

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Psalm 23:1

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."

THE FLOCK

"The Lord is my Shepherd" is a personal statement. The pronoun, "my" indicates an individual sheep is personally addressing his shepherd. It is a marvelous truth that the Lord is a personal God. Each of us can have a very personal relationship with Him and with His Son, the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Each of us can count on the fact that God will be very personal with us.

However, a person is never referred to as a "shepherd" who has only one sheep. This one sheep who speaks in Psalm 23 is one of many sheep in the Shepherd's flock. Hence, there are two aspects of this picture which we must observe. One is the intimate relationship between the individual sheep and the Shepherd. The other is a large flock of sheep each of whom have the same privileged relationship with the Shepherd. The Shepherd gives personal attention to each one, knowing each one by name, knowing the particular things that each one needs, but at the same time serves as shepherd to the entire flock. We have a personal God to whom each of us may relate, but we must understand the context of the group within which that occurs.

Sheep are not effective as independent creatures. They are not very good at finding food for themselves. They easily get lost on their own. When they inadvertently roll over onto their back, they cannot pick themselves up. Sheep are very poor at many things as independent creatures.

However, just being a member of a flock of sheep does not solve the individual sheep's problem. Fellow sheep are very limited in their ability to help each other. When one runs the wrong direction, the entire group tends to blindly go astray. When a sheep is stuck on its back, the rest of the flock is at a loss for what to do. The key to the welfare of the flock is the Shepherd.

Success in the body of Christ is not measured by the value of the relationship the members can muster among themselves. It is determined by the value of the personal relationship each individual has with Christ. All those who have an excellent relationship with the Shepherd find themselves in harmony with one another.

The primary effect of applying the truths of Psalm 23 is to enhance the personal relationship between an individual believer and the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The secondary effect is a genuine unity of the flock. As each Christian relates personally to the Lord Jesus, he finds himself in complete harmony with all other Christians who are doing the same thing. Differences are eliminated because all agree with Christ.

1. The Privileges That Go With Being A Shepherd.

The term "shepherd" implies the right to make decisions for the flock. Each sheep must realize that by saying, "*This particular person is my Shepherd,*" he is submitting to this individual's right to make decisions for him.

Notice the decisions that the Shepherd makes in Psalm 23:

1. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.
2. He leads me beside the still waters.
3. He restores my soul.
4. He leads me in the paths of righteousness.
5. He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
6. He anoints my head with oil.

What if a sheep does not want to lie down? May it stand up? What if it does not want to go beside the still waters? May it go somewhere else? What if it does not want its soul restored? Maybe it would rather wallow in his sorrow! And how about that table prepared in the presence of its enemies? What happens if it does not want to sit at that table?

Get the picture? The Shepherd is constantly making decisions for the sheep. The Sheep must recognize the right of the Shepherd to do so and submit. When a sheep rejects the Shepherd's decisions, it is guilty of the scenario in Isaiah 53:6, turning to his own way and going astray.

Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd, has the right to make decisions for His followers. He knows when they need to lie down in green pastures, when they need to be beside the still waters, and which path they should be traveling. When He prepares a table for His followers, He knows who should sit at that table. When oil is needed on their heads, He knows exactly how much to apply. To declare the Lord to be "my" Shepherd is to resign all "my" will to Him and to trust all the decisions He makes on "my" behalf. When He starts walking down the path of righteousness the sheep get in line. It is as simple as that.

The word "agenda" means "the list of things to do." Everyone has an agenda for his life. But who makes up that agenda? Are you free to ask that question to yourself sincerely? Who makes up your agenda?

Psalms 23 says, because the Lord is the Shepherd, he has the privilege of making up the agenda for the life of the sheep. Do you consider what God wants when you set your agenda, say, for the next week? Perhaps Sunday evening you sit down and look at your calendar. You think about what you have to do in the next seven days. Do you consciously consider what God wants you to do during those days? To acknowledge that the Lord is your Shepherd is to submit your will to His. It is to say, "*Lord I want your agenda to have the priority in my life. You make the decisions. I will follow.*" (Can you envision what would happen in a congregation of believers where every member did this faithfully?)

When children are very young, it is necessary for parents to make decisions for them. New born infants are particularly dependent upon their parents. Through the early years, parents decide what a child eats, what a child wears, where a child goes, etc. But as a child gets older, he constantly becomes more independent. He wants to choose his own wardrobe. He becomes more particular about the foods he likes and is willing to eat. He chooses his friends and his activities and his career and his mate. He wants to decide everything for himself.

Jesus described the essential ingredient of a relationship with Him as becoming like a child (Matt. 18:3). He said "Genuine faith requires that we become like little children." Often, we are too demanding of God. We go to the Him in prayer, expecting that he work out the details of our lives so they conform to the agenda we have set for ourselves - with little thought as to the agenda He has in mind for us. Instead, we ought to approach the Shepherd with a submitted heart, that says "*Lord, you are the Shepherd; I am only a sheep. Whatever you want for my life is what I want.*"

2. The thing we can count on from the Chief Shepherd.

While we accept that He has the right to make decisions for us, we can also trust that He always has our best interests in mind. In what kind of pastures does He make the sheep lie down? Green ones. Beside what kind of waters does He lead the sheep? Still ones. On what kind of paths does He lead the sheep? Righteous ones.

"Oh, but," you say, "*what about that path that goes through the valley of the shadow of death. I am not so sure about that one. And how about that table? The food may look alright but the enemy is sitting there.*" Sometimes we question God's decisions. We become skeptical about the appropriateness of the things He allows to come into our lives.

By contrast, we create in our minds a fantasy world in which we will always be healthy, we will always have enough, we will always be comfortable and we will always be happy. We add to this fantasy the idea that the purpose of having God in our lives is to secure this utopian state. God is good and everything about God is good and surely with God in our lives, everything in our lives will be good.

Then reality strikes, the shadows come, our enemies sit at our table, and we are bewildered that God would let it be so. We turn to the Shepherd and cry, "*If You are setting the agenda and You are making the decisions and You are leading on these paths, it must be Your fault that things are not going so well.*" That distrust of the Shepherd's decisions is a dangerous sign of faithlessness, a symptom that will inevitably lead to disunity and conflict among the sheep. Sheep have to believe that no matter how long the shadows get on the path, no matter

how many enemies sit at the table, no matter what the circumstances be that may arise, the Shepherd always has their best interests in mind.

Sheep are not perfect. Does that startle you? Sheep make mistakes. Can you possibly believe that? A group of believers work together in a local church. They may not do it perfectly but if they can begin with this conviction that God has the right to set the agenda and no matter what happens, he has their best interests in mind, nothing will hold them back from successfully doing the work of the Lord.

3. The Lord as my Shepherd is enough for me.

There are a few little words that follow the statement "The Lord is my Shepherd." They say, "I shall not want." Typically we understand these words to say that since the Lord is my Shepherd, He is going to give me everything I need and so I am not going to lack for anything. This may be true, but perhaps there is another sense in which we may understand these words. If the Lord is my Shepherd, then I do not want anything else. It is enough to have the Lord as my Shepherd. What else could I possibly want?

In the second chapter of Ecclesiastes, Solomon speaks of what he attempted to do in his life, saying, "I bought all the houses one could possibly buy. I bought servants; I had entertainment; I did everything there was to do; I obtained everything there was to obtain; I experienced everything there was to experience. When it was all done, my life was empty." His conclusion at the end of the book was a very simple one. After all the pursuits of his own imaginations, he concluded that God was all he needed.

With such a wonderful person as our Shepherd, who is wise enough to make right decisions for us all of the time, and humble enough to always have our best interests in mind, how could we want anything else. This knowledge ought to be enough motivation for us to lay aside our own agenda and all our selfish interests and submit to the Lord as our Shepherd with all that implies.

Conclusion.

Each sheep must respond to this lesson personally. Consider in your own heart whether you really are willing to submit to God's agenda for your life. Too many people are willing to say the right words without really meaning them. It will not do for you simply to mouth the words, "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" The idea must penetrate to the inner recesses of your heart. You must be committed to it with all your heart and mind and soul. You have to say "*Yes, I am willing to allow God to set my agenda, to make all of my decisions. Whatever He wants me to do, I will do; and I will not want anything else.*"

As each member of the body of Christ submits to the Shepherd in this way, consider the effect this has on the body as a whole. There will not be a lot of personal agendas competing with each other. Everyone will subscribe to the single agenda prescribed by the Shepherd. What wonderful harmony will exist among all the followers of Christ as each one trusts His judgment. As each one is looking to Him

personally, they are all looking to Him together.

Unity is the song of the Church today. It is a sweet sounding song, pleasing to the ears and comforting to the soul. It is a positive message that offers healing and blessing and happiness to all. But real unity in the Church cannot be constructed on a horizontal plane. It can only be obtained as individuals meet on an identical, vertical plane. When the Lord is my shepherd and the Lord is your shepherd and the Lord is someone else's shepherd, then and only then will we function like a flock.

In succeeding chapters we will examine each part of Psalm 23 and discover the specific factors involved in a sheep's relationship with the Shepherd. The effect of this will be to bring each believer into deeper submission to the Lord. When each of us are really close to Him, we are all close to each other.

CONTENTMENT IN THE CHURCH

Psalm 23:2a

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

We live in a noisy world where it is practically impossible to get any rest. There are, of course, all the external noises like traffic and sirens and radios and television. Those are bad enough. But then there are the kinds of things that create a noisy community -- crime and gangs and domestic violence and child abuse and racial tensions, just to name a few. As a result, human lives are shattered by the noises of pain, grief, sorrow, anger, hatred, bitterness, revenge, and prejudice.

Even Christians' lives quake as the noises of society blast into the Church. The followers of Christ must hold their ears in the midst of conflict, rivalry, and boisterous bickering. They are always on their guard, always looking over their shoulder, always tense. Pain has become so common place that everyone is constantly braced for more.

The Scriptures suggest that the key to a prosperous Congregation is providing an environment in which every one can relax.

Psalm 23:2,

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

The words "green pastures" creates the picture of a beautiful place that is quiet and peaceful. What a happy vision it brings to our minds.

Even more significant, though, are the words "He maketh me to lie down." These words describe God as the source of contentment for His people.

Understanding the nature of sheep adds depth to this statement. Sheep are not normally very relaxed animals. They are very timid, defenseless creatures that can do very little to defend themselves beyond staying on their feet and running from whatever frightens them. God has chosen this picture to teach us a lesson about contentment in the Church, for only when sheep are completely relaxed can they lie down. If anything frustrates them, they stay on their feet. Only when all frustrating factors are eliminated is it possible for sheep to lie down.

The same is true in the Church. When God says he makes the sheep to lie down, it is because He has removed all of their fear and anxiety and they are completely relaxed.

What is it that removes fear and anxiety from the believer's life? Before we answer that question, let

us look at what causes fear and anxiety.

THE SOURCES OF DISCONTENTMENT

Ezekiel 34 describes three reasons sheep cannot lie down.

1. Rivalry among the sheep.
2. Predators from without.
3. Hunger.

The same three things describe the sources of unrest in a lot of churches. In Philip Keller's words, "*A flock that is restless, discontented, always agitated and disturbed never does well. The same is true of people.*" Internal friction, external agitation and spiritual hunger are destructive forces that keep churches filled with the noise that makes believers discontent and prevents them from being able to lie down in peace.

1. Rivalry among the sheep.

Verses 17 through 24 describe rivalry among sheep in a very vivid manner.

And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord God; behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the he goats. Seemeth it a small thing unto you to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pastures? And to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet? And as for my flock, they eat that which ye have trodden with your feet; and they drink that which ye have fouled with your feet. Therefore thus saith the Lord God unto them; behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat cattle and between the lean cattle. Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad.

One form of rivalry described in this passage is the selfish indulgence of some at the expense of others. Some of the sheep were stronger, healthier, and more capable of managing for themselves. They gobbled up the good pasture and mashed down all remaining grass with their feet, making it difficult for the weaker, more needy sheep to access any food. Then the strong ones stomped right in to the clear, fresh water, and by the time they were finished drinking, all that was left was mud.

How does this spoiling of food happen in the Church? Picture a very aggressive person who proudly memorizes Bible verses, develops the language of Scripture in his vocabulary and talks like a very informed, spiritual person. He teaches Sunday School, sings in the choir, shows up at every work bee and may even sit on the Board. He looks strong and is considered a leader. But something is not right about this person. He is dishonest in his business dealings; or, he is belligerent and unkind towards fellow workers at his job; or, he reflects a lot of negative attitudes in front of his neighbors; or, he always insists upon doing things his way or no way at Church; or, he does all of these things and more. Hypocrisy of this kind among the "strong" Christians spoils spiritual truth for young believers who are seeking the nutrition they need to grow. They may easily conclude that if this is what listening to sermons and studying the Bible produces in a person, there is no use in putting forth the effort. Those who take the initiative to open the Bible and read it and learn its language need to understand they can spoil it for a lot of other people if they do not go beyond the vocabulary and really live what they have learned.

Another form of rivalry this passage describes is confrontation -- the kind where bullies constantly push others around. Sheep do this quite often. They butt one another and ram into each other to establish for themselves a posture of supremacy. They usually accomplish this by taking advantage of those that are not as capable of taking care of themselves.

This same kind of abuse takes place in the body of Christ. Instead of physically butting one's head into the side of another person, it is usually ramming by verbal attack. The unkind, cutting, belittling remarks that are spoken directly to a person, behind his back, or through innuendo causes tremendous amounts of

pain among Christians and destroys the tranquility of the Church.

Some members of a church will be tense and uneasy as long as others in the group view fellow Christians as competitors -- those who are to be outdone or overrun. Unfortunately, God not only needs to judge between the sheep and the goats, but between cattle and cattle as well.

2. Predators from without.

Verses 25 through 28 are equally vivid about the predators that plague the Church from without. *And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: ...and they shall be safe in their land, and shall know that I am the Lord, when I have broken the bands of their yoke, and delivered them out of the hand of those that served themselves of them. And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen, neither shall the beast of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and none shall make them afraid.*

Persecution is the act by which unbelievers seek to intimidate, incapacitate or devour Christians. Like evil beasts that prey upon sheep, they seek every opportunity to ridicule and make fun of the followers of Christ. A constant barrage of such attacks is greatly debilitating.

When I was a youngster, I learned first hand how much it hurts to be laughed at. I was quite husky and my size limited me in some activities. During physical education, we were supposed to climb up a pole on the swing set and touch the top bar. I could not get off the ground and I was laughed at openly by my peers. Perhaps you too know what it means to be laughed at. It is not a pleasant thing.

None of us want to experience such pain and it is very easy to run from it. This is what sheep do. They are ready to run from anything. Even a little rabbit scurrying through the flock is enough to stampede the whole group. It does not take much.

Many Christians have been so intimidated, so disarmed by ridicule, that they have been silenced in their witness for Christ. It is much easier to go about our business and blend in with the crowd. Why? Because we are afraid. The intimidation of the enemy has stolen our boldness and we cannot lie down in peace.

3. Hunger

Verse 29 refers to the problem of hunger. *And I will raise up for them a plant of renown, and they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of the heathen any more.*

Eating is very important to sheep. They are not active animals. In fact, just about all they do is eat and grow wool. Consequently, if they are ever plagued with gnawing hunger, they will continue to move about scratching and scavenging wherever they can to obtain what they need. They will not lie down until they are full. In some of the arid lands of the Middle East, grass is scarce and sheep are often discontent because they do not have enough to eat. Eating spiritual food is also an essential activity for the Christian. Taking in the Word of God and from it producing fruit is a simple way to describe the activity of the Christian life. If a believer is not properly nourished, he will be restless, always foraging for something to satisfy the empty feeling in his life. He may even do something very un-sheep-like and wander off from the flock, searching for something to fill his life. Some search as it were among the rocks, hoping that secular pursuits will bring contentment, whether it be in jobs, or entertainment, or some form of vice. Others search from Church to Church, as though from pasture to pasture, hoping to find some place where the grass has not dried up. If a Christian does not eventually find some spiritual food, prolonged fasting may actually destroy his appetite and he will forget that he was even hungry and he will starve.

In any local church, hunger, fear, or rivalry will destroy the peaceful environment and keep the

members from being able to relax.

THE SOURCE OF CONTENTMENT

There is really only one key factor in the provision of a peaceful environment for sheep -- the presence of the Shepherd. In Ezekiel 34:30 God said, "*Thus shall they know that I the Lord their God am with them.*" If you are a believer, when was the last time you consciously thought about the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life? When was the last time you awoke in the morning with your very first thought being, "Oh yes, the Holy Spirit dwells within me." When was the last time you looked in a mirror and consciously thought about the Holy Spirit being inside the body you were seeing in the reflection?

In too many activities of the Church, there is a quick word of prayer at the beginning, after which there is hardly a thought about the presence of God. This occurs at Church business meetings, social activities, and even in some worship services.

The consciousness of the presence of God makes a big difference in how we conduct ourselves. This is true with sheep as Phillip Keller suggests in his book, *A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23*.

As long as there is even the slightest suspicion of danger from dogs, coyotes, cougars, bears, or other enemies, the sheep stand up ready to flee for their lives. They have little or no means of self defense. They are helpless, timid, feeble creatures whose only recourse is to run.

When I invited friends to visit us...I always made it clear their dogs were to be left at home. I always had to drive off or shoot other stray dogs that came to molest or disturb the sheep. Two dogs have been known to kill as many as 292 sheep in a single night of unbridled slaughter.

Ewes heavy in lamb when chased by dogs or other predators will slip their unborn lambs and lose them in abortions. A shepherd's loss from such forays can be appalling. One morning at dawn I found nine of my choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead in a field where a cougar had harried the flock during the night.

It was a terrible shock to a young man like myself just new to the business and unfamiliar with such attacks. From then on I slept with a .303 rifle and flashlight by my bed. At the least sound of the flock being disturbed I would leap from bed and calling my faithful collie, dash out into the night, rifle in hand, ready to protect my sheep.

In the course of time, I came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep as to see me in the field. The presence of their master and owner and protector put them at ease as nothing else could do, and this applied day and night.

How true this is with the people of God. When we realize that God is present with us, what can we fear? What can harm us? What can we need more than what He provides?

Conclusion

God is the one who leads us into the green pastures and He is also the one who guarantees our safety so that we can sit down and relax in the green grass. He does this by making it possible for us to love one another, by protecting us from the enemy and by providing all the nourishment we could possibly need.

The imagery of Ezekiel 34 describes this wonderful scenario:

I will feed them in a good pasture and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. (Verses 14 and 15)

A local Church needs to be conscious of the presence of God. Such knowledge will put everything

into perspective for a group of believers. No longer will they need to banter back and forth, struggling among themselves. Nor will they ever again need to fear the enemy or go hungry. God's love will reassure. His power will protect. His compassion will meet needs. A Church that really understands this may be surprised at how smoothly business meetings will go and how tranquil the day to day operations of the church will be.

Every believer also needs to work at developing a working consciousness of the presence of God in his life. This is essential to contentment, not only in a group of believers, but for the individual as well.

The presence of God does not mean that we will not experience trials. It does not mean that there will never be difficulties. Neither does it mean that we will not have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It does not mean that we will not have to sit at a table prepared for us with our enemies present. And, it does not mean that we will never experience disease or frustration.

What it does mean is that in the midst of all those things, we can sit down and relax. As the apostle Paul said, "In whatsoever state I am, I can be content." God's presence makes it possible for us to lie down in spite of all the potential distractions. When we know the Shepherd is with us, we know everything is okay.

The Spiritual Dimension

A statement about the value of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Psalm 23:2b

"He leadeth me beside the still waters."

Water content in the body is essential to good health. About seventy percent of a sheep's body is water. It is about the same for a human being. If either a sheep or a human being does not take in enough water, the body will dehydrate, and dehydration has a serious adverse effect upon the health of the physical body.

Spiritual water is also essential to spiritual health. Jeremiah 17:13 says,
O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters.

The LORD is the fountain of living waters. That is, the LORD is the one who sustains life. When a person seeks to live life without the LORD, he withers and dies. Even a believer who tries to live life without drawing upon God for sustenance will end up living like a dehydrated soul.

Psalm 23 contributes to this subject with the words, *He leadeth me beside the still waters.* With

emphasis upon the word “waters,” a spiritual sheep is directed to that substance which sustains spiritual life. This is an illustration of the Spirit of God as the source of spiritual water. Without the Spirit of God, a human being cannot come alive (Titus 3:5-7). Without drawing upon the presence of the Spirit of God, a believer cannot be healthy (Romans 8).

WE TEND TO LIVE IN THE REALM OF THE PHYSICAL

With those beginning thoughts, direct your attention to the conversation Jesus had with the woman at the well in John Chapter Four. When John the Baptist was imprisoned, Jesus thought it necessary to go through Samaria. Samaria was a land the Jews wished not even to visit. In fact, they would go longer distances around Samaria to reach their destination rather than save time by the direct route through that region. Jesus chose to go through the Province of Samaria and came near the city of Samaria. While his disciples went into town to find something to eat, Jesus sat down at a well where a Samaritan woman was drawing water. He said to the woman “*Give me to drink*” (verse 7).

The woman’s answer illustrates the human tendency to live in the realm of the physical without consideration of the spiritual. She said, “*How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria?*” She never considered the possibility that Jesus was talking about anything but physical water. Why should she? She had a bucket in her hand. She was standing next to a well full of water. And, she was filling her bucket with that touchable wet stuff. What else could he possibly be talking about?

Jesus, however, attempted to channel her thoughts in a different direction. He said, “*If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.*”

Still, the woman remained conscious only of the physical realm. She responded, “*Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with.*” She was thinking of the bucket. “*And the well is deep.*” She was thinking of the physical measurements of the well. “*From whence then hast thou that living water?*” She was asking about a physical place where Jesus’ water might be stored. “*Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?*” She was rationalizing what she heard from Jesus on the basis of what she knew by her physical senses and by her knowledge of factual history.

God is constantly attempting to direct our attention to spiritual reality, yet like the woman at the well, we often do not get the point. Many believe that as long as people are fed, clothed, housed, and directed to a moral lifestyle that this is sufficient. Consequently, they interpret what they read in the Bible as meaning that man’s primary responsibility is to provide for human needs in a tangible way. This is what gave birth to the Social Gospel and it is what fuels theological liberalism. It is also one of the motivating factors for political activism and the attempt to “legislate morality.” However, a person can be full and clothed and warmed and housed and moral with no significant improvement brought to his life because no spiritual dimension has been added to it.

A healthy physical experience is secondary to a healthy spiritual experience. Real life will not begin until a person becomes conscious of this and begins to draw from the well of living spiritual water -- to draw from God Himself! This is what Jesus was helping the woman at the well to learn.

WE NEED TO PARTAKE OF THE SPIRIT

Physical thirst is unquenchable. Referring to the water in the Samaritan well, Jesus said to the woman, “*Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again*” (verse 13). She had been dropping her bucket into this deep well, hearing it splash and fill with water. She was turning the wheel that drew the bucket back to the surface where she was pouring the clear liquid into her personal jug. She did this every day, perhaps several times some days. She knew that all of her life she would never stop going back to the well because

a person could not live without drinking water regularly.

Living water, on the other hand, quenches spiritual thirst with an everlasting satisfaction. Thus, the water Jesus offered the woman was much more valuable than her physical water as he explained, *“But whosoever drinketh of the water I shall give him shall never thirst.”* He was telling her that living water provided a final quenching of a person’s thirst, so that he would never thirst again.

How is this possible? It is possible because living water springs from the Person of God into the life of a believer. Israel suffered because they sought sustenance from broken cisterns that could hold no water instead of from the Fountain of Living Water. They worshiped false gods that could provide no spiritual life, and their lives were spiritually dehydrated because of it (Jeremiah 2:13). If they had simply drawn from that eternal well of God, they could have quenched the longing of their souls in one swallow of faith.

For the believer today, the quenching of spiritual thirst is even more dramatic than it was in the Old Testament. In this age, God not only makes Himself available to those who believe, He literally enters into the believer’s life and dwells there permanently. The Holy Spirit thus becomes a well, springing up within the heart of man so that the longing of his soul is quenched with the refreshing presence of the Fountain of Living Water (John 7:38-39). It is not a mystical experience after salvation as Charismatic believers suppose, but it is a marvelous reality that the Living God takes up residence in the believer’s life -- yea, in his physical body -- at the very moment he receives Jesus Christ as Savior (John 1:12 with Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:9). This gift of Living Water is the fruit of our faith. We recognize who Jesus Christ is -- the Son of God, the person of the Godhead: who became man, who came to earth, who dwelt among men, and who took upon Himself the sin of the whole world. We believe that what He did -- suffering on our behalf, shedding his innocent blood for our sin, dying, being buried, and rising again -- was enough to save us. By faith we receive Him into our lives and God responds by taking up residence within us. The thirsting of our soul is quenched - once and for all.

WE ONLY NEED TO DRINK ONCE

Unsaved people in this world are thirsty. Their souls are empty of anything spiritual and they are constantly digging “spiritual” wells trying to find satisfaction for their souls. Every well they dig is broken and empty and the quenching of thirst alludes them.

The longer they go without finding the spiritual water they need, the more likely it is that total dehydration will numb them even to the sensation of thirst. Someone close to me had a physical experience like this. After a medical surgical procedure, there was an adverse reaction to the medication and as a result she was not able to hold down any food. It reached the point where she did not want to take in any food or even any water and her body was literally drying up. She had to be rushed to the Hospital and given liquid by I.V.

The lost people of this world are totally dry. There is not an ounce of spiritual moisture within them. They are dead in their trespasses and sins. They are dead souls walking around in this world and many of them have reached the point where they do not even care about living. They have stopped searching and are in danger of passing from this life without even trying to find the well of Living Water.

God will not force Himself upon them. There are no spiritual I.V.’s. Each individual must seek Him personally by faith; but once the Living Water enters their lives, the thirst of their soul, whether conscious or not, is satisfied once and for all. As Jesus explained it to the woman at the well, *“Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life”* (John 4:14).

Once the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life, you have a perpetual well of spiritual vitality which will never run dry. It will continually provide you with all the sustenance you need. It is better than those birthday candles that you cannot blow out. It is better than those Eveready batteries that keep going

and going and going. It will never diminish in its capacity to fill us and keep our thirst quenched for eternity.

DON'T MISS OUT ON WHAT IS AVAILABLE!

How sad for a person to be occupied by the Holy Spirit, and then fail to fully experience the value of this resource of Living Water. Sometimes when you blow on those birthday candles that never go out, the flame diminishes to a little red glow on the wick. This describes what happens when a person quenches the Holy Spirit in his life (1 Thessalonians 5:19). He cannot extinguish the Holy Spirit from his life, but he can fail to experience the full value of His being there.

This is the plight of a carnal Christian, one who keeps insisting on living in the realm of the physical world to the utter neglect of the spiritual. Human interests become a higher priority to them than spiritual ones. Even though a well of Living Water springs up within them, they live a life that is dry and shriveled, just like unsaved people.

This is also the plight of a local Church full of carnal Christians. They go through the motions of church-like activities and may even have some statistical evidence of life. But in terms of real spiritual substance, the Church is dead and the people are an unhappy, disgruntled lot who are always in a dither about some petty surface issue. Instead of enjoying the unity of the Spirit that dwells within each of them, they attempt to use their feeble human resources to accomplish a spiritual task. The result is similar to the foolishness of the parched lives of the unsaved.

It does not have to be like this. There is a vibrancy available to us through the living Holy Spirit that dwells within us. As children of God, we do not have to live dehydrated lives. We do not have to be filled with sorrow and grief and bitterness and anger and frustration. We do not have to be discouraged and despondent and depressed. We do not have to be worn-down by constant bombardment of worldly temptation and frustration. We do not have to be thirsty in this barren land -- because dwelling within us is the very living Spirit of God. He not only wants to be present in our lives, He wants to be active and perpetually quench our thirst. As Jesus explained it to the woman at the well, "*the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up!*" (Verse 14).

No Christians should ever use the excuse, "I'm only human" to rationalize his unacceptable behavior, or his spiritual deficiencies. If a person is born again, he is not only human; he is spiritual as well. And he is not alone, because he is indwelt by the Spirit of God. Therefore, a believer never has to rely solely upon his own human resources because he has the unlimited Spirit of God springing up within him.

May we learn to be conscious of the perpetual presence of the Fountain of Living Water that never runs dry. As we drink deeply from it every day, may our lives display the vibrancy that this Fountain supplies. May we be a testimony to the thirsty souls of this world that there is a source which quenches the panting of our souls. And, may we never lived a parched life, when the Water of Life dwells as closely as our own heart.

When A Christian Gets Down In The Dumps

Psalm 23:3a

“He restoreth my soul.”

If a sheep lies down and lets its feet get out from under him, it will roll onto its side and eventually onto its back. From this position, it is nearly impossible for a sheep to right himself. English Shepherds use the term “cast” to describe this situation in which a sheep is stuck on his back and totally helpless.

This is a striking picture of a child of God who is discouraged and cast down (Psalm 42:5,11). From such a position it is easy to feel that you just cannot get up.

In the case of the sheep, a shepherd will notice when a sheep is not running with the flock as it ought to be and will search for it. Upon finding a cast sheep, he will pick it up and set it on its feet. If the sheep has been cast for any length of time, the circulation may be gone out of its legs. In this condition, the sheep would just flop back to the ground if the shepherd expected it to stand on its own right away. Instead, the shepherd will hold onto the sheep while he rubs its legs helping the blood to circulate once again. Eventually, the sheep is able to stand and returns to the flock, walking and grazing on its own.

The words “He restoreth my soul” in Psalm 23, offer this wonderful picture of our Divine Shepherd seeking us out when we are down, picking us up and restoring the spiritual circulation to our lives so that we can walk and graze on our own.

There are two primary reasons we get cast down as Christians. One is because of sin. Guilt is far more depressing for the believer than for the non-believer, because we know we should not sin and we do not want to sin but sometimes we do sin and then we feel very badly about it.

The other reason we become cast down is much more generic. Sometimes we are victims of the imperfections of the human race. We live in an imperfect world and unfortunate things happen simply because of it. There are accidents and diseases and broken down machines and all kinds of things that happen around us and to us that are absolutely no fault of our own but do greatly inconvenience our lives. A lot of this in a short period of time can throw us on our back and cut off our spiritual circulation. It is not our fault but it sure is depressing and we may easily feel as though we cannot get up without help.

THE NEED FOR RESTORATION

There are at least three sensations experienced by those who are cast down.

1. **DESPERATION: I am conscious of my need.**

When the blood circulation is cut off from any part of the body, numbness warns us that something is wrong. Similarly, Psalm 42:1 suggests that thirst is a warning signal alarming us of a dangerous situation, *“As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.”* Without heeding the thirst signal, a person can dehydrate, and in such a condition may even die. Without heeding the warning of numbness in our legs the muscle tissue may be irreversibly damaged or destroyed.

There are also spiritual warning signals in the believer’s conscience. Each of the following is a warning signal corresponding to a deficiency of one of the fruit of the Spirit.

1. I don’t love my wife like I used to.
2. I’m saved but it doesn’t thrill me anymore.
3. My life is full of noise and confusion.

4. I am demanding and impatient.
5. My tone of voice is harsh and my words are unkind.
6. I never do anything good for anyone else but I expect an awful lot from others.
7. I wonder if God is as personal as He claims to be.
8. I am impulsive in my words, attitudes, thoughts, and emotions.
9. I am undisciplined and out of control.

If any one of those things rings in your conscience, it is a spiritual warning that your soul has been deprived of some vital substance and without it you face a dangerous situation.

2. ISOLATION: I feel far away from God.

If a sheep is cast so long that numbness can set in, it has been lying alone for a very long time. It has been isolated from the flock and from the shepherd. Psalm 42:2 expresses the human feeling of isolation with the question, "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" God is stationary in the lives of His children. He has promised never to leave us. So if we feel isolated from God, it is not because God has forsaken us. It is because something has entered our lives which prevents us from being conscious of his presence.

Some years ago I had the opportunity to drive 400 miles straight through the desert in Southern California. "Blocks" in the desert are 100 miles long. That is, you can drive for 100 miles before you come to the next intersection. Occasionally I would pass a car that was stopped along the road, the hood was up and an empty jug was sitting beside the car. The car had overheated and lost its water. Unlike the city, there is no water fountain or gas station within walking distance in the desert. In the middle of such a barren land, you can be isolated from the resources you need in a problem situation. This is the sensation a believer may feel when his soul is cast down, even though the Shepherd is always very near.

3. INTIMIDATION: The enemy knows when I'm down.

The last thing a cast sheep wants to see is a wolf. Lying on its back with numb legs makes a sheep extremely vulnerable to its enemies. Psalm 42:3 expresses this intimidation for the child of God, "My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, where is thy God?" The enemy senses when we are at our weakest point and knows this is the best time to attack. He harasses us, increasing our anxiety, and makes sure we are unable to defend ourselves before pushing us to the point of giving up.

HELP AS WE WAIT FOR THE SHEPHERD

For reasons usually known only to God, He often delays coming to our rescue. There may be prolonged periods of time during which we suffer the sensations of desperation, isolation and intimidation. But while we wait for the Shepherd to come, there are some things we can do to prevent total despair from overcoming us.

Waiting on the Lord is actually a very positive action, according to Isaiah 40:31. Picture the sheep cast on its back with its feet straight up in the air. It has no ability to roll over and stand on its own two feet. The warning signals indicate this is a desperate situation. He feels isolated from the shepherd who is not relieving the situation. The enemy is nipping at him making him feel very vulnerable. The sheep has no alternative but to lie there and wait. This is the same sensation a Christian may experience in the midst of a discouraging situation. There is nothing for him to do but wait until God decides it is time to help. It is to this person the Scripture says, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." Did you ever wonder how waiting can renew a person's strength?

Psalm 42:4-11 suggests two things a helpless person can do while they wait on the LORD.

1. REMEMBER

Psalm 42:4 - "When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me:

- for I had gone with the multitude,
- I went with them to the house of God,
- with the voice of joy and praise,
- with a multitude that kept holyday."

In our weakest moments and in our most vulnerable points we need to think on past blessings instead of potential catastrophes. Philippians 4:8 directs us to think about things of blessing in the very moment when we are dealing with things that have the potential to fill us with anxiety. When we meditate upon the things for which we can praise the Lord, present trials diminish in their significance.

It is only when we dwell upon the negative potential of our trials that despair is exaggerated in our hearts. We can avoid this pitfall by remembering the blessings we have experienced in the past from the hand of God.

2. HOPE

Remembering how God has blessed us in the past is the device that generates hope in our immediate need. Psalm 42:5 expresses it this way, "*Why are thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God.*" Hope is the flip side of the coin of remembrance. You cannot have one without the other. Looking back and remembering what God has done for me in the past, makes it possible to believe that God will come to my rescue this time.

Sometimes we paint ourselves into corners in life, just as one does when he paints a whole floor and then discovers there is no door or window in the last corner. But it is impossible for the Christian to paint himself into a corner where God is not able to provide a means of escape (I Corinthians 10:13). Even if it is something so serious that it is terminal in human terms, the door of heaven is available to us. A Christian simply cannot be defeated. The worst thing that can happen to a Christian on earth is to die, but how bad is that? To die is gain! And hope may reign in our hearts.

Conclusion

When Jesus hung upon the cross, he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In that moment Jesus understood the sensation of feeling isolated from God the Father. Psalm 22, from which Jesus took that pitiful cry, expands the emotion with the words, "Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring." Jesus became a lamb, cast upon an altar of sacrifice, bearing the sin of the world. He felt far away from His own Father.

But Hebrews 12:2 says that He endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. As our Great High Priest, He knows what it feels like to be down, to be isolated, to be harassed; but He used the principle of hope and endured the cross setting the example for us to persevere.

No matter what you are experiencing, the promise of God for His children is this: there is always blessing on the other side of difficulty; so, hope thou in God.

In every trial, condition yourself to remember the things of value in your life. No matter how bleak life seems, no matter how much you may feel like you are losing, there are always those things of value that God has provided which can fill your heart with thanksgiving. Then, condition yourself to measure your faith in terms of hope. No matter how bleak things look, commit your heart to believe God is coming to the rescue; and keep on believing that God is coming to the rescue no matter how long you have to wait. In His

time, He will always restore our soul.

MAKING OUR CHOICES EASY

Psalm 23:3b

"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

There are at least six or eight different ways I may travel the three and one half miles from the parsonage to the Church. Each morning I go to the office, I must choose which way I will go. Fortunately, each of those few ways carry me to my desired destination, but I could choose an even different route and end up far away from my place of work. In fact, if I made some really foolish turns, I could end up in some very unrighteous places.

Similarly, the Bible indicates there are a lot of different ways a man may choose in the world. Some paths lead to desirable destinations. Others direct a person to places they should not be. For example:

- Proverbs 2: 8 - The way of saints.
- Proverbs 4:19 - The way of the wicked.
- Proverbs 2:20 - The way of a good man.
- Proverbs 2:12 - The way of an evil man.
- Proverbs 6:23 - The way of life.
- Proverbs 7:27 - The way to hell.
- Proverbs 8:20 - The way of righteousness.
- Proverbs 13:15 - The way of transgressors.
- Proverbs 9: 6 - The way of understanding.
- Proverbs 12:15 - The way of a fool.
- Proverbs 10:29 - The way of the Lord.
- Proverbs 22: 5 - The way of the froward.

Psalm 23:3 says that Jesus Christ leads His sheep only onto certain paths, the paths labeled righteousness. Unfortunately, the sheep do not always follow. Sometimes they insist on making their own choices and end up on paths that are labeled unrighteousness. They belong to the Chief Shepherd, but they end up a long way from the flock.

WHEN CHRISTIANS INSIST ON CHOOSING THEIR OWN PATHS

Proverbs 14:12

"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man."

Each choice a person makes is decided by the values of his heart, but many people have determined their values merely by their own imaginations. Unfortunately, the imaginations of the human

heart are only evil continually (Genesis 6:5). The result of such action is that a man's perception is greatly distorted. A choice may seem good because it feels okay in the heart, but the misguided heart is incapable of perceiving truthfully.

Proverbs 21:2

"Every way of a man is right in his own eyes."

We live in a world that bases its choices upon selfish interests. New Age philosophy encourages this by promoting happiness as the determining factor in making life's decisions. As long as it results in your own happiness, New Agers say, do not be concerned about what other people think. Even if it involves breaking up a home, ending a marriage, changing your lifestyle or adopting a different set of values, what you want for yourself is the most important factor in choosing which way to go.

Isaiah 53:6

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way...."

Going astray means turning onto the way which seems right, and so is "right," in a person's own eyes. A clear statement of this worldly philosophy is found in the song "My Way?" as popularized by Frank Sinatra.

*And now the end is near and so I face the final curtain.
My friend I'll say it clear, I'll state my case of which I'm certain,
I've lived a life that's full, I've traveled each and every highway
and more, much more than this, I did it my way....*

The World promotes this philosophy and makes it sound glamorous. It makes a person teary-eyed and tenderhearted. What a wonderful, noble thing a man does (so the world says) when he breaks with tradition, defies ethics and morality, ignores truth and reason and does something heroically irresponsible. "I did it my way," is cheered as though it was the greatest thing he could have done.

God gives His indictment to such a choice in life - "the end thereof are the ways of death" (Proverbs 12). A human being cannot afford to do it his own way if he wants to please God. He cannot even pretend to be doing it God's way while secreting his selfish interests in the closet because nothing is hidden from His observance. Unbelievers will die a hellish death by following this philosophy. Believers can suffer the loss of a great many blessings by trying to imitate them.

Proverbs 21:8

"The way of man is froward and strange."

When a man's way is froward and strange, he is going away from what is right and proper and into a place that is far from where he ought to be. The word froward is the opposite of the word toward, as in to and fro. Toward is to go the same direction of something, while froward is to go away from something. The word stranger in the Old Testament refers to those who are foreigners or those who are away from home. Thus, a strange path is a road far from home.

II Peter 2:8.

"For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds."

Lot serves as an illustration of a man who made such poor choices in the ways he followed. Lot and his uncle, Abraham, could no longer dwell close together. There were too many sheep and too much conflict

between their shepherds. So Abraham gave Lot the choice of fields in which to graze his sheep. Lot looked on the greener fields and moved in that direction. However, the greener fields was not all Lot had in mind when he made his choice, because he pitched his tents next to Sodom and soon moved inside the city limits.

By choosing to dwell in Sodom, Lot exposed himself and his family to the filthy conversation of the wicked. Daily, in seeing and hearing their unlawful deeds, his righteous soul was vexed. He knew the behavior of the Sodomites was ungodly, unrighteous, and unholy; and yet, every day he chose to continue dwelling among them. It seemed right. It was advantageous in a business sense. Yet Lot was far from the place where he should have been, walking in his own path rather than God's.

Proverbs 21:16

“The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead.”

Some people, after they are truly born again, choose to turn back to the way of man, a froward direction. They go far away from their spiritual home, and they dwell next door to the ungodliness and unholiness of this world. They never intend to participate, but they never separate themselves from the influence.

The result is that they never experience much blessing in their life. Their life trudges on in the mire around them; they never get very excited about the things of the Lord; and when they pray there is never much response. Often, God ceases to seem very real to them. They know they had that personal experience of receiving Jesus Christ as Saviour, but it seems kind of dead.

A child of God cannot wander in the way of man, in the way of the world, keeping himself on a froward and strange path, and still expect God to bless him. To get to the green pastures and still waters they need to return to the paths of righteousness. Fortunately, the Shepherd is always looking for His sheep who have turned back to their own way so He may restore them to their rightful place.

WHAT JESUS PROVIDES TO KEEP HIS SHEEP ON THE RIGHT PATH

Psalm 23:3.

“He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name sake.”

Notice the position of those walking on the path. Someone is in front and someone is behind. Who is in front? The Lord Jesus Christ. Who is behind? His sheep. We must always acknowledge the rightful position of Jesus Christ, out in the lead, marking the paths we are to travel. We must always remember our own position, following behind, walking in his footsteps, going only where He goes. This will keep us from turning onto those froward and strange ways.

Notice also that movement is implied by the words “he leadeth me.” Neither the Shepherd nor the sheep are standing still. God does not want Christian mannequins who stand still and look pretty. He intends for His sheep to be moving on the path, constantly making progress. Every day should show some growth in a believer's life. Every day there should be a little more Bible knowledge, a little more fruit of the Holy Spirit, a little more godly character being noticed by those who see the sheep walk by. Just as the wool grows little by little on the plodding sheep, a little more spiritual growth should be evidenced each passing day as the child of God follows His Shepherd - Saviour.

Finally, notice the paths upon which the Shepherd is leading. They are the paths of righteousness. They may not be the ways we would choose for ourselves but we can depend on them being the very thing we need. The paths of righteousness protect us from the ways of the world so when we testify that we belong to Chief Shepherd, we can show by our walk that we are on the same path as He.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd, is the best one to choose the paths of life for His sheep. He always leads on the right paths, so all His sheep need to do is get in line and follow. That is how easy making choices in life can be.

He has marked His choices for us in the Bible. As we renew our mind and immerse ourselves in the Word of God, we will come to understand the value of staying on the paths of righteousness.

It will not work to choose our own way and then claim to be in line behind Jesus Christ. Still, there are many who try to do so. Remember that Jesus said the mere use of His name was not sufficient evidence a person belonged to Him (Matthew 7:22-23). In a similar way, there may be particular paths a person chooses which he calls righteousness, but really are not. If the Shepherd does not label a path to be righteous, then we have no business traveling that road regardless of how we label it ourselves.

Evaluate the choices you have made in life thus far: choices for your family, your occupation, your lifestyle, your recreational activities, your entertainment practices, your purchases, your homes, your clothes, your furniture, your toys, etc. Can you honestly say you are on the path of righteousness in each of these things?

Choices in life can be very easy if we will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is a magnificent person. He made us, and loved us, and saved us, and sacrificed everything for us. To acknowledge Him as Supreme and to bow before Him is the best choice a person can make in life. Acknowledge Him as the Lord of your life. Follow Him faithfully in the paths of righteousness. Make the commitment that you will not make a single choice in life without consciously considering the path on which Jesus Christ wants to lead you.

The Valley of the Shadow

Psalm 23:4a

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.”

Many years ago I played on a Little League baseball team and I remember one sunny August afternoon when we were playing a game. It was a beautiful day: you just could not ask for anything better, the sun was shining, the sky was as clear as could be, it was a perfect day for baseball. About the second inning, though, a black cloud appeared on the horizon. Now, that is the last thing a little league baseball player wants to see in the second inning of a game, but this thing was coming right toward us. You could see the line between the shining of the sun and the shadow of the cloud, and it kept moving closer and closer. We watched the rays of the sun move away until finally that black cloud stood right over top. Then, suddenly the cloud burst and our ballfield was in the midst of a storm. It wasn't a very big cloud but it was thick and it was dark and it was heavy and the rain came and we raced to our cars and waited for it to pass.

We all experience wonderful sunny days. They make us feel so good that we wear a smile on our faces and our hearts overflow with joy. Then come those black clouds, casting shadows upon our lives; and the storms come and we feel so dark. Shadows may be cast from a lot of different clouds: unemployment, bills mounting up, an argument with the person we love most, bad grades in school, a habit we have difficulty escaping, a disease, victimization from crime, or sinful activity plaguing our lives. These black clouds come in many different shapes and sizes and intensity but in every case the shadow is just as intimidating.

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow **of death...**”

When we read Psalm 23 verse 4, we often focus on the end of the line and dwell on **death**, a very dark cloud. Instead, let's view this statement with emphasis on the word **shadow**, for the shadow is the subject of the context. Oh, it is indeed the shadow cast by death, and death can bring intimidating shadows into our lives; but it is the shadow through which we are walking and not death itself.

There are a couple of important things to recognize about shadows. Real things cause shadows but shadows themselves have no substance. Certainly, a shadow is an indication that some evil looms over us, but the shadow itself has no measurable dimensions, no power, no ability to inflict injury. The most a shadow can do is create uncertainty. But, if we can tap into a source of confidence and reassurance, uncertainty can be eliminated as a source of anxiety.

A SHADOW INDICATES THAT EVIL HANGS OVER US.

Shadows often exaggerate the objects that cause them. Did you ever notice while walking in an evening along a sidewalk with street lamps that as you pass beyond the light, it casts a shadow of your figure on the sidewalk? And did you ever notice how that shadow grows and grows as you get further from the post? One of the cassette tapes our children use to listen to from time to time is called “Patch the Pirate Goes To The Jungle.” Two of the little characters involved in the story find themselves in the midst of a cave where rumors claimed a giant headhunter lived. They become separated from the rest of their group and have only a flashlight to guide their way. Then they begin to worry about running into the giant headhunter. As they walk along trying to find their way in the cave, they shine the flashlight out ahead of them. All of a sudden, before them on the wall is a shadow of the giant, 20 feet tall. Filled with fright, they cautiously turn to see this creature but as they turn all the way around they cannot see him. Where is this 20 foot giant? Finally the boy feels a knock on his knee and he looks down to see a pigmy standing in front of him. As it turns out, there is no 20 foot giant headhunter. The rumors had exaggerated his size and his fierceness and the light of the boy's flashlight had cast a shadow making the pigmy appear of overwhelming size. In reality, he was just a little person and not dangerous at all.

As we walk the path of this life, this is precisely what God wants us to understand about the shadows cast by objects of evil. Yes, they are fearsome to those who have no understanding of the dynamics of The

Almighty, but to us who belong to Him, these shadows represent only small creatures.

This is why Paul was instructed to pen these marvelous words,
“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

So while death casts a shadow across our path, and that shadow seems large and intimidating, death itself for the child of God is but a tiny, insignificant cloud with no power at all.

A SHADOW INDICATES THAT LIGHT IS ON THE OTHER SIDE.

Death, indeed, is not a substance to be feared by anyone who walks in the path of righteousness. The most death can do to the children of God is cast a shadow over their lives.

There is, however, a marvelous blessing revealed with the shadows cast by elements of evil. They cannot cast shadows unless there is a source of **light** beyond them. Think about it for a moment. It takes two things to make a shadow: an object and a source of light. Every time you see a shadow, there is a source of light involved. If there is no light, there would be total darkness; but a shadow indicates there is a source of light shining upon your life.

Clouds of evil seek to impose doom and gloom upon us by moving between us and the light of God. Because of the shadows, it is possible that fear may gain an advantage over us. But, we must take heart because shadows are not only evidence of some cloud which threatens us, they are also proof that the light of God is still shining beyond the cloud.

WE ARE ONLY WALKING THROUGH A SHADOW.

“Yea though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow.”

The word **through** is also a source of encouragement to those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. We who can say, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” are a people with a destination. We are not going to stop in the middle of any shadows. By the strength of The Almighty, we will walk **through** the shadows cast by the clouds that seek to hide the light of God from us.

If anyone had a right to be discouraged, it was the people of the Old Testament. These saints, who aligned themselves with Almighty God, who believed His promises, and who are described in Hebrews chapter 11, never personally realized the fulfillment of God’s promises while they walked on the earth. The list begins with Abel and Enoch, and Noah and Abraham. It includes a total of sixteen people by name but implies there were so many more involved. After describing their faith, Scripture says, “*These all died in faith, not having received the promises...*” (Hebrews 11:3).

If you thought you were not going to receive the promises, why would you bother to pursue them? But notice, this statement ends with a comma, not a period. The full sentence says, “*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*” They could see the light shining beyond the shadow and knew they would pass through the darkness of their times, coming out into the light on the other side. The black clouds that hovered over their lives in the Old Testament are listed in verse 33-37:

“Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens, women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting

deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented."

Yet in spite of all these things they continued their journey through the shadows with faith in God.

Some of their shadows make ours seem quite small and dim. But these people were not daunted by their trials. They kept pressing forward, knowing they would eventually reach their destination and be relieved of the shadows, proving the children of God are a people with a destination. As the promises say: we will walk **through** the valley of the **shadow** of death.

Because we dwell so much on the present, because we live so fully for the experience of today, we tend to convince ourselves that the darkness of our shadows will last forever. That is how so many of us get depressed. We just cannot see the temporary nature of the trials of life. We convince ourselves they will be permanent.

The message of hope from Almighty God is that every cloud which creates a shadow over our lives is only a temporary condition. His children will not stop in the shadow and stay there; they will pass through. If there is one thing that will make it possible for you to be sustained no matter what cloud comes over your life it is the simple little thing of hope -- the hope that believes this too shall pass and the light shall return.

To Little League baseball players, that black cloud was awfully discouraging. It was an important game to us and we wanted to play it with all our hearts. The black cloud came over and it poured its rain down on top of us; and we thought, "Oh, this is it; we won't get to play this game." But for as black as that cloud was, as dark a shadow as it cast, it was such a little cloud. The rain came and the cloud passed and the sun came out and the dust was dampened but we were able to finish the game.

Lord,
That storm you sent last night
Was so strong and powerful.
The darkness was mingled
With rain and thunder.
It frightened me
And filled the earth with awe.
 But in the morning it was gone,
 And peace prevailed with quietness
 On a newly humbled earth.
It
reminded
me
of
my
life.

Lord,
That storm you sent last week
Was so hard and painful.
The darkness was mingled
With tears and prayer.
It frightened me
And filled my heart with awe.
 But in the morning it was gone
 and peace prevailed with quietness
 On a newly humbled heart.

Robin Efav
YA Magazine, 1985

WE HAVE A REASSURING PRESENCE IN THE SHADOW.

Still another encouraging word jumps out of Psalm 23:4. "*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.*"

In the midst of the shadows, we are promised the wonderful, reassuring presence of Almighty God. Shepherds stay with their sheep. They are conscious of their needs, always watching out for them; because sheep are not very good at watching out for themselves. Wherever the sheep go, the shepherd goes along. In the same way, the presence of God is so very real to His children. If only we could grasp the reality of this.

When you awaken in the morning, do you ever consciously think about the Holy Spirit dwelling in you? The dynamic reality of the promise of God is that when we receive Christ as our Savior, He takes up residence in our life. That means wherever we go, God is with us no matter how dark a cloud passes over us.

Yet, when some Christians find their lives overcast with shadows from dark clouds, they lose their hope. Depression often causes a person to isolate himself from everyone else and sometimes this includes God: even though God is the very person he needs most in the middle of a shadow. And, God is the one person that will never leave us alone in such times of need.

The story about the footprints in the sand perfectly illustrates this point.

One night I had a dream -- I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonged to me and the other belonged to the Lord. When the last scene of my life flashed before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of my life there was only one set of footprints. I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in my life. This really bothered me, and I questioned the Lord about it: "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But I noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life THERE IS ONLY ONE SET OF FOOTPRINTS. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY IN THE TIMES WHEN I NEEDED YOU MOST, YOU SHOULD LEAVE ME." The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never, never leave you during your times of trial and suffering. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

He never leaves us. He is always with us. We have a tender and compassionate God who cares very deeply for us. His mercy reaches beyond any cloud that can cast a shadow over us. His faithfulness extends beyond the shadows and is more intense than any cloud. We have a God who cares very deeply for us, we have a God who is personally interested in us, and we have a God who is very personally involved in each of our lives.

Conclusion

What is the cloud that looms over your life right now? Do you feel its heaviness? Does it weigh you down? Perhaps we have quoted Psalm 23 so often, its words do not penetrate our hearts as they should. Read them over and over. "***Thou art with me.***" "***Thou art with me.***" "***Thou art with me.***" Praise Almighty God for His faithfulness unto us.

Horatio Spafford was a lawyer who lived in the latter half of the eighteen hundreds. He was a successful man but strong in his faith, having been influenced deeply by D. L. Moody. He lived in the time of

the great Chicago fire in 1871. At that time just about every building he owned, every piece of real estate he possessed, was burned to the ground. Nevertheless he became involved in helping others. About two years later, the schools had not yet been completely rebuilt in Chicago so he decided to take his family to England where his children could be enrolled in school. Something came up and he was not able to make the trip. So, he sent his wife and his children without him on a ship across the Atlantic. It so happened that the ship they were on collided with another ship and sank, killing Mr. Spafford's children, but sparing his wife. She was able to send a note to Horatio with just these words, "saved alone." That was a cloud which cast a deep shadow. But knowing Almighty God as well as he did, Horatio Spafford sat down in the midst of the shadow and penned these words:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

Thou Satan should buffet, tho' trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin - O, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin - not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
"Even so" - it is well with my soul.

You can say the same thing today as Horatio Spafford said in 1873 because the same God that was present with him is present with every Christian. Indeed, the same God that delivered Daniel out of the mouths of lions, the same God that preserved the lives of the disciples as they founded the church, is the same God that is with you in every shadow of your life.

And when you pass through all the shadows, there will be a glorious light in which you will rest for eternity -- the same light that shines now, on the other side of every cloud.

Walking In The Comfort Zone

Psalm 23:4b

"Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

The Museum of Scientific Discovery, in Harrisburg, is a hands on learning center, which we visited some years ago with our children. One of the machines there measures stress levels through your hands. I thought I was a pretty relaxed person so I put my hands on the machine and the needle went right to the top, suggesting I was really stressed out. Being the soft, gentle person I am, I became highly determined to move that needle down; so I stood there and gritted my teeth trying to force myself to relax.

We live in a high tension world and many of us undoubtedly find ourselves struggling to remain calm. We feel all kinds of emotions that cause us stress: such as anger when things are not as we think they ought to be, or fear when we are not sure how things are going to be, or anxiety when we face uncertainties, or pain from the wounds of our relationships. We end up being irritable, restless, and grumpy from all of the pressures of living.

In Psalm 23:4a there is the valley of the shadow of death. In verse 5, there is the table prepared before us in the presence of our enemies. Between these two stressful things is this word of comfort, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." In spite of all the stressful experiences of life, there is a source of relief, the comfort offered by the rod and staff of God.

THE DEFINITION OF COMFORT

Too much tension can make us snap. When our son Samuel began to play the violin, I attempted to tune each string to the pitch it was supposed to have. Thinking I was loosening one of the strings, I was actually stretching it tighter. It snapped right in front of me, because the tension was more than it could bear.

Human beings, too, can be stretched beyond their limit by tension filled experiences. We do not need more things to cause us stress: more problems, more disagreements, more disappointments, more difficulties. We need the tensions relieved.

God gives us a beautiful picture in Isaiah 51 of the relieving of tension in our lives. He says, *"Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hold of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him. For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD."*

Isaiah 51:1-3

Comfort is illustrated by the turning of a dry, parched wilderness into a lush green garden. A wilderness is a difficult place to survive. It is a place of anxiety because of the lack of what is needed. Comfort is like finding an oasis in the middle of a wilderness with an abundance of living water and green pastures -- every thing we need to relieve the tension of desperation.

God desires for us to experience the relieving of every tension in our lives. If your life is like a wilderness, parched with dry attitudes of anger and fear and worry, scorched by uncertainty and pain and irritability, God says He can lead you to a place of quiet rest.

But how He does it, according to Psalm 23:4 sounds very strange. You would think the things by which He provides comfort would sound fresh and inviting. Instead, He says only this: *"Thy rod and thy staff they **comfort** me."*

Psalm 23 is the shepherd's psalm. At the beginning, it expresses how the shepherd leads His sheep at Spring time into pleasant places, where the water is still and the grass is green. Then it describes how the Shepherd must move his sheep into the higher mountain regions where the late summer grasses provide

nourishment. In making their way, they go through ravines, along steep cliffs, making their way through the valley of the shadow of death. Two instruments are needful along that journey: the rod and the staff. There is a definite distinction between the value of a rod and the value of a staff, but they both provide comfort to the sheep.

THE PURPOSE OF A ROD

Moses was concerned that the people would think he was merely speaking from himself. He wanted them to be convinced that he was carrying a message to them directly from God. In Exodus Chapter 4 God identified the rod in Moses' hand as a tool to demonstrate His this. Throughout the ministry of Moses the rod played a significant role. It initiated the plagues over Egypt; it parted the waters of the Red Sea; and, it brought forth water from the rock: each time representing the authority of God as placed in the hand of Moses.

There are also several references to a rod in the Book of Proverbs as a symbol of authority in the hand of a parent.

Proverbs 22:15,

"Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him."

Proverbs 23:13-14,

"Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell."

Proverbs 29:15,

"The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."

There is a great deal of concern, today, about Christians who believe in spanking their children. It is equated with child abuse, which, of course, is a horrible thing. The rod in the hand of a parent, however, was never intended to be a destructive tool. Viewed in the same light as the rod in Moses' hand, a spanking tool becomes a symbol of authority. Used properly, a rod teaches children to respond with respect to people of authority.

Understanding that someone is in control is very important to our ability to relax. For example, a court system that constantly turns criminals back into the streets creates tension throughout a society. But when we see that authority figures are able to limit criminal activity with a rod, the obedient members of the community are able to relax. The same is true in a parent-child relationship. When a child does not sense that the parent is able to help the child control his behavior there can be a great deal of tension in his life leading to unruly behavior. A strong authoritarian hand by a parent actually relieves tension in a child's life. The same is also true among sheep. Unruly sheep insist upon ramming their heads into other sheep, knocking them over, injuring them, causing harm. If a shepherd is not present with a rod to maintain control, there will be an atmosphere of tension throughout the flock. But when the shepherd walks among the sheep, gently showing the presence of his rod, the unruly sheep cower at the presence of authority and the whole flock is able to relax.

We can forget too easily that God is still God. Our world may seem out of control. Our judicial system may seem ineffective. But God is still on the Throne, and his rod of authority should relieve our anxiety in the midst of all our stressful circumstances because it reminds us that He has everything under control.

THE PURPOSE OF A STAFF

The staff was an instrument used like a cane or a walking stick. It was used to keep one's feet sure

and stable on the path.

Hebrews 11:21 says,

“By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshiped, leaning upon the top of his staff.”

Zechariah 8:4 reports,

“There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age.”

Exodus 21:19 says,

“If he rise again, and walk abroad upon his staff...”

When hiking on some trails, it helps to take a walking stick along. It provides balance so you can stay upon your feet.

The image of the staff, is of the Shepherd walking on a path with the confidence that He will never stumble and will never fall. The sheep have confidence in following such a shepherd up mountain paths, through ravines, over any kind of terrain, because they know He has stable feet and can lead them safely all the way. How would you feel as a sheep if your shepherd was a clumsy person. Every time you walked along a steep hill or the edge of a sharp cliff, you would be afraid He would fall and that you would follow. You wouldn't want to be in a flock where the leaders are continually stumbling. You would rather have stable leaders, capable of keeping their feet in all their steps, giving you confidence in following them.

This is exactly the kind of Shepherd we have. With His staff in hand, He is sure-footed, and able to keep not only His own feet from falling, but ours as well.

Conclusion

The rod is a symbol of authority; the staff, a symbol of stability. There is an interesting parallel between these things and the cross of Jesus Christ.

The cross was the rod with which our Savior Shepherd dealt with sin. In hanging upon the cross He issued an indictment against sin and His authority was so effective that He was able to judge it with finality.

The cross was also the staff which revealed the strength of our Savior Shepherd. Everyone else who ever hung upon a cross did so as a weakling, succumbing to its torturous effects. But Jesus hung in strength, totally in control of what He was doing: giving His blood, giving His life, and gaining salvation for all. He did not fail while hanging upon the cross; He accomplished exactly what He set out to do. Leaning upon the staff of the cross, He gave Himself confidently, and expertly finished the job.

When we look to Jesus Christ, we can look to one who is able to exercise authority even over sin and over death and over hell; and we can look to One who shall never falter as He leads us along the paths of righteousness for His Name sake. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need fear no evil because our Shepherd never falters. We can relax with the comfort of knowing that in the wilderness of anxiety, the rod and staff of our Shepherd will keep everything in control and will keep our steps along the path of life.

Sometimes our anxiety over immediate circumstances makes us stumble. Just like Peter when he walked on the water, we look down at the churning water around our feet instead of looking up in the direction of the Shepherd. If we would keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, we could see that He is carrying the rod and the staff, indicating that He knows where He is going, He knows how He is going to get there, He is in control of the circumstances, He will be sure-footed along the way, and there is nothing for us to be concerned about. If only we would keep our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ and see in His hand the rod and the staff we could be relieved from a lot of the tension of our lives. Strange as it may seem, the rod and staff

of our God really do comfort us.

In The Presences OF Mine Enemies

Psalm 23:5a

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

Please put yourself into the following situation: You have a good job and you are an honest worker. You give your boss a day's work for a day's wage. You put your heart into your job performance in order to truly earn your wages. But someone in the company, who has a lower position, wants to be where you are. So he begins to sabotage your work, making it look as though you are committing mistakes. He causes things to break and makes it appear that you are responsible. He tells lies about you and your reputation begins to decline. One day your boss comes to you and says, "I'm sorry. You have been making a mess of things, and we cannot tolerate it any longer. You're fired." That day happens to be your birthday and you have to tell your wife you lost your job. When you arrive home, she says cheerfully, "We won't worry about that today, I've made reservations for you at your favorite restaurant." So with your gloomy face, you trail along with her to the restaurant, where it happens to be very crowded. The hostess says, "There is only one table available. Please follow me." When you are seated, you notice that the party at the very next table includes the man who sabotaged your job, causing you to be fired: he and his friends are celebrating his new position -- the one he has taken from you.

How would you respond to that kind of situation? Would you be able to enjoy your dinner? Would you be able to enjoy your wife's company and taste the food and say how delicious it was while your enemy is sitting nearby reveling in his success of ousting you and taking your place?

One of the most important reflexes a Christian must learn is how to absorb God's blessing in the midst of adversity. That is the intent of Psalm 23:5a, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

THOU PREPAREST A TABLE BEFORE ME.

It is valuable to know that God desires to be personally involved in each of our lives. He prepares the table Himself and He prepares it before me. He is a hands-on God who knows His sheep by name and prepares a feast for each one tailored to their individual needs. He knows how to give good gifts to His children and is fully prepared to do so.

In its literal sense, the table refers to food, suggesting the image of a shepherd leading his sheep to higher elevations, a plateau where grazing is much better in the latter part of the summer. In the same sense, God personally provides His sheep with the spiritual grazing they need as the seasons of their lives pass by. He does not leave them to fend for themselves, but is always concerning Himself with what they need (Matthew 6:8; 7:11).

In fact, God has prepared some marvelous things for His sheep to feast upon. I Corinthians 2:9 refers to *"the things which God has prepared for them that love Him."* And while we cannot imagine on our own what those things are, He reveals them to us little by little through the Holy Spirit and the written Word (I Corinthians 2:10).

IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES.

1. Accepting The Context Of The Table

Comfort is a way of life in America. We have come to expect to be comfortable in every imaginable situation. Our automobiles ride as smooth as air, our homes are plush with overstuffed chairs and even our church pews are padded.

But God's primary concern for His sheep is not comfort. Failing to understand this, many of His sheep run from difficult circumstances prematurely. They leave when trouble starts and long before the blessing arrives.

Consider Moses as an example. When he was forty years old he felt the tug to defend his brethren, but almost immediately ran away because he could not see the possibility of blessing in what looked like trouble. God waited another forty years before calling him again into a life of ministry. Moses had to wait for God's blessing even longer than he might have if he had not been so hasty in his judgment of the situation.

As God's redeemed people, we must believe infinitely, continuously, and without giving up that God can bring His blessing into our lives in spite of our circumstances. Without this, even one's hope of heaven and eternal life can diminish, and depression may be a real possibility. If we do not begin with this fundamental belief, we likely will give up: as Psalm 27:13 says, "*I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*" Without the belief that God's blessing waits for us, we will surely faint when we face trouble.

When I went to college, I believed I was in the place God wanted me to be. It is a long story as to how He convinced me, but when I arrived on campus, I was absolutely certain it was the place of God's choosing for my life. Once there, I was keenly interested in other students' testimonies which echoed my own that God had led me to that particular place.

There was a very difficult English teacher at this school. She made you work, challenging you to your limits. But a number of students, who came to the school believing God led them there, refused to take her English courses, opting instead to take summer English courses at community colleges near their homes. I would say to these students, "Do you really believe God led you to this place?" "Oh yes," they would reply, "God led me to this school." Then I would ask, "When God led you to come here, did He know that Miss So-and-So was an English teacher here?" "Yes," they would answer, "God knows everything." Finally I would enquire, "If you really believe that God led you to this particular college, and He knew before He did so that this teacher was here, why are you avoiding part of God's plan for your life?"

Too often we set our own criteria as to what circumstances can or cannot facilitate the blessing of God for our lives. The result is that too often we give up before we can experience what God has been preparing for us. We ought to believe that God's intention to bless us is not inhibited by any circumstance of life, even adversity. And we ought not avoid hardship simply because we cannot see the possibility of blessing in it.

At the root of this is our concept of God. Who is He and of what is He capable? Are there any limitations in God? Is there ever a time I need to take things into my own hands because God is not able to see me through? Hebrews 11:6 says that we must not only believe that He is but we must also believe that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. We ought never to give up our confidence that God will have our best interests in mind -- come what may.

2. Believing God Is Able.

God established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel. He established who He was and what He expected of His people (Psalm 78:5). Then He did some marvelous things for His people. "*He divided the sea and caused them to pass through; He made the waters to stand as an heap. In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire. He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink as out of the great depths. He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers*" (Psalm 78:13-16).

Nevertheless, the Israelites were intimidated by nearly every hardship they experienced. "*The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law; And forgat his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them*" (Psalm 78:9-11).

Worse than that, they questioned the extent of God's ability to help them. "*They sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness. And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust. Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?*" (Psalm 78:17-19). What a question! To put the words "can" and "God" together in a question is the epitome of unbelief. To doubt that God is capable of anything, is to doubt that He is fully God.

Unfortunately, this is a question too many people ask. "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?" Sometimes our lives just seem to dry up. We may lose our job, we may lose a loved one, we may lose our health, we may have any number of adverse circumstances enter our lives casting us into a wilderness of trying times. It is in times like this that many question God's ability to bless them. "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?"

There is an important difference between a person who questions God's ability and a person who believes in it without reservation. It is the difference between a person who simply says he believes in God and one who loves Him with all his heart and mind and soul and strength.

God's blessing does not come to those who seek merely to use God for their own advantage. Too many are interested in God only for what they can get out of Him. They believe in God as long as everything goes well and He seems to be providing for every deficiency. But when the milk and honey dry up, they are quick to question His ability to provide a table in the wilderness.

God's blessing is prepared, however, for those that love him (I Corinthians 2:9; Romans 8:28). A person loves God when he understands what He did to redeem him from eternal condemnation. And understanding that remarkable work, he is convinced that the Almighty is capable of anything.

What were the Israelites afraid of in the wilderness? What are we afraid of in our wildernesses? Are we afraid of losing our job because we are not sure God could bless us without a job? Are we afraid of our car breaking down because we are not sure God could bless us with a broken down car? Are we afraid of losing our house in hard economic times because we are not sure God could bless us if we did not have a house?

Suppose we do have to sell our house so that we can buy food for our family? Suppose we do have to sell our furniture, or lose every material thing we consider of value?. Too many of us think that as soon as we face adversity, we have lost the possibility of God blessing our lives, when in fact, that may be the very situation in which He has prepared His greatest blessing for us.

Conclusion

A person who truly loves God has eyes that help them see beyond the adversities of life. He has eyes that help him see beyond the loss of earthly things, beyond physical illness, beyond the presence of enemies. He has eyes that help him see the blessings God has prepared for him regardless of the context of his life.

What do you feel is missing in your life? What do you feel that God has failed to provide? What do you feel is the blessing you ought to be experiencing but for some reason isn't there? What are the deficiencies you experience as a result of adversity? The kinds of things that come to your mind in answer to these questions reveal something about your concept of God and the level of your commitment to Him.

Do not doubt that God intends to bless your life but love Him with all of your heart. Patiently wait upon Him even in the most difficult of times. He is preparing some marvelous blessings for those who love Him and often they come when we appear to be in the greatest danger.

More Than We Could Ask For

Psalm 23:5b

“Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

The treasures of this world are sometimes an unfortunate necessity, for without money we cannot buy the things we need to survive. But they can also become a preoccupation for more frivolous reasons. Even within the church, it is possible to fall into measuring people's success on the basis of how much stuff they have.

On the other hand, Psalm 23:5b pictures for us a desirable fortune when it says, “my cup runneth over.” It is a statement that alludes not to an abundance of worldly riches, but to a wealth of a different kind, far more valuable than earthly stuff could ever be.

It is accompanied by another statement that is complex in its meaning, but which directs us to some of the riches our Shepherd pours generously into our lives. He “anoints our heads with oil” and in so doing bestows upon us some marvelous spiritual blessings.

Scripture records three different reasons for anointing, each of which suggests a category of spiritual blessings we have received from our Shepherd. The first was cosmetic in nature. In the third chapter of Ruth, Ruth was preparing herself for a personal encounter with Boaz. In so doing, she anointed her head as part of cleaning up from the day's activities in the same way we would use perfume or deodorant today. This kind of anointing provided a refreshment to the body, making a person cosmetically presentable in social situations.

The second reason Scripture records for anointing was for an appointment to a special responsibility. One of the most famous incidents of this was when the Lord directed Samuel to anoint the young David, designating him as the next king of Israel. In this fashion Prophets, Priests, and Kings were all anointed, symbolically recognizing God's appointment in their lives.

The third reason for anointing in Scripture was medicinal. The disciples used oil when they were

sent out two by two, anointing many of the sick (Mark 6:13). The Good Samaritan poured oil on the wounds of the man that had been attacked and robbed and beaten (Luke 10:34). The elders of the church were directed to use oil along with their prayer ministry for those that were ill (James 5).

In Psalm 23, it is possible to see an application of all three of these purposes for anointing when the Shepherd is seen anointing the head of his sheep with oil.

ANOINTED WITH A DIVINE FRAGRANCE

The Good Shepherd anoints his sheep with a divine fragrance. It is described in II Corinthians 2:14, *“Now thanks be unto God, which always causes us to triumph in Christ and maketh manifest the savor of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life.”*

The word savor suggests the detecting of some fragrance or odor by smell. Just as it is possible to tell where certain people have been by the fragrance or odor they bring with them, it ought to be possible to tell a Christian by the spiritual fragrance of his life.

Years ago, I knew a young man that worked on a farm. When he would go home, he took with him an aroma of the barn. If you got within 10 feet of him, you would know exactly where he had been.

Similarly, people ought to be able to tell that we Christians are in constant contact with God. If God dwells within us, we are in His presence all the time. In addition, we interact with Him through His Word and through prayer. It only makes sense that we should carry something with us from our personal interaction with God. We might not glow like Moses when he walked on Mount Sinai, or like the angels that appeared to various people in the Bible, but there ought to be some evidence in our lives that we have contact with God.

II Corinthians 2:14-16 explains that among believers our spiritual fragrance will be very pleasing; but among unbelievers it may have an opposite effect. In either case, people will identify us by our savor as someone who knows God.

Ephesians 1:12 expresses it a little differently, but the effect is the same. It says that Christians will be to the praise of the glory of God. This means that when unsaved people notice our language and values and lifestyle is different than theirs, it is an opportunity to identify the source for those things in our lives. They may accuse us of bearing a holier than thou attitude, but when they do so, they are simply identifying the effect God has had upon us. Our lives are made holier than theirs by the presence of Christ in our lives. If we carry this glory with us, unsaved people feel uncomfortable because of the contrast to their own sinfulness. But as we bear the savor of Christ, at least they will know where we are coming from.

God saves, redeems, and forgives; and in the process He transforms our lives so that we can be different, anointing us with a fragrance of Himself so that people who come in contact with us can tell where we have come from. It is truly unfortunate when Christians are ashamed to bear this divine fragrance and try to cover it up with the frivolous things of the world. It is a privilege to bear the glory of God because it is one of the most valuable things that a person may possess.

ANOINTED FOR SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The Good Shepherd anoints his sheep for special responsibilities. The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of this. Unfortunately, there were some who accused him of taking things into his own hands: very similar to Moses and those who questioned his authority. Paul explained in II Corinthians 1:21, however, that *“he which establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, is God.”* Paul had not taken things upon himself, but was specially appointed by God to do the things he did.

In the same sense, God assigns each of us to specific responsibilities for Him. I Corinthians 12:7 is one of the foundational verses in the Word of God regarding the activities of the children of God. It does not say that the manifestation of the Spirit is given only to preachers and evangelists, or only to those who are willing to witness for Him. It does not say that the manifestation of the Spirit is given only to Sunday School teachers and officers in the church. It says, "*The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man.*" And for what purpose? To profit. And who is to profit from the manifestation of the Spirit of God which is given to every born again believer? Everybody -- to profit with all, to profit within the entire body of Christ.

We have all been given the privilege of being used by the Holy Spirit to fulfill a special responsibility in the work of God. Our hearts should fill up with joy as we realize the magnitude of the privilege we have of bearing a divine fragrance, and of participating in the responsibilities of serving Almighty God.

In the 1960's, there was a lot of protest against the Vietnam War. As a result, there was a period of time in our country in which our soldiers were very unpopular. Many even tried to make it seem dishonorable to serve our country. But then came Desert Storm. All of a sudden, America was once again proud of the young men and women who marched off to defend our Country's interests. When the war was over and the soldiers came home, crowds of people greeted them with parades and parties, and there was a great fanfare, honoring those who had served America. The soldiers could walk into the streets of America and hold their heads high.

If you are a Sunday School teacher, you should hold your head high because it is a real honor to serve the living God in this capacity, or any other. If you are a church officer, or sing in the choir, or do something that hardly anyone else ever notices, you should hold your head high and have joy in your heart. Whatever it is that God has given you to do is an honorable service because you are serving Him, and there is no higher calling.

ANOINTED WITH A DIVINE HEALING AGENT

The Good Shepherd also anoints his sheep with a divine healing agent. Hebrews 9:11-14 tells us that the blood of Jesus Christ is that healing agent and it heals the sickness of sin in the life of a human being.

"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

1 John 1:7 confirms this by saying, "*The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.*"

Doctors are able to do some marvelous things in the field of medicine these days. They even go so far as to remove an old worn out heart and replace it with a healthy one. This makes it possible for a person to awaken to another day and live for a number of years after receiving a change of heart inside his body. Consider how such a person would respond to having a new heart. He knew he only had days or months at the most to live because his old heart was worn out. He endured the operation, knowing his old heart would be removed from his body and another heart put in its place. When this person regains consciousness with a new heart, what do you think his attitude towards life will be? I imagine he is going to appreciate every day that he can look around and see and be with his loved ones.

Why is it that we, who have had our old sinful hearts removed by the blood of Jesus Christ and replaced with a new spiritual heart, do not appreciate eternal life more than we do? Why don't we awaken

every day with a consciousness of the thrill of life, knowing that we will live forever? We have been healed from the eternal sickness of sin. We have been healed from the eternal damnation of death and punishment in hell. We have been given a new lease on life; we have been given the very essence of life itself. Why don't we awaken every day with the thrill of what God has done for us? We ought to.

Conclusion

Eternal life was worth enough for God to pay the blood of His Son to purchase it. Serving in the Lord's army is an honor we've been granted that we don't deserve. Bearing the fragrance of the glory of God is a privilege beyond description.

Do you realize the value of what you possess? Do you realize the value of your life purchased by the blood of Christ? Do you realize the honor it is to serve in the army of Almighty God? Do you realize the value of bearing the fragrance of the glory of God so that people can recognize we keep company with the Almighty?

Truly, our cup runs over. Make a pledge today that you will remind yourself every day of the value of the things you possess as a Child of God.

If you have never received Jesus Christ as your Savior, come for the first time to the treasure house of Almighty God and receive the precious gift of life through His Son. For if you have never had that joyful experience of a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, you do not yet have a divine fragrance, you have not yet been given a divine responsibility, and you have not yet received that divine healing agent. But it is available. It is available to all who will ask for it, to all who will receive it. Simply confess your sinfulness to God, acknowledged that Jesus Christ paid the price for your sin with His own blood and receive Him as your personal Savior? Simply believe that Jesus Christ, as God Almighty, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, made Himself of no reputation and took upon Himself the form of a servant, being obedient to the death of the cross, shedding His blood as payment for your sins. Then come to the Lord Jesus saying,

"I confess my sin, I believe that You are the One who paid for my sin and I entrust my life to You, believing that You will forgive me, and You will save me, and You will preserve me for eternity. Lord I come unto You, and I receive You Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior."

If you pray this prayer, God will apply that divine healing agent to your life, He will grant unto you a divine responsibility so that you may serve Him with your new life and He will give you the privilege of bearing His divine fragrance. Oh, how valuable these things are!

THE BRIDGE OF SURVIVAL

Psalm 23:6a

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah for approximately 40 years but one day he awakened to find himself alone in a broken down city. The houses had been burnt, the temple had been destroyed, the walls had been torn down and the people had been carried away.

For 40 years, Jeremiah admonished the people to heed the warning of God concerning pending judgment. But they never took it seriously thinking it just would not happen to them. Even if they were invaded, they could take care of themselves -- so there was no need to listen to a silly old prophet.

Nebuchadnezzar came in 606 BC and again in 596 BC and again in 586 BC, each time carrying some of the people away. The third time, however, he utterly annihilated Judah as a nation. Jeremiah records the final blow to Jerusalem in the last chapter of his prophecy:

"Now in the fifth month, in the tenth day of the month, which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzar-adan, captain of the guard, which served the king of Babylon, into Jerusalem, and burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house; and all the houses of Jerusalem, and all the houses of the great men, burned he with fire: And all the army of the Chaldeans, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down all the walls of Jerusalem round about. Then Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard carried away captive certain of the poor of the people, and the residue of the people that remained in the city, and those that fell away, that fell to the king of Babylon, and the rest of the multitude. But Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard left certain of the poor of the land for vinedressers and for husbandmen. Also the pillars of brass that were in the house of the Lord, and the bases, and the brasen sea that was in the house of the Lord, ...the caldrons also, and the shovels, and the snuffers, and the bowls, and the spoons, and all the vessels of brass wherewith they ministered...And the basons, and the firepans, and the bowls, and the caldrons, and the candlesticks, and the spoons, and the cups...took the captain of the guard away."

There was nothing left but a few poor people. Jeremiah sat in the city and lamented: *"How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!"* (Lamentations 1:1).

How could it happen? Jerusalem was a thriving city. Every day people rose up from their beds, went to work, went to school, laughed, cried, cooked meals, washed clothing and traveled from place to place. They mundanely lived their daily lives, just as they had done for hundreds of years, yet all of a sudden it was all over. Jeremiah sat alone in his beloved city, once full of people, a busy metropolis. Now, the people, their homes, their palaces, the temple, the city walls were all gone. No more children playing, no more business transactions, no more songs, no more laughter, no more games. Only silence and rubble and ruin.

What guarantees do we have that our homes will still be here tomorrow? Or, that America will still be a free and independent nation? Or, that next Sunday our church building will still be standing? Or that a natural calamity will not come upon us and destroy our town? Or, that tomorrow we will have jobs, and money to buy food, and water to drink? There is only one thing that provides us with hope for tomorrow and that is the goodness and the mercy of God.

Too many today are complacent as the Jews were in Judah moments before Babylon destroyed their city and carried them away into captivity. This is because they subscribe to the doctrine of self sufficiency which consists of two primary elements: (1) It won't happen to me, and (2) I can take care of myself. They have convinced themselves they may live as they please in defiance of God's Word and suffer no consequences. God is too loving, they say, to let anything happen to them, and besides, they are quite

capable of fortifying their own lives to meet any challenges that come their way. There is no need to go to Church and listen to sermons, or read the Bible on a regular basis, or pray and ask God for help. Everything is fine and everything will continue to be fine.

IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME!

The doctrine of self-sufficiency has cast a shadow over our world today, reaching even unto the Church. Many fail to realize that life is tenuous at best and the only thing -- **the only thing** -- that sustains us is the goodness and the mercy of God.

What were the people thinking and feeling in Jerusalem just before the end came? Did they have any opportunity to know what might be coming? Indeed, the failure of their sister Kingdom to the north should have awakened the Jews to the danger of their foolish ways. The kings in the North were generally evil and cared nothing about the things of the Lord. Eventually, the situation deteriorated so badly that God brought a terrible judgment upon the nation. About 720 BC, the Assyrians from Ninevah invaded Israel and simply ended its existence.

Jeremiah confronted Judah with this history:

"Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? She is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot. And I said after she had done all these things, turn thou unto me. But she returned not. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it" (Jeremiah 3:6-7).

The Southern Kingdom was watching when the Northern Kingdom fell. She saw Israel's ungodliness, her idolatry, and the warnings God issued to her from the Prophets. She also saw how the people of the North rejected the Word of the Lord and followed their own foolish way. She saw it.

"Yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also. And it came to pass through the lightness of her whoredom, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and with stocks. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart but feignedly, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 3:8-10).

Judah saw everything that Israel went through, including her rejection of God and the consequences that followed. But Judah continued in the same worldly lifestyle and said to herself, "It's not going to happen to me."

Even a lot of Christians today think they are immune to disaster. They forget too easily that we live in an imperfect world and there are no guarantees. Catastrophe can strike at any moment even without our bringing it upon ourselves through irresponsible living. We cannot afford to snub our noses at The Almighty and expect that He will not care!

"It won't happen to me" is a dangerous philosophy to live by. Just wishing disaster away can never prevent it from happening. It **can** happen to us and it **will**, but for the goodness and mercy of God. In fact, if he did not watch over us, sometimes even in spite of the way we live, we would be haunted by a constant barrage of consequences with no means at all of helping ourselves.

WE CAN TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES.

The second element in the doctrine of self-sufficiency is the belief that "we can take care of ourselves.

"And the Lord saith, because they have forsaken my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, neither walked therein; but have walked after the imagination of their own heart, and after Baalim, which their fathers taught them... Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the

rich man glory in his riches” (Jeremiah 9:13-14, 23).

The phrase “after the imagination of their own heart” was used a number of times by Jeremiah as a rebuke to the people for their failure to trust God. There are three specific ways God identifies by which man insists he can take care of himself.

A. The wise man in his wisdom

The wise man in his wisdom we may apply to education. The current philosophy is that education provides the solution to all kinds of social ills: drug abuse, teen pregnancy, aids, domestic violence, etc. If we can educate ourselves sufficiently, so popular wisdom goes, these problems will go away.

What about education in the Church? If it consists of a serious examination of the real Word of God, it can be very effective in directing our lives. Unfortunately, Bible study has been replaced in large part with a humanly fabricated wisdom which supposedly talks about what God has said, but which actually consists of ideas that have originated in man’s imagination. A tremendous amount of energy is being spent studying man’s words about the Bible instead of observing the actual words of God. Consequently, many Christians are ever learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

We must not depend upon the wisdom which man’s words teach in order to develop confidence in our Christian experience. We must depend solely upon what God has said and believe with all our heart that He alone is right about everything.

B. The mighty man in his might.

The mighty man in his might we may apply to military power. The United States of America has the strongest army on earth. We were able to demonstrate this in the war with Iraq back in 1991. Our technological weapons were truly amazing to see in action. In fact, our military machine was so effective that the world’s fourth largest army was not even able to put up a respectable resistance.

When Israel was still a theocracy, God instructed her future kings not to accumulate horses (Deuteronomy 17:16). Why was that? Does God not like horses? No, horses were the military machines of those days and in the accumulation of horses, their strength could be measured in earthly tangible terms, rather than in their confidence in God.

The Church does not maintain an army and Christians generally do not fight physical battles with guns or swords. But we are engaged in a spiritual warfare against principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. It is dangerous to think we can resist such forces in our own strength and come out the victor. Our confidence must be in God and God alone. Israel learned in her history that even small enemies could defeat her if she was not trusting in the goodness and mercy of God. The same is true for America or any other nation, and the same is true for the Christian as he fights his spiritual battles. If God is not protecting us, we are vulnerable to the smallest of enemies; but if God be for us, who can be against us?.

C. The rich man in his riches.

The rich man in his riches we may apply to economic matters. Many churches in America are better off than ever before. We have wonderful facilities and we ought to be thankful for the comfort in which we may worship the Lord. But we have so much that it is possible for local congregations to rely upon the money they have in the bank rather than in the provision of God to pay their bills. Perhaps we have too much to really know what it means to trust in the goodness and mercy of God.

If we lost it all, if our church building burned down and there was nothing left but a piece of dirt, how

many of us would continue to faithfully serve this church. We must tune our hearts to things beyond that which we can see, beyond that which we can reason, and beyond that which we can provide for ourselves.

Conclusion

Some years ago, a bridge crossing a river on the New York state thruway collapsed unexpectedly. There was no storm, or earthquake, or natural calamity: the bridge just collapsed. There were cars on the bridge when it happened and lives were lost. The support structure underneath the bridge had deteriorated and it simply broke apart. One minute people were riding down the highway in their cars and life was very normal. But very unexpectedly, disaster struck, the bridge collapsed and the people could not help themselves. They died and life was over for them.

Our lives are like bridges. They require something to hold our lives in place. It is impossible for any one of us to provide a structure underneath ourselves that will support us and help us when disaster strikes.

This is what the goodness and mercy of God will do for us though. What a marvelous prospect the Psalmist gave us when he sang "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." We are safe in the watchful care of the Shepherd who sends his faithful watch dogs after us to protect us and keep us from harm. Why would we want to trust in ourselves when God has provided so wonderfully for us?

Isn't it reasonable for sheep who are cared for in this way to devote their lives to the Shepherd who watches over them? Instead of wandering off, making our own way, and trying to fend for ourselves, it makes much more sense to enjoy the security of the sheepfold, to live by God's rules, to conform our lives to His expectations and then be able to enjoy the protection that His goodness and mercy provide.

The compassion of God never fails. It is us who fail to trust in it. There is nothing we can do to sustain our own lives. There is no education we can obtain, no philosophy we can follow, no defense we can invent, no pay check we can earn that will help us. But the goodness and mercy of God will watch over us if we trust in Him.

Eternal Confidence

A Statement about Eternal Security And the Assurance of Salvation
Psalm 23:6b

"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

David said in Psalm 23:6, *"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* He did not say, "I hope so, I think so, I might." He said, "I **will** dwell in the house of the Lord forever." In this statement, David expresses tremendous confidence that He will live forever in the presence of God. In other words, he knew he was eternally secure in his salvation.

The security of the believer in Jesus Christ is a crucial doctrine and at the very heart of it is the reputation of God. Some would have us believe that when we receive the Lord Jesus Christ He gives us a temporary license to live until the end of life on earth; and as long as we perform satisfactorily here, He will then give us a permanent license to live in Heaven when we die physically. Salvation, however, is not like a learner's permit for driving a car which is followed by a permanent license if the learner passes the test. Salvation is an act of God. To question our eternal security in Christ is to question the ability of God to save at all.

In saving us, God does many things among which are these three important steps: (1) God forgives us for our sins and for our sinfulness. He forgives us solely on the basis of what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, and He forgives us completely, promising never again to bring up our sins against us (Ephesians 4:32; Psalm 103:8-12). (2) God replaces our sinfulness with His righteousness. As sin produces death, righteousness produces life, so He gives us His righteousness to make us alive in Him (Romans 5:18-21). (3) God promises to preserve our lives for eternity. This promise is effective immediately upon the salvation of our soul. And, the life He produces in us is consistently and emphatically said by Scripture to be "eternal"! (John 3:16; Romans 6:23).

He does all this in exchange for our faith alone. His promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ is unconditional apart from faith in Christ's redeeming work on the cross and in God's own power to save (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 10:9-10,13). Salvation, therefore, and the security of salvation, rests not on our ability to be sufficiently good but rests solely on the ability of God to keep His promises.

II Timothy 1:12 is a dynamic statement concerning the security of the believer, putting the emphasis of our security where it belongs: on God rather than on us.

"For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him."

The title of this essay is "Eternal Confidence" because that is really the focus on man's part concerning our salvation. Eternal security is not confidence in our ability to sufficiently please God with our behavior. Rather, it is confidence in the eternal God who has made eternal promises to preserve our lives for eternity.

This verse teaches three steps to the assurance of salvation. First, we must know Him in whom we have believed. Secondly, we must understand what we have committed to Him. And thirdly, we must be persuaded that God can keep us. If you are struggling with the assurance of your salvation, observe these three steps carefully. If you possess an eternal confidence in God's ability to save you, rejoice in being reminded of this precious truth.

WE MUST KNOW HIM IN WHOM WE HAVE BELIEVED.

1. God's greatest desire is for every one to know Him.

We live in an age of prolific information, but God is being systematically eliminated from the

information being made available. With an abundance of books, newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, computers, and other forms of communication, man is able to generate a phenomenal amount of information. Through public schools, community colleges, technical schools, colleges and universities, man is able to utilize this information in ever more learning. Yet it is an empty learning without the knowledge of God.

If man is ever to appreciate what God has done for him in providing salvation, man must first come to know God. Indeed, God's greatest desire is for all mankind to know that He is God. Repeatedly, He makes this statement in His word.

"Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen; that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour" (Isaiah 43:10,11).

"And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

"Thus shall mine anger be accomplished, and I will cause my fury to rest upon them, and I will be comforted: and they shall know that I the Lord have spoken it" (Ezekiel 5:13).

"And ye shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 6:7).

"And they shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 6:10).

"Then shall ye know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 6:13).

"And they shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 6:14).

"Ye shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 7:4).

"And mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: I will recompense thee according to thy ways and thine abominations that are in the midst of thee; and ye shall know that I am the Lord that smiteth" (Ezekiel 7:9).

There are at least 70 statements in the book of Ezekiel alone in which God says, "I want people to know that I am the Lord." After all this, you begin to get the point. He wants us to know Him.

2. God also desires for man to understand what it means for Him to be God.

Knowing God involves much more than simply knowing He exists. To really and truly know God, we must also know what He is like and what He is capable of.

God wants us to know that He is almighty, beautiful, blessed, clean, everlasting, excellent, glorious, good, great, holy, honorable, humble, infinite, just, light, living, majestic, marvelous, most high, perfect, powerful, pure, reverend, righteous, strong, sure, unique, upright, wise, and worthy. He wants us to know that He is compassionate, dependable, faithful, favorable, forgiving, gentle, gracious, long suffering, lovingly kind, merciful, near, present, tender, and understanding. He wants us to know that He hears, He sustains, He gives counsel, He deals bountifully, He forgets not, He gives hope, He shepherds, He restores, He redeems, and He satisfies. He wants us to know that He is a defense, a fortress, a refuge, a rock, a shelter, a shield, a high tower, a king, a healer, a helper, a keeper, a preserver, a dwelling place, a secret place, and a hiding place.

And this is only an introduction to the unlimited character and capabilities of God. He is awesome and when we know Him, this knowledge must have a profound affect upon our lives. We will be convinced that God is able to save us and to do it effectively.

Imagine a professional baseball player such as Hank Aaron, who holds the record for hitting the most home runs, showing up to play on a little league baseball team. The twelve year old pitcher on the

opposing team would be utterly intimidated by the prospect of pitching to such a powerful hitter.

In a very small way, this illustrates the immensity of God compared to man. He is awesome. He is superior. He is beyond our imagination and when we know Him -- when we truly know who He is and what He is capable of and the intensity of what it means for Him to be God, we will have confidence that He is not only able to save us, but to keep us for eternity as well.

WE MUST UNDERSTAND WHAT WE HAVE COMMITTED TO HIM.

The second step to the assurance of salvation is understanding what we have committed to God when we receive His salvation. II Timothy 1:12 says, "...I know whom I have believed," and then it says, "I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him."

1. This commitment is not an exchange of one thing for another.

Salvation is not an exchange in which man gives God something and God gives man something else in return. God does not give us life in exchange for works, nor does He give us eternal life in exchange for faithfulness. Man has nothing of value to offer God which would warrant the bestowal of the grace of God. Salvation is purely a gift from God to man, and nothing else (Romans 6:23).

2. This commitment is a recognition of God's right of ownership of my life, having purchased it with the blood of Christ.

When we come with faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that we have destroyed our own lives by our sinfulness (Romans 3:23; Romans 5:12; Romans 6:23); and we acknowledge that Jesus Christ paid a price to purchase us, thereby giving Him the right of ownership of our lives (I Corinthians 6:19-20). It is extremely unpleasant to admit that we are failures, but when Jesus says all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), we must agree with Him. I am a failure. All human beings are failures. There is nothing that we can do to pull ourselves up by the boot straps. We cannot make our lives what they ought to be. We cannot be good enough. We cannot work hard enough or in any other way measure up to the glory of God so that He will be willing to let us into Heaven. Every human being is a failure before Almighty God but Jesus Christ was willing to pay a high price to purchase all our worthless lives. He was willing to shed His blood in payment for all the failures in the world. And He welcomes every one of us to come to Him and say,

"I am a failure, I have sinned, I am totally unsuccessful, there is nothing I can do to help myself. I am lost and condemned for eternity. So, I welcome you, Lord Jesus, to exercise ownership over my life. I believe that you purchased me from sin with your shed blood and I want to belong to you. Take me, I am yours."

Too many people, who profess to come to Jesus Christ these days, do not understand the full value of what He did in purchasing our lives. They think He went to the cross to buy tickets for them so they might go to Heaven. Or, they think He went up Calvary's Hill simply to open the door to Heaven so they might find their own way there. In fact, He went to the cross to buy us. He went to the cross to purchase us with His redemptive blood, because the only way we can get to Heaven is to be purchased out of the bondage to sin.

In receiving Jesus Christ as Savior, we commit our entire being to God as His possession -- our soul, our spirit, our body, our heart, our mind, our life -- everything. In salvation, we acknowledge God's ownership of our life. In receiving Christ, we recognize that ownership by placing ourselves into His Hands by faith in Jesus Christ.

Loved with everlasting love, Led by grace that love to know;
Gracious Spirit from above, Thou hast taught me it is so!

O, this full and perfect peace! O, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease, I am His, and He is mine.

Things that once were wild alarms Cannot now disturb my rest;
Closed in everlasting arms, Pillowed on the loving breast.
O, to lie forever here, Doubt and care and self resign,
While He whispers in my ear, I am His, and He is mine.
George W. Robinson

"Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which you have of God and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's" (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30).

WE MUST BE PERSUADED THAT GOD CAN KEEP US!

The first step to the assurance of salvation is knowing in whom we have believed. For too many, God is too small. When God is too small, it is easy to believe that man must help in obtaining salvation. But God is large and powerful beyond our comprehension and quite capable of saving us all on His own.

The second step to the assurance of salvation is understanding what we have committed to Him. We have not committed our works or our faithfulness in exchange for the right to go to Heaven. We have committed ourselves and the keeping of ourselves to Him. He owns us and we belong to Him

The third step to the assurance of salvation is believing that God is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him.

At the very root of this matter of eternal security or eternal confidence or the assurance of salvation or however we may term it, is God's ability to save us and then to keep us for eternity. When we know Him, we will be persuaded that He is so awesome, so superior, so omnipotent that when He saves us, He is able to keep us saved for ever. If God were not able to keep us, it would raise a question as to whether or not He was able to save us at all. For how could God save us if He could not keep us? Besides, what would it mean to be saved, if we were not rescued from sin's consequences forever? How could you be saved from sin temporarily and actually call that salvation?

In I Peter 1:3-5, we are given a wonderful promise in this regard. *"He has begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* That is God's promise. We are kept by His power, and His power alone. Our own efforts at remaining saved are irrelevant. God saves us and God keeps us and we may have the utmost confidence in this wonderful promise.

Conclusion

How big is your God? The real God, Almighty God, is big enough to save you and He is big enough to keep you forever.

It is just as futile for you to try to keep your life as it is for you to try to save it. You are insufficient to

save your own life and you are just as insufficient to keep it.

Christ paid the price of His blood to purchase your life from the condemnation of sin. When you declare your faith in that work of Christ before Almighty God, He forgives you of your sins and your sinfulness, He clothes you with His own righteousness and He promises to preserve your life for ever.

To be eternally secure in Christ, you need only pray a simple prayer by faith:

“Dear God, I am a sinner, I am lost, and I cannot help myself. I believe that You paid the price for my sin with Your Son’s blood and purchased my life from the bondage of sin and the condemnation of Hell. I receive the Lord Jesus Christ into my life. I receive the forgiveness you offer to me because of what Jesus did for me on the cross. And, I receive the gift of eternal life you have promised for believing in You and Your Son and His sacrifice for me. As the owner of my life, I believe you will keep me forever and ever. Amen.”

When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, and you receive Him into your life, He becomes the owner and keeper of your life and you may have confidence He will keep you for eternity because Jesus never fails. You may say with David, “...and I **will** dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”