

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Psalm 23 - Aspects of our LORD: The LORD our Captain

What's in a name? Well quite a lot actually. Rolls Royce is synonymous with excellence. We speak about hoovering the floor, even though we may not be using a Hoover vacuum cleaner. Conversely, we can no longer buy our jewellery at Ratners, because they only sold, well not very nice stuff. A name can make, or break, a business, or a person. What is true in life is also true in the Bible. We speak of a doubting Thomas (John 20:24-29), or a Judas (Matthew 26:14, 25, 47; 27:3), neither of which give a good impression.

In Psalm 23 we have been looking at aspects of our LORD and it is all down to His name - Jehovah Rohi. We have seen the way in which He provides for us the green pastures and still waters. We have seen how He is able to guide us into the paths of righteousness and to keep us even in the valley of the shadow of death. Well this morning we will view Him as our Captain, looking particularly at Psalm 23:5. But let us begin by just reading the Psalm, in its entirety together.

"Jehovah Rohi (that is, 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 leads me in the paths of righteousness 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 runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:1-6)

It is fitting that as we stand at the end of one year and on the threshold of a New Year, with all the excitements and uncertainties that that may hold, that we remind ourselves that He is our captain. Now I am no genius when it comes to sorting out all the ranks within the army but I do know that captains have authority over the common privates. If I enlist, I am not free to say "Well, actually I don't like that order so count me out" or "I am not keen on fighting in that conflict so I'll just stay in the barracks." I had freedom of choice before I joined up, but having enlisted I gave up that right. I am there to follow orders, and it is not up to me to make the orders. So it is in spiritual things, and perhaps we have forgotten this.

Christianity is not a democracy. God gives us the freedom to choose to accept or reject His Son, but once we accept Him, with all the many privileges that come with such a choice, we also forgo our freedom to self choice. We are under His authority, and it is our responsibility to obey His commands. A soldier who goes missing whilst on active service is a deserter, as is a Christian who lives his or her life with little thought of submitting to His authority.

So as we start a new year the question we need to ask ourselves is really a simple one, but the answer will have life changing and profound consequences. Are we going to accept His authority in our lives? This really is an all or none choice, although we will very often fall short, and make mistakes. Perhaps in helping us to make that choice it is good to remind ourselves of the Captain that we have, and what He has done.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over" (Psalm 23:5). We can look at Psalm 23:5 in at least two ways: either as a banquet, or, I think more preferably, as living on the high ground. Perhaps, though, they are not mutually exclusive. What a terrific thing it is to be able to remind ourselves that Jesus has conquered and won an eternal victory.

Paul speaks about this victory in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57: *"So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

And in Ephesians 4:7-10: *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.' (Now this, "He ascended" - what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)"*

Sin and death and Hell are a defeated force. Jesus spoke about a strong man in Luke 11:21. But He also spoke of One who is stronger coming and binding that strong man, and plundering his possessions (Luke 11:22). Well, the Devil may be like the strong man, and certainly as we face trials and temptations we know the full force of his strength, but Jesus is stronger and has bound him and we now belong to the Lord Jesus. Our sins are fully forgiven, the judgement of them fully satisfied in Jesus' death on the cross at Calvary.

Death holds no terror for the Christian, for in dying we go to be with Him, which is far better. Hell's doors are mercifully forever closed to us as we are now *"accepted in the Beloved"*. What a victory Jesus has won and He would have us celebrate this victory with Him. So He prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23:5). What a feast we have to enjoy - peace with God, justification, sanctification, eternal security, the indwelling Holy Spirit, forgiveness, gifting are all on the menu. And that is just the first course. We are *"blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ"* (Ephesians 1:3).

Of course, we need to tuck in for it to be any good. Were Jamie Oliver to come round to my house and prepare the most amazing feast for me, only for me to look at it and admire its presentation, you would think me daft. Food needs to be eaten to enjoy the benefits of it. Well, with such a feast of spiritual benefits spread before us, we need to spend this next year feasting on these things by considering them deeply and then working them out, in practice, in our lives.

And it is in the presence of my enemies. Perhaps you have never considered how offensive it is to the Devil, that God has left you here. God could have taken you straight to Heaven the moment you accepted Jesus as your Saviour. Instead, He chose to leave you here as a constant reminder to the Devil that he has been defeated. There is nothing that he can do against the almighty power of Jesus. He has been defeated and our continuing presence in this world is a constant reminder of this fact. This is not a quickly snatched meal in enemy territory, this is a public feast to celebrate Jesus' victory - and it is held on enemy soil.

In similar vein, when the Lord Himself returns to take His church to be with Him, it is in the air that we shall meet Him. The Devil is referred to as the *"prince of the power of the air"* (Ephesians 2:2) but he will be powerless to stop this joyful reunion on his home patch. We could never imagine Barack Obama and David Cameron having an unaccompanied sightseeing tour of some middle Eastern hotspot. Yet something just as audacious is what we have here, as our captain shares with us the fruits of His victory.

In the words *"You anoint my head with oil"* (Psalm 23:5) we are reminded of the wonderful position we have been brought into as believers. During Old Testament times, both kings and priests were anointed with oil, marking them out as those who had been chosen by God. David himself had been anointed by the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 16, particularly 1 Samuel 16:13. It is good to remind ourselves, then, that we are similarly anointed as both royal and holy priests. Let us read what Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9: *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."*

Every single Christian, every believer on the Lord Jesus is a part of the priesthood of God's kingdom. He has poured the oil of consecration upon us so that we all may *"proclaim the praises of Him"* (1 Peter 2:9). It is really important that each of us recognise the value and honour that every child of God has, and the responsibility to exercise this priesthood before God. Jesus our captain is the One who commands us to worship and praise Him - in public and in private, in word and in action. As we begin this new year, let us resolve to make this a living reality.

"My cup runs over" just reinforces the image of abundant blessing that is ours. Too often we fill our minds with problems and difficulties, real or imagined. Instead, we need to fill our thoughts with the over abundant blessing that comes with knowing Jesus as our Captain and Saviour. There is also the thought that the danger has been dealt with. After all, who would want to start drinking if there was still the danger of a counter attack?

I want now to look at the second way of understanding Psalm 23:5 and the wonderful truths that this verse suggests. The reason why I like this way of looking at the verse is it seems to fit better with the theme of His shepherd care for the flock all year round. We can understand the shepherd leading the sheep beside still waters (Psalm 23:2), or protecting in the valley (Psalm 23:4), but sheep do not eat at a table and so we almost need to break one image and start another if we use the former picture. I think what we shall look at next carries on the picture of the shepherd - Jehovah Rohi, which, as we have seen, in Hebrew means *"the LORD is my shepherd"* (Psalm 23:1).

During the winter months, the shepherd would bring his sheep down into the valley to escape the worst of the Israeli winter weather. However, by the time spring came the warmth lower down would cause insect life to flourish and the proliferation of all these insects could be quite an irritation to the sheep. So a part of the shepherd's job would be to go up the mountainsides to the high flat plateaus, or "tables". Here, the air was less stifling and the sheep would be able to find relief from all those tiny biting mouths. Of course, any number of wild plants that were unsuitable for the flock to feed on would need to be cleared away, and that would be backbreaking work. Here too, wild animals would roam.

Perhaps it was during just such a day that David had to confront the lion and the bear, as he prepared the table for his sheep - the lion or the bear being the enemies of his sheep. Once the ground was ready the sheep would have their heads dipped in oil to kill any insects that had made their home on the sheep before leading the flock up to the relief of the high ground, where they could feed free from distraction.

Throughout the Psalm we can see the year round protection of the shepherd - which leads David to make the summary statement - *"my cup runs over"*. A cup full of goodness and mercy has been poured out upon him 365 days a year from the hand of the Great Shepherd.

Now a lesson in farming in Israel may be quite interesting but we need to see that there are spiritual parallels that apply wonderfully to us.

Firstly, it is the shepherd who prepares the table. Hours of backbreaking work will have been involved in those few simple words. So in Hebrews 12:2-3 we read: *"looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls."* What backbreaking, heart breaking work it must have been for the Lord Jesus to clear away the awful proliferation of the weeds of our sins. How savage the personal attacks that the Devil made against Him as Jesus perfectly obeyed the will of God His Father.

Perhaps, like me, you have gone to start a job that has been needing doing for some time. As you survey all that needs to be done the soul sinks and the thought "Where do I start?" comes to mind. Oh, the temptation to put off starting for another day! I do not think we can begin to imagine the immensity of the task that the Lord Jesus faced as He entered into this world to deal with our sins. And yet He was ready to endure the cross and despised the shame for the joy of knowing that He was obeying His Father and that, through His work, we would be saved (see Hebrews 12:2).

He has prepared the high ground for us by His death upon the cross. Now He would not have us always living our lives in the valley of life. He wants us up on the spiritual high ground free from the minor irritations and distractions of life. It is all too easy to get stuck in the rut of routine existence when what beckons is the strain of the climb to a closer walk with Him. And yet He would lead us up and onto a higher, closer daily walk with Him. We need to challenge ourselves as to whether we have settled down into a life in the valley, plagued by the bugs of frustration and life's little irritations.

To free us of the effects of these He has anointed us with the Holy Spirit. Let us read from John 14:26-27: *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."*

The sheep need not worry about climbing the mountain and living up on the high ground, for the shepherd would walk the same path and be with them every step of the way. Is it any less true for us? Oh no, for He has promised us the Holy Spirit to live within us, guiding us in all things, bringing us into a fuller understanding of all that God has for us. By His work we can experience this wonderful sense of peace.

God does not promise us a carefree life with no troubles - in fact He promises the opposite! However, He does offer us the peace that we need to live with a serenity that would commend the Gospel, if only we would allow Him to have His way in our lives.

Sometimes His peace may overwhelm us like a tidal wave, as He carries us along in life. However, more often it is by the active decision that we make to concentrate our minds upon Him, and not to allow our problems to irritate us that we learn to cultivate His peace within our lives. So as I face the daily commute today, will I sit in that queue of traffic raging at the idiot in front of me who has stalled again and missed the lights, or will I thank Him for this time when I can gather my thoughts before the busyness of the day and focus them on what He has done for me? Or as I get ready to go to church, am I frustrated at ministering to so few again, or am I content to know that He is there, and He is enough? We cannot change the world but we can certainly change ourselves, and how we view the circumstances of life, with His help.

Our Chief Shepherd (see 1 Peter 5:4) beckons us into a higher experience with Him. He has anointed our heads with the indwelling Holy Spirit, giving us His peace. Now we must do our part and follow Him in the mundane, ordinariness of life. Follow through happy and sad days. Follow wherever He may lead without question. And there was I thinking that a sheep's life must be quite dull and uninteresting!

He is our captain, and so we live under His authority, or else we live in disobedience. The one way leads to our good, though may prove difficult at times. The other can only lead to danger and inevitable failure. Who for one minute can imagine a sheep getting on well with no help from the shepherd? How fortunate we are that His goodness and mercy are an overflowing cup directed for our blessing (Psalm 23:6). Time after time, failure after failure, they are poured out upon us, drawing us back into the safety of His care for us. How very true: Jehovah Rohi - *"the LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

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