

“THE HOLY LAND: AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE”

by Rom A. Pegram (6/3/18)

So, how many here today have heard of ‘the fifth gospel’? Mathew, Mark, Luke and John we know; but, what about ‘the fifth gospel’? Historically speaking, ‘The Fifth Gospel’ has come to mean a number of things. But, ever since I’ve been going to the Holy Land, I have come to know the 5th Gospel as ... *the people and the land of Israel*. And the idea is this: You cannot come to understand God’s word more fully ... until you understand the *context* of God’s word more fully! So, one of the reasons I continue to go and to take groups and return to the Holy Land is to get to know the 5th Gospel better—*the land and the people of Israel*...

This morning (and next week from a New Testament perspective), I’d like to share with you some things I’ve learned from the 5th Gospel (the people and land of Israel) that have helped me understand more fully God’s word as a guide for my life—today, from the Old Testament. And it’s going to be a simple teaching today, as we walk through the most beloved Old Testament scripture ever written—the 23rd Psalm.

Before I get into the scripture itself, let me start with a few general observations of Psalm 23. David, here, wrote out of his own experience; as many of you know, he spent many of his early years tending his father’s (Jesse’s) sheep near Bethlehem. And one thing you learn about sheep—very early on—is they are totally dependent on the shepherd for provision, guidance, and protection...

I can’t help but think of our youngest grandson, Wally—down in Nashville. He turns two years old this month, but still very much a babe when it comes to his needs. His vocabulary is limited; when he wants something, many times he’ll just grunt and point. But, he’s totally dependent on his parents for his provision (and he likes to eat), for guidance (though he never seems to like the word ‘no’), and for his protection (not really understanding what dangers are really out there in the world). He, too, needs a shepherd (parents). And so do we. God never created us, nor designed us, to live completely autonomous lives; it is to be a life of faith and dependence on the One who can offer us provision, guidance, and protection. Psalm 23 is an exposition of our proper dependency on the living LORD, who wants to care for us in the way a shepherd cares for his sheep. Let’s get into our Bible reading now (Psalm 23, NLT)...

The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need. ² He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. ³ He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. ⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. ⁶ Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.

Have you begun to see the LORD as your shepherd—especially in the hearing of this famous Psalm? This psalm does not really focus on the animal-like qualities of sheep,

but on the discipleship qualities of those who follow... And, how does the 5th Gospel help us understand better this Old Testament passage? Let's take a look...

The LORD is my shepherd. The New Living Translation says it this way: "The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need." **The first half (vv. 1-3) of this Psalm is all about ... provision.** God gives us *all that we need* in life, if we'll be obedient to who God calls us to be in this relationship!

Does anyone remember the song "Someone to Watch Over Me," sung by Rosemary Clooney (amongst others)? Some of the lyrics say, "Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb?" That's what this Psalm always reminds me of...

The mother of a young boy who was dying of cancer taught him the Twenty-Third Psalm, having him repeat "the Lord is *my* shepherd"—emphasizing, of course, the personal nature of this statement—*my* shepherd. She taught him by having him count these five words with his fingers starting with his thumb. His ring finger was the word "my." When he got to that word, his mother taught him to hold that finger in his fist, symbolizing the personal relationship which Jesus had for him. When the boy died, he was found holding his ring finger. He died in the shepherd's arms. And all of us must come to the place where we can say ... the LORD is *my* shepherd... David was talking about a relationship that was real!

Then, David goes on to explain in Psalm 23 just how God/Jesus, as our shepherd, does that. Here's God's *provision* for our lives...

He lets me rest... David tells us, "He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me [to a watering place] beside peaceful streams."

I learned a long time ago, in my early trips to Israel, that the reality of green pastures was a far cry from what I'd been taught/what I'd imagined in my own mind while reading this verse. What David is referring to here is *not* something lush. It's something *sparse*; and while it's sparse, it is sufficient provision...

Here's the context. Think 'manna'—the food God provided the Israelites with those years they wandered in the wilderness after escaping Egypt. God provided just enough for every day. They were not to pick up extra and store it; they were trust God for his daily provision. So, if God sends rain ... and there's a sunny side of the hill, tender green shoots of grass will push their way up and out of the crusty earth. It's not a Wisconsin pasture, but this is the pasture of Psalm 23—getting our needs provided for through God's daily provision...

And God also leads *me* beside peaceful streams—another way to receive rest. Israel is desert. When they get water, there're often flash floods—very dangerous. This is NOT the land of 'peaceful streams'—like Southwest Wisconsin's trout streams, for instance. But there is one place, in northern Galilee, that is a peaceful stream or has 'still waters.' Could this be the place David was speaking about when he wrote this Psalm? It's one of the few examples of a 'peaceful stream' I know about in Israel—just north of the Judean wilderness...

Folks, what we can experience with God as our shepherd ... are blessings in the midst of what the world would call scarcity. And God provides this...

He renews my strength... He guides me... The psalmist continues: “He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.” When David says here that God renews his strength, he’s talking about inner strength here—one version says “He restores my soul”—to return, to refresh... God doesn’t just care about our physical bodies; God also cares about our mental/emotional health, restores our very souls—encouraging us for the days ahead. And now we move from God’s provision ... to God’s protection; **the second half of Psalm 23 (vv. 4-6) is about God’s protection...**

You are close beside me... David continues with this truth: “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.”

Death is one of the greatest fears of human beings. We always—to a certain extent—fear the unknown. David knew that, and yet his faith in the Great Shepherd allowed him to declare his lack of fear because of the very real presence of God in his life. And we can be just as confident as David; same God/Shepherd looks over us today. If you were traveling through the Judean Wilderness and passed through the valley that runs by St. George’s monastery, it may be cool temperature-wise, but it could also hold dangers ... including possible death. David likens this to death in our own lives—one of the times we dread the most...

David here is counting on God’s protection; we have God’s rod (to beat off external enemies) and God’s staff (to pull us back in when we’re our own worst enemy). God’s protection—as the Great Shepherd—is ours ... and we don’t have to be afraid either... Let’s move to Verse 5...

You prepare a feast for me ... My cup overflows... Our scripture continues: “You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.”

Here, we see that a part of God’s provision and protection are ... honor and blessing in our lives. Here the LORD also becomes a host: Scripturally, the banquet table (feast) is a sign of victory/salvation; God seats us right down at ‘the table of victory’ in front of our enemies! This is God honoring us ... and we can count on it! A head being anointed with oil means that you’re an honored guest! This is how we’ll be dining with God... Then, David refers to his ‘cup.’ As a good shepherd would understand, he says, “My cup overflows with blessings.” It is only through the 5th Gospel that you can understand what David is referring to here. [Show ‘Shepherd’s Cup...'] When the shepherd’s cup is full, they have been blessed...

So, honor and blessing will be ours as we allow God/Jesus to be our Great Shepherd... Finally, David moves to a promise. Listen...

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me... David concludes with this truth: “Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.” Goodness = the fulfillment and perfection of God’s will in your life. Mercy = God’s covenant-love, redemptive power, and faithfulness. And those two things God provides will follow or pursue us (an intentional following after) for a lifetime—including eternal life (we talked about that last week); we will ‘live in the house of the LORD forever.’

Folks, it doesn’t get any better than that! In Psalm 23, we have the revelation of God’s provision and God’s protection for our lives. And can you see, through this Old Testament perspective (Psalm 23), just how much the 5th Gospel plays into a true understanding of what God’s word is trying to tell us?

God’s purpose is to bring us into his house ... forever! And he made a way for us to do just that which we’ll be talking about next week ... in a New Testament perspective—again, looking to the 5th Gospel to help us understand more fully ‘The Great Shepherd’—Jesus himself...