

PSALM 23:5 (Part 7)

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the fifth verse in the Psalm that we have been looking at. It is a lovely Psalm and we have covered many subjects in the first four verses. We have looked at the whole subject of God in Jesus Christ being our Shepherd and consequently we do not need to worry for we will lack nothing. We will not lack peace or serenity for we will receive the peace of God.

When we wander from Him He will go after us and restore our souls and he does so not for our benefit, but for his own glory for his own name's sake. He as the Shepherd of his sheep leads and guides us into the right paths and when we face the valley of the shadow of death we need not fear for He is with us guiding us and comforting us.

That is some of the teaching so far that we have considered. Now we come to verse 5 and some people think that the picture changes from that of a Shepherd to that of a banquet. Now that might well be the case but I however am not so sure and I think we can fit this verse into the context of the whole Psalm which is the Shepherd shepherding his sheep. Let me explain what I mean.

1. THE SHEPHERD FEEDS AND PROTECTS HIS SHEEP (v 5)

I am told that being a shepherd in David's time could be really difficult because often the ground where the sheep would feed became infested with all types of parasites mainly due to the hot climate. The ground could also be full of poisonous plants and dangerous brambles. These dangers caused many sheep to fall ill and even die and it also meant that it was difficult for the shepherd to improve his stock because of diseases picked up while feeding.

A good shepherd was aware of this danger and took active steps to help his sheep during feeding time.

Sometimes they cleared the ground the best they could before allowing the sheep on to the land but on many occasions shepherds made little raised troughs or tables that the sheep could feed from. At other times when the grass was too dangerous to eat because of insects etc. the shepherds would lay leather sheeting on the ground and put the sheep's food on that.

These practises stopped the sheep from eating the parasites or the poisonous plants that could damage their health. Now some think this is the picture David had in mind and although we can't be absolutely sure it does seem to fit the whole context of the Psalm.

Therefore just as the shepherd prepares the sheep's table while their enemies mainly insects and poisonous plants watched on, so our heavenly Shepherd feeds us and protects us from our enemies. But who are our enemies today. The bible points to a number so let's look at two of these and see how our shepherd protects us from them.

a) The Devil (1 Peter 5:8) – The Devil is the enemy of God and therefore the enemy of God's people. He roars about like a hungry lion looking for prey and then seeking to destroy that prey. He seeks to do so individually looking for every opportunity to tempt us and trip us up. But how do we avoid being destroyed by the devil how do we avoid his traps?

We must rely upon God the Shepherd to protect us from him in the same way as the sheep relied upon their shepherd to protect them from their enemies. We must cultivate day by day a deep and meaningful relationship with our Lord. This is done through reading his word and prayer therefore we must daily open his word study and learn from it and we must day by day cast ourselves in persistent prayer upon him. We must depend totally upon our Lord to protect us from every

situation that we find ourselves in. Our enemy hates to see us reading God's word but that is how our Shepherd feeds us in the presence of our enemies.

The devil will do everything he can to stop us being fed through God's word. He will put many distractions in our way but our great Shepherd prompts us and encourages us to feed upon his word. He gives us His Holy Spirit who helps us to understand God's word and to learn from it and he teaches us to apply it to our lives.

The idea of the shepherd feeding his sheep in the presence of their enemies paints the picture of the sheep's enemies just waiting for that moment to pounce that moment when the shepherd takes his eye off the sheep. But thank God our Shepherd never takes his eye off his sheep and so the devil is waiting to pounce and destroy but he is unable to do so because of our Shepherd watching over us.

However it might be that although the Shepherd never takes his eye off his sheep it could be that we his sheep take our eye off the Shepherd. When we do that we give our enemy the devil a foothold to exploit our weaknesses and to bring failure into our lives. Therefore in application we must commit our ways in prayer to our Shepherd constantly and we must daily be fed by our Shepherd through his word and by his Holy Spirit?

When do you have your devotional time before the Lord when the Shepherd is able to feed you through his word? Perhaps we have set times every day like morning or evening but I believe that we need to learn to turn to him in every situation throughout the day asking for his grace and power to enable us to live for him and to allow him to feed us. (1 Peter 5:8 notice the word alert).

Our enemy is always alert but are we or are there times in every day when we become careless and give our enemy a chance to attack us. We must be very careful and use the means God has provided for us individually to resist our enemy. Let's praise God that our Shepherd provides all that we need to be spiritually fed and he watches over us in order to protect us from our enemy the devil.

But not only does the devil seek to destroy us individually he seeks to destroy us collectively. Many times we read in the New Testament about false teachers who had infiltrated the church of Jesus Christ. Many of Paul's letters are written against the background of false teachers (Galatians 1:6-10). The same is true in our day and generation.

The devil seeks to plant into churches people who are not true believers or true believers that do not believe correct doctrine. As a result such people teach things that are false and often if they are in leadership roles they seek to take the church in an unbiblical direction. What can we do as a church when we face this situation?

Turn to our Shepherd who will protect us stay near him collectively and seek his will through his word and don't allow ourselves to be deceived no matter how genuine someone may appear to be. As a church we must allow our Shepherd to teach us through his word and by his Spirit so that we can stop error. Our enemy hates to hear clear biblical preaching for he knows that this is how our Shepherd feeds his church.

Therefore make sure we are present when the church gathers to be collectively fed by the Shepherd. Prepare well before coming to church so that we are in the right frame of mind and heart to be fed through God's word. Test the preaching that you hear with the Scriptures so that you know that what is being taught is God's word and not man's ideas. Every Sunday God prepares for us two meals that will feed our souls. Are you present for both those meals? Every Wednesday we gather collectively to be fed as a church by our shepherd.

Are we regularly present? Perhaps one reason why the church of Jesus is being deceived today by our enemy the devil is that we are not present when it is feeding time. God prepares a table before our enemies but perhaps for whatever reason we miss the meal. It's important if we are going to stand firm as a church that we are present when our Shepherd is feeding his church through his word and by His Spirit.

We have a great enemy in the devil but praise God that we have a great Shepherd who prepares for us our daily food and he does so even in the presence of our enemies.

b) The world (James 4:4) – The world with all its anti God thinking and philosophy is the enemy of God and is therefore our enemy. You wouldn't think it when you look at the lives of some Christians. There are Christians who seem to love to flirt with the world and the things of the world and often do so at their own peril. We are told to love not the world or anything of the world (1 John 2:15-17) yet if we all are honest we love the love far too much. It is difficult not to.

The media and the people of this world encourage us constantly to love the world and they discourage us from loving God.

But the world is our enemy not our friend and our lifestyle surely ought to reflect that fact.

But how do we avoid falling into the trap of loving the world? The answer is once again to turn to the Shepherd, stick close to him be determined that no matter what you will obey his word. Be determined to enjoy God Himself as he feeds us through his word. What I am really talking about of course is godliness. I know sadly godliness seems to be rare in these days in which we are living, but do we have those inward desires to be truly godly and to live a life that is truly godly.

Do we long to be more like our Master, sadly sometimes Christians are more like some famous person than we are like Jesus Christ. Sadly sometimes we are more influenced by one of our earthly heroes than we are by Jesus Christ.

But the world is not our friend and the people of the world are not our friends. Therefore turn again and again to our Shepherd and be fed by him. Our world does not understand why anyone would want to come to church and listen to some boring man talking about the Bible. Why would anyone want to spend an hour praying to God?

That's how the world thinks and that is how the world tries to influence us to think but we must resist such thinking and realise that God has given us his word so that we can be fed and protected as we live in this evil world. So don't let the world put us off fellowshiping with God and his people.

Let them mock us and laugh at us we know that if we are not going to be overcome by the enemy of this world then we must constantly be going to our Shepherd to be fed by him and to know his daily grace for living in our world.

2. THE SHEPHERD SOOTHES AND REFRESHES HIS SHEEP WHEN THEY ARE HURT

The next picture that the Psalmist's gives to us is that of oil being used as a soothing agent. Again I am told that Shepherds in the David's time carried in their pockets a small bottle of olive oil. They did this in case they had to doctor one of their sheep. Now one of the most vulnerable parts of a sheep is their face because their wool protects the rest of their body but their head has no such protection.

Therefore sometimes sheep could get cut on brambles or bushes as they travelled from the plains to the mountains through these difficult valleys that we spoke about last time. Sometimes the sheep would be bitten by insects and in such cases the caring shepherd would take out his little

bottle of olive oil and soothe the sore on the sheep's face. Now this seems to me to be the picture that David has in mind as he talks about the Lord anointing his head with oil.

But we might know what it meant for the sheep that David and other shepherds cared for but what does it mean to us today?

Well each one of us faces the jags and bruises of everyday life for no one who lives sincerely as a Christian in our evil world can avoid the pounding of the world. But it's at those times that we need to go to our Shepherd and experience His soothing of our wounds and His fresh supply of grace to live for him. His Spirit comes alongside us and encourages us and comforts us at such times. He helps us to cope with those cuts and bruises and he nurses us gently back to health.

That is the picture that David gives us here. Have you been hurt? Hurt by the world, by your friends, family even by your brothers and sisters in this church? If so then go to your Shepherd, pour out your heart to him. Tell him all about your hurts and pain and allow him by his Spirit and through His word to soothe those wounds and to ease that pain. So far we have seen that the answer to everything is found in our relationship with our Shepherd.

It is fundamental to every aspect of our life. We must therefore set apart time so that we can spend time with God reading his word and unburdening our hearts to him. We must spend time cultivating our relationship with him so that when the bruises and cuts in life come our way our first response is to go straight to our Shepherd for comfort, support and healing.

The reason why we do not immediately head to the Shepherd on such occasions is that we have not spent time cultivating our relationship with Him in such a way so that we feel that we know him and will find comfort and support from Him. Our relationship with our Shepherd gives us the foundation for everything that we have to face in our modern 21st Century world, so spend time cultivating it.

Now the last phrase in this verse is in keeping with what we know about the Shepherds in David's time. Shepherds lived with and for their sheep and they carried with them all that were necessary to save the life of their sheep. The crook or staff was part of the Shepherds equipment as was the oil.

I am also told that often shepherds would carry around some sort of container so that if the sheep became ill or if it rolled over on its back (this is called casting) and hurt itself then the shepherd would take the container and fill it with water and give the poor sheep a drink.

This once again seems to me to be the picture that David has in mind in this last phrase. He pictures the Lord giving us a drink of water to revive and refresh us. Now whereas shepherds in David's time could often only find a little water for his sheep to drink our Shepherd's cup is full and running over. In other words there is enough for us and even more if we need it. It's a picture of our Good Shepherd reviving his sheep. Sometimes we can get so spiritually low that we become spiritually ill. It may be that we stop feeding ourselves spiritually through reading his word and prayer. Our desire for such spiritual disciplines seemed to have left us so that all the means that God has provided for us are being neglected. What happens at such times?

Does our Shepherd just leave us? Does he simply forget about us and allow us to die spiritually. No! He comes alongside us at such times and revives us. Sometimes he does this through the preaching that we hear. Sometimes it's through a verse from the bible we read or are reminded of. Other times it's through a Christian friend. Sometimes he revives our souls by reminding us of his great eternal love for us.

At other times he has to come and rebuke us and at other times he very graciously and gently reminds us of the wonderful salvation that Jesus Christ has purchased for us by his own blood. But however he chooses to deal with us we can be assured that if we are one of his sheep he will deal with us and at such times it will be like having a long drink of water after being in a desert for a long time.

We have a loving Shepherd who revives us and graciously puts us back on the right path when we are spiritually dry. It may be that our Shepherd has to do this many times for we are often sinful and neglectful of God's means of grace and allow ourselves to become very dry spiritually. We are so often weak and sadly we are content to be weak and allow ourselves to remain weak because we fail to apply ourselves to God's disciplines.

But whenever God has to act to spiritually refresh us we can be sure that he does so with a cup that is overflowing. We will never exhaust his supply of grace he constantly pours grace upon us and there is always more to follow when needed.

Isn't wonderful that we have such a great Shepherd who cares so much for his sheep? A Shepherd, who will time and time again bind up our wounds, feed us and protects us. We have a Wonderful Saviour but do you know Him personally? You can if you will only trust him today for salvation. He will never, no never, no never, let you down.

Amen