

Psalm 23 – Fear and Worry

Do you remember the episode of Fawlty Towers with the 2 psychiatrists, Sybil Fawlty describes her mother: *Old people are wonderful when they have so much life, aren't they? Gives us all hope, doesn't it? My mother on the other hand is a little bit of a trial, really. You know, it's alright when they have the life force but Mother – well she's got more of the death force really. She's a worrier. She has these, well, morbid fears they are, really. Vans is one. Rats. Doorknobs. Birds. Heights. Open spaces. Confined spaces. It's very difficult getting the space right for her really, you know. Footballs. Bicycles. Cows.*

There are times when we are right to be afraid. Other times when traumatic experiences can trigger a fear response that is hard to quell. Which takes us to Psalm 23, The Lord is my Shepherd. Familiar words, to help us deal with worry, anxiety and fear.

Simple words – an antidote to our complicated lives.
Deep words – that strike to the heart of our humanity.
Comforting words – to help us build our trust in God.

Have you seen how Psalms 22, 23 and 24 form a little trio?

- Psalm 22 – the Good Shepherd dies for His sheep.
- Psalm 23 – the Great Shepherd cares for His sheep.
- Psalm 24 – the Shepherd King returns for His sheep.

Psalm 22 has a graphic picture of the death of the Jesus, the agony he went through. It is called "the psalm of the cross." Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10v11). Psalm 22 ends with the joy of being rescued and restored to right relationship with God. Psalm 23 continues by describing what it is like to be at home with God.

Then Psalm 24 describes the one who stands before God. Christ, the ascended Saviour, is the King of Glory. The Shepherd will come for his sheep, so that finally the earth will belong completely to God. Peter writes in 1 Peter 5v4 "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

And so between salvation and glory, we have this most beautiful Psalm describing the meticulous care the Good Shepherd gives to his sheep. Still waters, green pastures, righteous guidance, protection from evil and at the end of the journey a banquet with overflowing cups. Assurance of a life, full of goodness and love.

The sheep who are part of the Good Shepherd's flock will not want for nothing. These sheep have food and drink (v2), strength and guidance (v3), security (v4), celebration (v5) and life (v6).

Worry

"He leads me beside the still waters"

There is a spectrum, with worry at one end and fear at the other. Fear is acute worry. We worry. Whether it is anxiety about our finances or concern about the future, where are we heading in life, where life is taking us.

Worry divides the mind. The biblical word for worry is a compound of two Greek words, *merizo* ("to divide") and *nous* ("the mind"). Anxiety splits our energy between today's priorities and tomorrow's problems. Part of our mind is on the now. The rest is on the not yet. The result is half-minded living.

We don't need reminding of the high cost of anxiety. It is not a disease, but it causes them: high blood pressure, heart trouble, migraine headaches and stomach disorders. Anxiety is an expensive habit. It might be worth the cost if it worked. But it doesn't. Our frets are futile.

Jesus said, "You cannot add any time to your life by worrying about it" (Matt. 6v27)

Worry has never brightened a day, solved a problem or cured a disease. So how do we deal with it?

"He leads me beside the still waters," David declares. "He leads me." Jesus isn't behind me, saying, "Go!". He is ahead of me, bidding "Come!". He is in front, clearing the path, showing the way. He tells us what we need to know when we need to know it.

"We will find grace to help us when *we need it*" (Heb 4v16). God's help is timely and since I can trust his timely provision, I can enjoy the now.

Jesus tell us: "So don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6v34). The key is this: Meet today's problems with today's strength. Don't start tackling tomorrow's problems until tomorrow. You do not have tomorrow's strength yet. You simply have enough for today.

Easy to say, but not so easy to do. We don't know what will happen tomorrow, but we know he leads us and "we will find grace to help us when we need it" (Heb 4v16 NLT).

Fear

Fear is the big brother of worry. It is like acid eating away at life. Fear can lock us up and prevent us from doing anything. Fear is life denying.

Some fear is quite rational, but do we always evaluate correctly the things we should fear and the things we don't need to fear?

Comforted by modern belief that we control of our environment, humanity tends not to fear the supernatural. We've got nature tamed, just the occasional earth tremor or failure of our mighty antibiotics to trouble us. We act as if nothing will touch us, other than our collective stupidity and selfishness. We dismiss any notion that inhabitants of the unseen world should be feared. How silly we are. Those who come face to face with the living God know what it is to be afraid. Fear of God is quite real.

Time and time again people who encounter God or his messengers need to be reassured by the words "Do not be afraid." When God spoke to Joseph in a dream, He begins with "Do not be afraid". When Jesus walks on water, Jesus has to say to his disciples, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." When Peter, James and John were with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus needs to tell them "Do not be afraid". After Jesus had been raised from the dead, he had to say to his disciples, "Do not be afraid".

There are many things that cause fear. An encounter with the living God is definitely one of them. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

An unspoken challenge behind fear is that God will abandon us, that we're on our own. Faith says: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff protect me.* As sheep who belong to the Shepherd's flock, we don't need to fear that wolves or worse will attack us.

- "If God is for us, who can be against us." (Rom 8v31)
- "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8v38-39)

The opposite of fear is faith. As our confidence in our Shepherd grows, as we experience His protection, as we pray and He answers, so our faith grows and fear fades. I will not be afraid, because you are with me. At the start of this pandemic, I found myself gripped by fear. As I turned to God in prayer, as I read Scripture, that fear subsided.

When we begin our journey with God, we start to experience his covenant love for us. Perhaps in little ways and sometime seemingly trivial answers to prayer. We are looked after, we have what we need to live well. Later when we hit the storms of life, we discover that he draws near to us and gives us the strength and protection to endure those troubles. Having experienced God's faithfulness towards us in this life, our confidence in Him builds, until we can say with conviction: *surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.*

The Hebrew word that is rendered here as 'mercy' is *hesed*. The English word 'mercy' seems a bit feeble compared with *hesed*, which means steadfast love, covenant love, strong fidelity. This is something rock solid and reliable. And it is coupled with the word 'follow', which means 'pursue'. The psalmist is declaring that God's promised covenant love will chase me down, it will run after me. Just as the Good Shepherd will pursue any of his sheep that might get lost.

"The world can do nothing to a Christian who has no fear of man." Brother Yun.

For all of us, there is a river to cross and we are apprehensive about what we will find on the other side. We pray for health, but God has a much more radical plan: the destruction of death itself and the evil which causes death. We pray for survival and endurance, when He wants to throw the most amazing party. Celebration and sublime joy. When we submit ourselves to His plan and trust His faithfulness, His *hesed*, His steadfast love, our fear turns into expectant joy and praise.

*When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death, and hell's Destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever sing to you,
I will ever sing to you.*

You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
you welcome me as an honoured guest
and fill my cup to the brim.

I know that your goodness and steadfast (*hesed*) love
will be with me all my life;
and your house will be my home as long as I live.

Footnote

Much of the above can be found in the book *Travelling Light* by Max Lucado, where he also explains that this Psalm has antidotes to:

- Weariness *He makes me to lie down in green pastures*
- Hopelessness *He restores my soul*
- Guilt *He leads me in the paths of righteousness*
- Arrogance *For His name's sake*
- Grief *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*
- Loneliness *You are with me*
- Shame *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*
- Disappointment *You anoint my head with oil*
- Envy *My cup overflows with blessings*
- Doubt *Surely goodness and steadfast love shall follow me...*
- Homesickness *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*