our psalm today will be quite helpful. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 23. It's our seventh psalm this summer.

Psalm 23 is arguably the best known psalm, probably for sure, and maybe the best known Scripture in all of our Bible. It's a *Psalm of David*. Most scholars believe David wrote it towards the end of his life and probably under duress. In other words, it's probably not correct to think about David sitting on the side of a hill and peacefully penning some clever lyrics. It's more the idea that David was under duress—his life was very hard. Some scholars think it was when David was fleeing from Absalom, his son, who had the Israeli army and was seeking to kill him. So, in the midst of very difficult circumstances, he is reminding himself that, **The Lord is my shepherd** and then, what are the implications of that?

David, having been a shepherd himself, would have a clear understanding of that imagery. It's much more difficult for us. We're familiar with the fact that the Bible uses the imagery of a shepherd over and over and over again. So, on one hand we're very familiar with it, and on the other hand we're not familiar with it at all because we're not shepherds and we don't watch sheep. Even if people today own sheep, it's nothing like it was in the ancient Near East. It still is very hard to get inside the imagery of what really is meant by that imagery. What was it like thousands of years ago? On one hand, a shepherd was considered kind of at the low end of the totem pole. For example, typically, like the youngest son would have that job. You see that when Samuel comes to David's family to anoint the next King of Israel and goes through all the brothers. None of them is called to be king and they end up with, "Well, there's one more boy and he's out watching the sheep." And you kind of get that sense that that's how shepherds were thought of. You have the same thing in the New Testament when we talk about the *lowly* shepherds and the angels coming to announce the birth of Christ. So, on one hand, that is true.

But it's also true that this imagery of a shepherd was used, for example, by God Himself. God referred to Himself as a shepherd. In Psalm 78 He refers to David as His under-shepherd or His assistant shepherd. Kings and rulers in the ancient world actually identified themselves as shepherds. They used this imagery, capturing the idea that their job was to provide for and protect the sheep—the people. So, on one hand it was kind of this lowly imagery; on the other hand it was used for God and the most powerful rulers of the day. David says, in verse one:

> **The LORD is my shepherd,**
> **I shall not want.**

So, in other words, the big idea is in verse one, **The Lord is my shepherd**. The implication of that is, "I shall not want for anything." And the rest of the psalm is just things **I shall not want** for—I shall not lack. Lord, all caps, L-O-R-D, which always tells us that's the Hebrew *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*. It's the God that's personal and intimate, that has entered into a covenant, personal relationship with David. It would have been highly unusual in those days to refer to God in such personal terms as to say the Lord is *my* shepherd—my own personal shepherd—so, very unusual terminology for them, even though we're quite familiar with it today. So, **the Lord is my shepherd**; the result of that is, **I shall not want**.

Now I remember as a kid, I couldn't understand the psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, and I don't want Him" (*laughter*). That's what it sounds like it's saying, like, "I don't get that." But it's **The Lord is my shepherd;** therefore, **I shall not want.** I shall not want for anything. And then he goes through just some things we shall not want for. Verse two:

> **He makes me lie down in green pastures;** (Vs. 2a)

The first thing we shall not want for is *rest*. Now, again, we don't know a lot about shepherding and sheep, but sheep are considered, by most, to be among the dumbest animals out there. And there are a number of things they do to gain that distinction. Sheep don't lie down easily. This whole idea of **green pastures**—you have to remember this wasn't Nebraska. This was the ancient Near East; it wasn't green in too many places. It was mostly brown. So it took a skilled shepherd to continually move the sheep and find green pastures. And in order for a sheep to basically lie down and rest, it required certain needs to be met. The first one is they had to be free from fear—fear of predators. There had to be a feeling of safety. They had to be free of fear of the other sheep. Like a lot of animals, sheep kind of have this pecking order and they would kind of beat each other up until the order was established. And in order for these sheep to relax and lie down, there had to be a sense in which they weren't going to get mugged in their sleep, you know? The third is they had to be free from irritating bugs and flies and critters. It was actually said that some of these sheep would get so worked up over the flies and the bugs and the insects that just would not leave them alone, that they'd start hitting their heads on rocks and stones to try to get the bugs off, to the point that sometimes sheep would actually kill themselves—just kind of crazy over these bugs and flies that just wouldn't leave them alone. So there had to be a sense in which they were free from that. And finally, they were well fed. There were *green pastures*. With all those needs met, the sheep would lie down and rest.

When I think about this for us, it reminds me that rest is all about a rigorous, full theology of grace. In the midst of our performance-based culture and all the pressure and all the stress and all the anxiety that that creates, in order to rest we have to understand the full implications of this magnificent doctrine of grace. Jesus said, "Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest." The Good Shepherd offers us rest by virtue of His amazing grace. In the midst of a culture filled with all of the confusion and pressure, so when I have my significance, when I have my identity, when I have my acceptance, when I have my belonging rooted in God on the basis of God's grace, even in the midst of the chaos, I am able to rest. It's not an absence of the storm; it's being able to rest in the midst of the storm.

He leads me beside quiet waters. (Vs. 2b)

Sheep were not able to forge the mighty river. They're not like cows or horses or other animals that have the strength to forge a river. They're actually quite at risk when they're down by a flowing river. So they required quiet water where they could get water and they could be refreshed in a way that was safe. I think that's the idea—they shall not want for refreshment. When we think about rest, I would suggest it's like Sabbath rest. But when I say Sabbath rest, I'm not talking about Saturday and I'm not talking about Sunday. I don't think that's what it is in the new covenant. We're talking about resting in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. Seven days a week, 24/7, I rest. I rest in what Jesus has done for me. So, on the basis of His finished work, then I'm also able to find refreshment for my dry and thirsty soul.

Go back to the language of Galatians—that I understand that on my best days but more importantly on my worst days, when I blow it and I make a mess of things, because of God's grace I have permission to run to the *Light Room* and there experience the life of Christ, and it flows into me and it refreshes my soul and it brings my soul back to life and I remember again what matters and what's important and what I want to live for. The **quiet waters** are the waters of Jesus as *Living Water* as He refreshes my soul, all on the basis, not of my performance, but on the basis of His grace. It's always safe there. Verse three:

He restores my soul; (Vs. 3a)

The word **restores** could be *revives* and the word **soul** is the common Hebrew word for *life*—maybe better translated, "He revives my life." Now, what's he talking about there? One of the interesting dynamics or distinctions of sheep is: even if there are no predators within 100 miles, even if there's plenty of food, even if there are quiet waters, they're still always at risk—at risk to themselves. They have this interesting behavior where a sheep that's maybe a little bit fat or maybe extremely wooly or perhaps pregnant, has a tendency to lie down in kind of a depression, or a crevice, or a bowl, and what happens is when this sheep lays down, then the legs stick out sideways and literally do not touch the ground. The shepherds in the ancient world refer to it as the sheep "casting down". As a matter of fact, if you read through the Old Testament, you see that terminology used, "like sheep cast down." That's what it's talking about. The sheep would then panic because its hooves could not touch the ground and so they start to shake and wiggle and what happens, I guess because of their center of gravity, they don't roll over. They roll up and then they're virtually upside down and they will stay there until they die. They have no capacity to change their situation. A shepherd would say that's a sheep *cast down*. In a very hot climate, within a couple of hours the sheep could be dead; when it's milder, maybe a day or so. And that's why you see such emphasis on things such as a shepherd counting the sheep.

You see this in Luke 15—the shepherd counts the sheep—there are 99. One's missing because the sheep had this habit of casting down and he knew somewhere out there there's a sheep and if I don't get to it, it will die there and so, "Let the search begin." Once the sheep was found, it was not as simple as just rolling them over and back to the flock. By that time the blood had flowed out of the extremities, and it was necessary to very carefully roll the sheep over and get the blood start going back into the legs. Sometimes they carefully stand them up and massage the legs until there was enough strength to stand and then eventually run back to the flock. So, when you think about it, it's a very vivid imagery of our tendency to get ourselves in trouble—and we make a mess of things. And God counts the sheep and He says, "Uh oh, seems to Me Bryan's missing." And He goes searching and He finds me, not to whack me but to restore me, to turn me over, to get the blood flowing again, to get me back on my feet, to revive me, to get me back on the trail and back in the game. It's the reminder that I shall not want for revival, for restoration, that God is in the business of restoration. No failure is final. God is about grace; He's about mercy; He's about forgiveness; He's about calling, and He's about re-calling. With Peter, after the denial of Christ and that whole mess in John 21, Jesus comes back and he re-calls Peter to make a difference in this world because that's who Jesus is. No failure is ever final. I shall not want for restoration. God is in the restoration business...**He restores my soul...**

He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake. (Vs. 3b)

I shall not want for guidance or direction. Another interesting distinction of sheep is they just have this tendency to wander away. There can be plenty of food; there can be plenty of protection and water, but they just start grazing their way away, and literally a sheep will wander away to where there's no grass, no water and no protection. That's just kind of their nature, which reminds us then why Isaiah said, "All we like sheep..." have what? "We've gone astray." It's just our nature; it's our tendency. No matter how good things are, we have a tendency to wander away and get ourselves in trouble.

Over the last couple of weeks I've talked about *temptation* and I've defined temptation as the invitation to meet a legitimate need, but through illegitimate means. In other words, we wander away. God has promised, as the Good Shepherd, "I'll take care of you; I'll meet your needs; I'll meet your desires; I will satisfy your soul," but we don't trust Him. So we wander away and we get ourselves in all kinds of trouble and He goes out and finds us and He brings us back. We've been reminded, just this summer that, "*The Word of God is a lamp to our path"* that guides us along the way. We've been reminded from Psalm 37 that the way to stay on the right path is to believe that God tells the truth and take God at His Word. We're reminded through Psalm 51: this is what happens when we go astray. This is what happens when we decide to do it our own way. But, in the midst of that is the reminder that God is a God of grace and mercy. He forgives us and He invites us back onto the path and to continue to travel with Him, and that failure's never final. So, He guides me down the right path **for His name's sake**. His own reputation is at stake in that. Verse four:

> **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**
> **I fear no evil, for You are with me.**

That word **evil** is a Hebrew word that could be translated *harm*, and I think that's probably better. Now, this psalm is often used at funerals and it's completely appropriate there. There is a sense in which when we, as family and loved ones and friends go through the grieving of death, that God goes through that with us. But the actual context here is not so much that it is the *risk of dying*. In other words, what he's talking about here, **through the valley of the shadow of death** is that I've got to go through a valley and put my life at risk, and the Good Shepherd goes with me.

Now, what he's talking about is this: In the ancient Near East, in the fall and the winter, by and large the sheep would come down to the low lands and they stayed pretty close to home in order to watch them and take care of them. But in the spring and the summer, as the snow would recede, then they would move up the mountain to the grass that was green and fresh. So they'd spend the spring and the summer there, and come back down in the winter.

Now with everything I've said about sheep, now try to imagine moving this flock of sheep up a mountain. It's a rather difficult task. So how they did this was that they moved them up through, basically, what were dry streambeds—what they called the "wadi". So it basically made like a tunnel that provided kind of a path and kind of borders on the path and they would take the flock up through the wadi, up into the higher elevations. The problem with this is because it was a dried streambed—just the nature of the geography—it was filled with peril. There were dangers; there were obstacles; there were snakes; there were predators. By and large it was dark and shadowy because it was a depression, so there were plenty of places for predators to hide. So it kind of creates this picture—**the valley of the shadow of death.** So the shepherd did not say, "You go up to the mountaintop, and I'll meet you there." But rather, what the text is saying is: the shepherd gets in amongst them and walks with them, looking for obstacles, looking for snakes, looking for predators hiding in the rocks. So even though they're traveling through the valley of the shadow of death the shepherd is going with them and is going to get them through the valley. We shall not want for protection. Whatever it is in life that feels uncertain, that feels unsafe—I'm just not sure what's going to happen—it feels like there are bad things hiding in the shadows, the Shepherd has said, "I will go with you every step of the way and we'll go through the valley of the shadow of death together." That's what he's referring to there.

It is worth noting that in verses one, two, and three he is describing the Good Shepherd with third person pronouns: he, he, he. But when he gets to verse four, it shifts from third person to second

person—God, *You*— and all of a sudden you get this sense that this is the situation David's in—that the enemy is closing in. He feels like he's traveling through the valley of the shadow of death and this is now not describing God; this is a heart crying out to God as the Good Shepherd. "God, I'm going through this valley of the shadow of death, but I remember that You are with me so I will not fear. I will trust You."

Your rod and your staff they comfort me.

This is, in essence, saying the shepherd has the necessary tools of the trade to get the job done. I shall not want for comfort. God is big enough; He's strong enough; He's powerful enough; He's loving enough, that I can trust Him. The rod eventually symbolized—with a King and a scepter—the idea of power. It was a shorter rod; typically it had a ball on the end of it, and was considered to be a weapon. It was for striking, and even for throwing. It's amazing how good these shepherds got with their slingshots and with their rod at throwing this at predators and even, at times, at the sheep. If a sheep was walking toward danger or a snake or a cliff, they might throw the rod in order to stop the sheep, kind of a discipline to get them back where they belong. The staff is what we're much more familiar with—the long shepherd staff, the crook at the end, used to grab the sheep, to pull the sheep out of the ditch. One other interesting thing it was used for is when the ewe would have a little lamb—of course you have sheep everywhere—and these lambs are dropping and there's confusion about which lamb goes with which sheep and the shepherd often would use the staff to pick up the little lamb and to pull it alongside the ewe because he wanted to connect the little lamb with the mother without human scent. So that's another thing that staff was used for.

I think for us, with God being the shepherd, the Good Shepherd, is the reminder: He has everything necessary to take care of us, so there's great comfort in that. There's nothing that's too big for God. Verse five:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You have anointed my head with oil.

Now, at this point in the psalm there's a lot of discussion of whether the shepherding imagery continues or whether it changes. If it's the imagery of the shepherd, then it goes like this: the idea of **a table**—banqueting table—is that shepherds would try to move sheep up onto a mesa, or what they referred to as *a table*, because these tables were typically full of food. It was kind of like a banquet; the sheep could live it up. The risk was that there was danger in that...so **in the presence of my enemies.** So, it's like a sheep going up on this table with this banquet to eat but with the shepherd protecting them from the enemies. The idea of the **oil** would be the shepherd taking oil mixed with sulfur and some spices to put on their wounds in order to keep bugs and insects and infection out, and then the *cup overflowing* is kind of a two-handled cup that they would often use. If getting the water was too dangerous, the shepherd would get the water and use this cup in order to water the sheep. And it's the idea of water in abundance. So if it's a shepherding imagery, then that's what it's referring to.

A lot of people think though that the imagery shifts to that of a host. So imagine David's out fleeing for his life. The army's chasing him; he feels like he's going through the *valley of the shadow of death* but then somebody invites him in; somebody functions as the host. And they don't just feed him; they feed him a feast. The oil would be the idea of expensive oil that is poured over the head and parts of the body in order to sooth the skin that's been out in the heat and the wind, and is dry and cracked and it's kind of this soothing experience. The word **anointed** there is not the Hebrew

word that's used like a ceremonial anointing. It's a Hebrew word that basically means *luxury*. So this, **anoint my head with oil** carries this idea of it being luxurious. In the midst of the struggle, he's served a banquet. He has this luxurious treatment with the oil and his wine goblet basically is full all the time, which again would be kind of this imagery of bounty and fullness.

So either way it's basically talking about in the middle of hard times, in the middle of a struggle, in the middle of a storm, that there is a shepherd or a host who provides this banquet, who provides this oil, who provides this wine, that just simply provides what you need in abundance to take care of you in your hour of need. Again it's not saying that there will never be problems, that there will never be tragedy, that life's always going to be easy. What **The Lord is my shepherd** is actually saying is the opposite—the opposite is true. There will be tragedies; there will be storms; there will be difficulties. That's why you need the Lord as your shepherd. That's why you need Him to walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death. That's why you need Him to be your host to provide the banqueting table and the oil and the cup. Verse six is kind of a summary:

> **Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,**
> **And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

David's reminding himself that this Shepherd that is *his* shepherd—that provides all he needs; he shall not want for anything—is always good; He's always loving; He's always kind. The behavior flowing out of the Shepherd is always flowing out of His character which is good and loving and kind. There are days when that feels abundantly clear and there are days when all you can do is believe that by faith.

Recently I was talking to a young father who, in the last couple of months, has been through a lot—the death of his father and just a couple months before that the birth of a child that was born prematurely with all these hoses and wires and stuff inserted in this child, and we were just talking about that. There's really nothing more difficult for a parent than to watch all this stuff being done to your child. You know that it's for the child's good and yet, as a dad, your instinct is to stop it and to protect that child. And we were talking about this because it's an imagery that I've seen over and over again over the years. When, as a father, you look into the eyes of that infant and you can tell that they're scared; they're terrified, and they probably wonder, "Why, if you love me, are you allowing these people to torture me and do this to me?" And, as a parent, you feel that. And yet, as a parent, you say, "I love you more than life itself. I would do anything for you, but right now this is what you need to survive." But there is the frustration; there is simply no ability, as an adult, to explain that to an infant in such a way that the infant would understand. And I've often wondered: is that how God feels? God is so much bigger. God has a different perspective. God sees the beginning from the end, and there are times when everything just seems unfair and we wonder, "Why would God allow this and why would God do this and why does it have to be this way?" And we look at God with terror in our eyes and we say, "God, if you love me, why would you allow this to happen to me?" And God must feel the pain and the frustration of knowing, "I am doing this out of my goodness and my love and my kindness, but because I'm God and you're not, there's simply no way that I could ever explain this in such a way that you would understand. So, in this moment, all I can do is ask you to trust Me, that at the end of the day, as your Shepherd, everything flows through My goodness and My love and My kindness."

And then, at the end of the psalm, David reminds us that his future is glorious. If David is indeed on the run, he doesn't know if he's going to live or die. He doesn't know what the future holds, but he does know that no matter what happens, his eternal future is glorious because, **The Lord is my**

shepherd and He's always good and He's always loving and He's always kind. Because **The Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want.** I shall not want for rest or refreshment or restoration or guidance or protection or provision or hope.

So, what does all this have to do with contentment? We're discontent when we're always anxious and fearful and worried about what might happen and what I lack and what I wish I had and what about tomorrow and what about the day after that and what about this and what about that and we're always focused on things we can't ultimately change or control. But in the process of that, I miss the moment today. Those of you that consider yourselves to be visionaries and dreamers—that's an awesome quality, but you better be careful you're not spending so much of your life in what could be someday that you miss the moment of what is today. The past is past; you can't do that again. Yesterday had moments and you either missed them or you captured them. But this we know for sure. You don't ever get those moments back. I don't know that I have tomorrow—maybe I do; maybe I don't. What I do know is I have today, such as my circumstances are, today. And because the Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want. I shall not want for anything that I need, so I'll trust Him with that, which allows me the freedom to think about today. And today there will be moments, and today matters, and I need to be thoughtful that I don't miss the moments today...because I will never get those moments back again.

Our Father, we're thankful that You love us, that You are our Good Shepherd. And because You are our shepherd, we shall not want for anything that we need. God, help us to learn to trust You, that we might learn to be content rather than focusing on what we don't have. Today I will want what I already have. God, open our eyes to see what we have today, what those moments are, what matters today, and to capture those moments. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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