

PSALM 23:2 (Part 3)

INTRODUCTION

Here is a version of the 23rd Psalm that I found this past week in preparation for this message.

“The Lord is my slave driver, I must be satisfied.

He compels me to try harder.

He makes me labour more furiously; he leads me into noisy activity. He implores me to ignore the emptiness within and just keep going. He nudges me in the paths of perfectionism for his reputation's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of burnout I fear a breakdown. But no one can see the real me; your expectations and your people they goad me on. You prepare a list of expectations before me in the presence of my peers; you provoke me on and on. My cup seems more parched than ever. Surely serenity and rest will elude me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the land of the harassed forever.”

Now thankfully that is not what David wrote but unfortunately it is how many Christian people live their lives. Some Christians spend their life in ceaseless activity but know nothing of the rest that God grants to his people who know by experience that the Lord is their Shepherd. Now I am not saying that life should not be full of activity of course it will be; however it will be activity, which springs from a heart that is at rest and peace with God. Activity, which flows from a heart that is enjoying the presence of God and enjoying knowing God as their Shepherd. This is theme of this verse that we are looking at today.

Here we see our Shepherd gently leading his sheep to that place of restful assurance in the Lord. This rest is of course spiritual but it is a rest that will pervade your whole life including our emotions and our physical life as well. It is a rest that is full of busyness but busyness that is God ordered and God driven.

Now the Hebrew words translated as “makes me lie down” has the idea of resting from exertion at its heart. It is a picture of restfulness. Now is that one word that could be used to sum up our lives. If not then we are not resting in Christ but are actually being driven by something or someone else. Perhaps it's our own ego or our sense of self-importance that is driving us.

Perhaps its some past experience that keeps telling us to work harder or try harder in order to find what we are looking for. But this rest that we are looking for is only found in our relationship with God as our Shepherd. It will mean we work hard but not for our own benefit but for his glory. It will mean being busy but not for our own self worth or self-advancement but for the glory of God.

Our world is full of workaholics who are restless in their souls but only those who know the Shepherd will be able to get the balance in all areas of life because we are at rest in God. Now it is this restfulness that is drawn for us in picture language in this verse.

Here is a lovely picture of sheep lying down in lush green grass beside a perfectly still lake. The sheep having grazed all morning in the lush green grass settle down in the afternoon sun to rest. It is a picture of a Christian who lives by God's word who takes in his word on a daily basis who actively obeys his word and throughout the day in the midst of the busyness of it all he time and time again turns to God's word in his mind and turns to his God and finds rest for his soul.

It's a picture of outward activity but inner peace. A Christian who is resting by meditating upon God's word and his God throughout the working day he is not trying to appease God by his busy life. He is not driving himself to work harder in order to some how get God to love him or to get God to think well of him. No this resting comes through the fact that he knows that he belongs to

God though his marvellous grace shown to him in Jesus Christ. This verse offers every one of us true freedom from trying to be accepted by God.

Christ's death for you removes all that hinders our acceptance before God. His resurrection provides proof of God's pleasure with Christ and with all who are trusting in Him. Christ's own record of righteousness is credited to our account so that we are truly free accepted by God forever. Therefore we ought to live everyday knowing that God has accepted us in Christ and we can know this rest that the Psalm is talking about every day in our busy lives.

Now as I was preparing for this message and this series of messages I read two small books from two former shepherds and they said in their books that one of the hardest things to get sheep to do is to lie down. They said that from their experience sheep seem very reluctant to lie down and they suggest some reasons why this is the case. But before we look at those reasons we must understand that many Christians find it difficult to rest in Christ and in their relationship with God their Shepherd. That's why God sometimes has to act to get us to rest in him "he 'makes' us lie down in green pastures." Sometimes he does that through illness because we were being driven by something other than Christ. Illness is a good way to get us to depend more on God and find rest in him.

Sometimes he has to change our circumstances to make us realise just how independently from God we were living. Sometimes spiritually he has to almost break us in order that we might be made to rest in Christ and to know the enjoyment of having him as our Good Shepherd. But just like sheep we can find it hard to rest and there are a number of reasons for it.

Let's go back to my two former Shepherds to find out what it is that hinders sheep from lying down and perhaps we will learn something about our reasons for failing to rest in Christ. These two former shepherds said that sheep would not lie down because of:

i) Fear – Sheep are naturally timid animals therefore unless they feel a sense of complete security and a complete removal of all fear they will not lie down. When I am at my Mother In Law's farm and I walk through a field with sheep in it, if those sheep are lying down they will immediately jump up and run away from you because they are afraid. Well this Psalm is saying that when we come to know the Lord as our Shepherd He not only grants us contentment by supplying all our needs but he also removes from us all need to fear.

We are not to fear God in the sense of dreading God because fear comes as a result of sin and God's judgement comes as a result. But in coming to Jesus as our Shepherd we have our sins forgiven therefore we have no need to fear Him or anyone else. He is our Shepherd he supplies all our needs and he will protect us and watch over us so that nothing can harm us.

There is no one or anything that will be able to harm us without our Good Shepherd permitting it. Satan can't touch us without his permission and even then God is the one who puts limits on him. Death cannot harm us for death might be the end of this life but it is the gateway to our heavenly home for it is absent from the body and present with the Lord.

People cannot ultimately harm us for the Lord is sovereign and oversees every detail of our lives including the people we meet and know and work alongside. Hell has no hold on us for we have been delivered from hell by the precious shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore it is possible to know this rest that verse 2 talks about because we are in the hands of our Good Shepherd who grants us rest because He casts out all fear from our lives.

ii) Tensions within the flock – According to these ex-shepherds that I read, sheep will not lie down if they know that there is friction within the flock. One of these ex-shepherds known as Philip Kellar says that there are sheep that always like to be the boss of the flock; they like to be the bully.

These sheep are the ones that cause antagonism among the flock. You know there are so many of God's sheep that find it hard to rest in God because of antagonism among God's sheep.

There are churches that have people who like to be the centre of attention I suppose if we are honest we are all a bit like that. Such people only do the tasks in the church that are seen and are upfront and as a result they can cause friction and tensions within God's flock. Such tensions can rob us of the rest that God wants us to have as Christian people. But you might say tensions in the church are inevitable for when you have people joining together you will always have tensions. But the bible also gives a blueprint for dealing with the various disagreements and tensions that arise within God's church. Matthew 18:15-20 and Matthew 5:23-26 gives us clear principles that when applied will restore peace and serenity to the church.

The problem often in churches is that individual Christians do not apply biblical principles in dealing with difficulties and therefore the difficulties are allowed to increase and fester to an extent that often small difficulties and problems become far too big and almost take on a life of their own.

This is an important issue if we are truly a biblical church then we must apply biblical principles and if we do this when there are tensions then be assured that we will know this rest that God promises to give to his people.

iii) Insects – In the books that I read this past week from these ex-shepherd I was told that if sheep are being annoyed by flies or insects then they will not lie down. Now when you think of the size of a sheep and the size of insects and flies you cannot imagine sheep being disturbed by such small creatures but they are and their peace is disturbed and they will not lie down until the flies are dealt with or go away. I was told that sheep would go and hide in bushes in order to get rid of these insects and have their peace restored. Well as I thought about that over this past week in relation to our Christian life and our peace I came to realise that so often it is the small and insignificant things in life that so often disturbs our peace with God.

We find it so hard to rest in him because we have some small matters that disturb us and seek to rob us of our peace. It is so often the little trivial things in life that can, really disturb our calmness before God. Little details that annoy us or frustrate us, things that are so small that we may not even wish to mention them to another person, yet they are disturbing our peace with God and are robbing us of enjoying the experience of this Psalm of being at rest with God.

But what should we do. We ought to take those small insignificant things to God in prayer and commit them to him. You might think that they are too small to bother God with them but if they are disturbing you then your Shepherd is interested in them and He wants you to bring them to him. The second thing we must do is to trust God with the small things of life as well as the big things of life. Let him deal with those small things in life that so often hinder us from enjoying his peace and rest. Commit them to Him and then let him deal with them. It is so often the case that it is the small things the insignificant things of life that we can do nothing about or at least when we do try to do something about them they can become bigger than they should be.

But God can deal with them and he longs to lead us into his rest and his peace and if those small things are the things that are hindering us resting in God then he will deal with them. Sometimes he deals with them by changing our attitude towards them so that they no longer matter to us to the same degree and therefore no longer hinder us from enjoying his rest.

iv) Famine – The fourth thing that these ex-shepherds told me in their books about sheep is that if a sheep is hungry it will not lie down. But our Psalmist tells us that God leads his sheep into green pastures so that their hunger can be satisfied. Now when as Christians we do not know this rest that God is talking about; is it possible that one reason for it is that we are hungry and therefore unsatisfied.

If you are spiritually hungry then your peace and rest will be disturbed but there is no need for us to be hungry for God has provided all that we need to be filled and satisfied. But it could be that there are some here tonight who are neglecting the spiritual food that God wants us to have. You are failing to read God's word, as you should. You are failing to pray as you should and you are failing to attend to the means of grace in this church.

You have become so busy with the things of this world many genuine and right things but the result is that you have neglected the food that God provides for you. Your busyness has become your God and you find nothing but restlessness in your soul. Well you will never know this rest that God grants to us unless we are using the means provided by God and are diligently seeking to be nourished by God through his means of grace.

So read his word frequently, pray often, and take the opportunities to meet with God's people and not just on a Sunday. If we all do that then we will experience that peace and rest that only God can give to his sheep.

However for some here it could be that you are restless in soul and do not know this God given rest because you simply do not know the Shepherd. You are not one of his sheep and you are restless and you could never picture yourself being able to lie down in complete peace and in complete confidence of the Lord's tender care for you. If that is the case then you must come to the Shepherd and confess your sin to him and take this Shepherd as your Saviour.

Immediately you will notice the difference as God indwells you through his Spirit and as He begins to shepherd you. You will then know that you have a Shepherd to turn too when your rest is disturbed and that you have the means to deal with whatever it is that is hindering you from knowing this daily rest. However the most important thing is that you are able to say in a meaningful way that "the Lord is my Shepherd."

So please turn to this great Shepherd. Trust Him and you will find rest for your soul. That rest will not only mean that you are right with God and guaranteed a place in heaven the place of His eternal rest. But that everyday God will lead you and grant you his peace and will deal with whatever it is that is robbing you of knowing his daily rest. What we must do is actively obey his word, follow his leading and simply trust him to deal with everything that robs us of this blessed rest that we find in Christ Jesus alone

Amen