

## **"When I Need Comfort"**

### Psalm 23 - Power Sunday School Class

Four weeks ago, my extended family gathered over the Labor Day holiday in Murfreesboro, TN to celebrate the upcoming special birthday for my grandmother - 100 years! We had a good crowd of my brothers, sisters, and their spouses and kids to share in this very unique occasion. Only 1 out of 4000 people born in 1909 live to see their 100<sup>th</sup> birthday (imagine a typical crowd in our 9:30 worship service). As we brought her back to her room that night, I reminded her that she wasn't really 100 yet; she needed to make it to Thursday (5 days ahead) to make our party "count."

Well, she made it to Thursday, but wasn't feeling too well that day. She felt worse on Friday, then died on Saturday, two days after her big birthday. Even when someone lives to a ripe old age, it seems like just a vapor after they're gone when compared to eternity.

We buried her body and held a memorial service for her ten days ago. My oldest brother conducted the memorial service and in keeping with tradition, he selected a reading from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, read here by my youngest brother {play the tape}.

This Psalm often comes to mind as we (collectively) walk in the shadow of death. Death is a terrible enemy, one that entered our world as an intruder after the fall and, still today, it brings physical pain, fear of uncertainty, and separation from those that we love. At the death of Lazarus, Jesus not only wept (John 11:35), but commanded Lazarus' body to rise from the grave with a sense of vengeance (John 11:43). One of my favorite verses in scripture shows how Jesus ultimately dealt with death (1 Corinthians 15:54-56):

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The only way that we can face death and "fear no evil" is with the knowledge that Jesus, by His death on the cross, has taken away its sting and victory for those who place their faith in Him. That's why this Psalm starts off the way that it does: The Lord is *MY* shepherd. It's a very personal statement of what it is like to walk with the Lord every day. As much as we'd like to derive general encouragement from the sweet words of the Psalm, unless the Lord is your shepherd, you might as well skip over this one and just move on to Psalm 24:

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 24:3,4)

The only ones who can lay a claim to purity are those who have received the cleansing of Jesus Christ, those who have the victory through his death. When we are walking with the Savior, we can speak the words of Psalm 23 from a deeply personal perspective. Notice how every phrase uses the word "me", "my", or "I". We walk in a dark world, and it is good to know that there is One who will guide us even when the way isn't so clear. In fact, the same Hebrew word for darkness is used in Job 24:16 -

For the morning is the same to him as thick darkness, For he is familiar with the terrors of thick darkness.

When a shepherd leads his sheep through daylight or darkness, remember that he doesn't normally consult with their sheep before making a strategic decision. The shepherd leads and the sheep follow, guided by his staff or disciplined with his rod when needed. He doesn't do this because He hates us and wants to push us around - He does this because He loves us. We don't find peace and rest in asserting our will - we find it in trusting and following. And He doesn't lead us and bless us just so that we can be self-absorbed blobs of flesh, He does this for His name's sake. Ultimately, everything that we do (and He does for us) has its goal in the glory of God.

When we speak of how the Shepherd guides us with His staff, people often wonder how to discern God's special direction for their lives, whether it is for today's schedule, next month's plan, or a lifetime calling. The men gathered at my house for a Bible study three weeks ago where we examined a number of ways in which we can identify God's direction. Here are some of the elements that we discussed:

- Prayer: before you take the first step - Colossians 1:9
- Present yourself as a living sacrifice - Romans 12:1,2
- Preparation: gifts, training, and experiences - Ephesians 2:10
- Preference: submit to God and pursue your Passion - Psalm 37:4
- Performance: where/how has God used you in the past - 2 Timothy 4:11
- Perceptive, Prayerful Counselors are helpful - Proverbs 15:22
- Providential Circumstances: God opens and closes doors - Esther 4:13,14
- Perseverance/Presence: don't forsake God's calling - Galatians 6:9
- Provision/Protection are promised by God - Isaiah 41:10
- Praise to God is our goal - 1 Corinthians 10:31

I don't want to make it sound like we follow *God's* direction by plugging numbers into a formula and waiting for it to spit out the result. Remember that we are personally being led by our Shepherd. This morning, Allen asked for me to show how *God* is leading us to make a pretty big change in life. I'll use the elements on this framework to do so, and at this point, we'll have to turn off the webcast for the sake of confidentiality for some of those involved in the process.