

Thought for 24th January 2021

Over the last two weeks we have looked at the 23rd Psalm and thought about the relationship of the shepherd and the sheep and how this is an illustration of how God relates to His people, that is you and me. We saw that as the shepherd leads his sheep so God leads us, not as a distant God in heaven but as the God who walks with us leading us and sharing our life. We also saw that as the shepherd provides all that his sheep need for life, so God wants to provide for us all we need for our lives. We finished last week thinking about how the shepherd provides the fundamental for all life, that is water for his sheep.

David links the shepherd's provision, particularly of water with the idea of God refreshing his soul. The primary image here is of the sheep after a long, hot and wearisome day eating on the parched Judean hillsides being revived and refreshed by cool clean water.

Now I don't know if you have ever been really thirsty, not, "Oh I fancy a cuppa thirsty" but really parched and dehydrated. One of my experiences of real thirst was when I climbed my first mountain called Buachaille Etive Mor in Glencoe. As it was my first mountain, I was hideously unprepared and had only brought two small squeezy boxes of juice for the climb. Unusually for Scotland it was a baking hot day June day, and I drank both the boxes within the first hour. The rest of the climb was a nightmare of thirst, cramp, exhaustion and trying to suck the sweat from my clothes just to get some moisture to relieve the constant gnawing thirst. It feels like I was dying, I had no energy and it took all my will power to put one foot in front of the other. Eventually I reached the summit, and some kind soul gave me a drink from their canteen. As I drank the cool clear water, I honestly felt my cramped muscles relax, my breathing slow, my vision clear and my strength return. As my strength returned, I stopped thinking solely about my thirst and began to look around me and I was staggered by the beauty of God's creation made plain in the mountains of Glencoe. As I struggled up Buachaille Etive Mor I swore I would never climb as much as a set of stairs let alone a mountain again. Now restored and revelling in God's creation I felt a sense of accomplishment, of joy and a determination to do this again and climb all those other mountains I saw in Glencoe.

David here is using the image of the shepherd's care and provision for his sheep refreshing their strength and vitality to illustrate how God's care and provision for His people refreshes them. But unlike the water for sheep, God's refreshing is not just a refreshing of physical strength. No, God's refreshing is so much more all-encompassing.

When David writes "he refreshes my soul" he uses two very particular Hebrew words. Firstly, the image or thought behind the Hebrew word translated refresh is one of returning something to its original form or state. Therefore restore better captures the idea of this Hebrew word than refresh. Secondly, the Hebrew word translated soul literally means my whole being or every part of me. David sees God's care and provision for His people is so vast, so all-encompassing that it touches every part of a person's life. Jesus said as the Good Shepherd in John 10:10, "*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*" David expresses a similar idea of abundant provision when he writes later in the Psalm "*my cup overflows*". David, in his choice of words when he writes "he refreshes my soul" is clear that God's provision is so comprehensive, so complete and so prodigal that it restores every part of his being, the entirety of who he is.

It is a great thought, that God doesn't just provide and care for us just enough, just enough so we just get by. No, God as it was once explained to me wants to bless our socks off. If you take nothing from this morning please take this away with you, God's provision and care for you is unimaginably more than you could ever know or imagine.

Returning to God restoring us through his care and provision David experienced God's restoration repeatedly in his life. Our call to worship is David's lament from Psalm 22 where he pleads for God's restoration. Here David cries out "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" David is pleading with God to restore the close relationship and sense of His presence with David that he had lost. Yet despite feeling lost and far from God David chooses to trust that God will restore fellowship with him. David even chooses to trust in God despite the mockery and insults from those around him. David acknowledges his complete dependence and trust in God's provision to restore or refresh him.

You and I need restoration on a daily basis. We need the Good Shepherd, through his provision and care to restore us. Our journey through life can feel like a journey through a harsh and barren desert. A desert devoid of sustenance and water, a desert filled with endless toil and suffocating heat. In the trials and tribulations of our desert journeying we need the provision and care of our Shepherd to restore all the desert journey takes from us.

Sometimes we need restoration, not the restoration of what the desert journey has taken from us but sometimes we need restored to the Shepherd's flock. Even as sometimes sheep wander away from the shepherd so we can wander away from our Good Shepherd. Why we wander away either through carelessness or conscious decision isn't relevant. The fact of the matter is that we wander from the shepherds care and provision and all to quickly find ourselves in trouble. As I have said frequently a sheep without a shepherd is very quickly becomes a dead sheep.

Remember last week I said we would look at restoration and how the shepherd deals with those sheep of his flock who have gone astray. Remember that I said David used two very particular Hebrew words when he wrote *"he restores my soul"*. Using the original sense of these words **Psalm 23:3** could easily be translated, "He brings me back" or "He causes me to repent", instead of, "He restores or refreshes my soul." This really makes sense when you realize that David might have been reflecting on his personal journey of faith. David could have been saying, as do many other Old Testament Passages, that God came after him and brought him back. It is the picture of a good shepherd who goes after a lost sheep and brings it back to a safe place.

David could have the image of the shepherd going after the sheep that has gone astray as we find in Jesus's parable of the lost sheep **John 15: 3 – 6** *"Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"*

We have all at some time chosen to go our own way, we have all as Frank Sinatra sang, "I did it my way" and usually with disastrous consequences for ourselves and those around us. Isaiah has the right of it when he writes *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way;"*

The remarkable thing is not that the sheep wanders off but that the shepherd searches for and rescues the errant sheep, not to reprimand him but to return the sheep to his care and provision. God is so determined to lavish his care and provision on us that when we do wander off, God doesn't leave us to suffer and perish because of our decisions. No, God seeks us out to restore us, bring us back in to his care and provision, to lavish his love on us.

Perhaps you have wandered off from the Good Shepherd and aren't seeing His care and provision in your life. Perhaps you have chosen to follow another voice or perhaps you have decided that the grass is greener somewhere else or perhaps you just wanted to do it your way, it really doesn't matter. Please know this that the Good Shepherd is looking for you, searching for you so He can restore you through his care and provision. Why don't you stop wandering and let the Good Shepherd find you and restore you?

Next week we will look at how God restores or refreshes as He leads us in path of righteousness.

I leave you with a short story, apparently true, of what happens when the shepherd doesn't provide and care for their sheep. ISTANBUL: Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths this week while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 metres to their deaths in a ravine in Van province near Iran but broke the fall of another 1,100 animals who survived, newspaper reports said yesterday. Shepherds from Ikizler village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free, the Radikal daily newspaper said. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000.

What a relief we have the Good Shepherd whose life is all about His sheep and that He never takes time off from providing and caring for His people.