

Dear Friends,

Over recent weeks, I have reflected with you on what Dallas Willard calls “the triangle of sufficiency,” – faith or trust in God, death to self and agape love, and how it is when we understand and integrate these three things in our lives that we come to experience something of the life without lack that God, our Shepherd, offers to us.

As I reflect upon Psalm 23, I find that I am increasingly drawn to an understanding that verses 2 – 6 of the Psalm are actually a commentary on verse 1. In verse 1 we hear David say that, “The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.” The rest of the Psalm seems to me to be something of a description of what that looks like in practice.

Next week, I will offer a final reflection on the last verse of this Psalm, “surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” But for today, I simply want to offer to you a reflection that Willard gives near the start of his book, that provides an overview of the whole Psalm. I hope it will provide you with a deeper understanding and experience of the Lord being your Shepherd on a daily basis.

***The Lord is my Shepherd*** – in other words, I’m in the care of someone else. I’m not the one in charge. I’ve taken my kingdom and surrendered it to the kingdom of God. I am living life with God. The Lord is my shepherd. And what follows from that?

***I shall not want*** – that’s the natural result. I shall not lack anything. That’s what Jesus teaches when he says: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and everything else will be given to you as well.”

***He makes me lie down in green pastures*** – what kind of sheep lies down in green pasture? A sheep that has eaten its fill. If a sheep is in a green pasture and it’s not full, it will be eating, not lying down!

***He leads me beside the still waters*** – likewise, a sheep that is being led by still water is a sheep that is not thirsty. Jesus said to the woman at the well, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give them will never thirst. But the water that I shall give them will become in them a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

***He restores my soul*** – the broken depths of my soul are healed and reintegrated in a life in union with God: the eternal kind of life.

***He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake*** – the effect of the restoration of my soul is that I walk in paths of righteousness on God’s behalf as a natural expression of my renewed inner nature. As I walk these paths, my trust in the Shepherd runs so deep that I can then declare:

***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*** – a life without lack is one that carries no fear of evil. Our confidence in God soars far above wants and fears. Would you like to have a life without fear, a life of soaring faith? It seems like Jesus was constantly saying to his friends, “Fear not! Fear not!” Imagine for a moment what that would be like. No fear of life, aging or death, disease or hunger, no fear of any person or creature, not even the loss of all your possessions. It’s not about not having to face the things we fear but rather being able to face them without any fear in our hearts. You can live without fear even in

the midst of a world dominated by it. Fear can be eliminated from your heart and mind. While the Psalmist clearly knows all about life's dangers, he can still say, "I will fear no evil." Why?

***For you are with me*** – Perhaps the central truth of the whole Bible is that the life without lack or fear, the life lived in all its fullness, is based entirely upon the presence of God in our midst. And God is most clearly and fully present to us in Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us.

***Your rod and your staff, they comfort me*** – The rod and staff represent for us the Shepherd's strength and protective care. In this safe place where I have no fear, I am at liberty to enjoy the overwhelming generosity of my Shepherd.

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*** – since I love my enemies, which is what Jesus calls and equips us to do, I would not feast upon a delicious meal in their presence and leave them standing there hungry. The abundance of God's provision and safety in my life is so great, I would invite them to enjoy with me what God has prepared.

***You anoint my head with oil*** – think for a moment of hot showers and warm fluffy towels, things that make us feel clean, comfortable, and special, made ready for God's purposes, and how God makes that possible. God is not only interested in my having something wonderful to eat, but also in blessing me with a life that is full and free and powerful in him. So much so that the abundance of God's provision rings out from the Psalmist's pen:

***My cup is full!*** – Is that what it says? No. ***My cup overflows.*** I have more than my cup can possibly hold – a bottomless cup, permanent refills. So much that I can be as generous as my Shepherd without fear of ever running out. So much so that I am convinced:

***Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*** – this is a description of the eternal life available to us now in the kingdom of the heavens; the abundant with-God life that comes from following the Shepherd, where we dwell and abide with God in the fullness of his life – a life in which all the promises of Christ's gospel are realised. Because of this we have no reason to be anxious; the world is a perfectly safe place for us to be – when we are able to put our trust in God alone.<sup>1</sup>

Every Blessing,

Rev Tim

## Notices

### Use of Church Buildings for Worship and Other activities

You will by now be familiar with the new "rule of 6" that the Government has introduced for gatherings indoors or outdoors. I am delighted to confirm that Churches, as voluntary organisations are exempt from this as we are working on the basis of households sitting socially-distanced from others anyway. Weddings and funerals will still be allowed subject to a maximum attendance figure of 30.

## Pastoral Concerns

If you are aware of any pastoral concerns or celebrations that might be good to share with our churches via this letter, please do not hesitate to send me details. It is good to be able to share news of celebrations and to hold one another in love and prayer where people are facing

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<sup>1</sup> Willard D, *Life without lack*, Nelson Books, 2018, P. xvii - xx

particular difficulties. I am grateful to Richard Lowe for sharing the following with me. Friends at Burley may be particularly interested.

Both Irene Lincoln and Ron Gray have a birthday on 25<sup>th</sup> September. Irene will be remembered as the minister at Burley (and Norwood and Timble) from 1985 to 1994 and Ron was a key player in the life of the church over many years, including taking a leading role on our major redevelopment in 2002. Sadly, both are now in Care Homes suffering from forms of dementia. Following Sylvia's death, Irene was moved into a Care Home in Rugby which is close to her brother and sister in law. Because of the Covid-19 restrictions they have been unable to visit her since March. Irene initially found the lack of visits disturbing, but had settled down until she became unwell and receipt of a card from David and Brenda reminded her she has a family. Although the Alzheimer's Society is pushing the Government to allow visits there is concern that Irene will no longer remember her family. Ron is in a Care Home near York close to his daughter. Carole can visit him for half an hour a week outdoors. Ron has no recollection of life in Burley and doesn't even recognise Carole as his daughter. It is a difficult time for everyone concerned and so it would be great if we could pray for Irene and Ron and their families on 25<sup>th</sup> September.