

MAKING PSALM 23 WORK

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday), April 4, 2010

Text: Psalm 23

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

I ask you! What is so great about goodness and mercy *following* us! Why don't they catch up and *walk with* us! Maybe even go ahead and pave our way!

Some people wishfully translate this “goodness and mercy *are with*” me—but that's inaccurate. The text says “goodness and mercy *follow*.”

Or does it? Surely David knew what he was doing when he chose the word. But it looks like timid translators may have watered it down. David's own word meant to chase or pursue, to try to catch up with, often with hostile intent. That's a lot stronger than follow. Goodness and mercy are not two servants following me around with platters of goodies. They are two hunters. They are tracking me down.

So. “Goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me all the days of my life.”

But let's keep going. If we want to take Psalm 23 down off the wall and out of the frame and make it work for us, we need to look at a few more words.

“Goodness” and “mercy” are threadbare words. As in “Goodness' sakes!” and “Mercy me!” Can we put some heft in them? Can we fill them up?

The word “goodness” in the original Hebrew is **tov**. In Genesis 1 it is a major player, as God's judgment on what he has just created. Time after time, in that story, we hear the refrain “and God saw that it was—“*tov*”—good.”

So “good” is a very heavy word! God was not talking about a Reuben sandwich. He was talking about the world! The planet! Earth! He was looking for a word to express what we might call the awesome excellence of creation, and he chose “GOOD.”

What did God think of light? *Tov*! Dry land? *Tov*! All the plant life? *Tov*! Sun, moon, and stars above? *Tov*! Fish and birds? *Tov*! All the animals on the land? (Even the creeping things!) *Tov*! Finally, the whole ball of wax, the whole shooting match, including you and me? *Tov meoth*! (That means “Very good!”)

That is the kind of “good” that shall pursue me all the days of my life.

As for the other word, *chesed*? It is one of the most important concepts in the entire OT! *Chesed* means steadfast love, or loving kindness, or merciful faithfulness, an attribute of God as important as his power. Specifically, it refers to loving acts of kindness that are undertaken

freely *within* an understood relationship. This is the word that comes to be translated with the Greek *charis*, or grace. We are crystallizing God's character when we plead "Lord, have *mercy*."

That is what shall pursue me all the days of my life. The goodness of God, and the loving kindness of a God who is my God. I will be stalked, I will be hunted down by the goodness and loving kindness of the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. Wow!

But let's go back to the beginning of the psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Does that really work for you? Does it fit?

Or are you like me? I most emphatically *do* want. The green pastures may be tantalizingly close, but they are still on the other side of one fence or another. Those still waters . . . are a mirage. My soul needs a full time handyman to do more restoration. I walk in ways that are not always righteous, with results that do not give glory to God's name. I quake to walk in the valley of the shadow of you know what. In the presence of my enemies I do not digest very well, so I go elsewhere to eat. If my cup runs over, it is usually with something that I have to clean up.

I wish Psalm 23 worked for me, with its confidence born of the hope that—some day—I shall not want; but I am more like a kid in the back seat, asking God: "Are we there yet?" I know the answer I will hear: "Not quite."

And that is where we live, you and I. Us chasing after goodness, while goodness is chasing after us.

We are like those impatient Judeans who asked Jesus: "How long will you hold us in suspense?" Literally, "How long will you hold on to our psyches?"

I want to play with that Greek phrase in a way it was not intended. I want to suggest that it is precisely Jesus' intention to seize our psyches, hold us in suspense, and that *it is good news that he does so*.

For we are people who do not yet lie down in green pastures . . . but who are pursued and will be captured by the great goodness and loving kindness of the Creator. Pursued; not yet content; souls still needing some restoration; we live in hope by faith, and that is why we can love so much. Because our fears do not rule over our nature.

Indeed, although “the Lord is my shepherd,” much is still wrong. Despite circumstances, despite ourselves, it is well with our souls. We have the peace that doesn’t really make sense, that passes understanding, because Jesus Christ makes Psalm 23 work.

Notice that in verse 26 of the Gospel Jesus suggests that belonging to him *precedes* believing in him. We believe because we belong, and we belong (to the shepherd) because he has seized our psyches with his words, and with his sacrifice of himself for our sins. We are still in his grip; his rod and his staff, they comfort us. Because of the signs he has done to show us who he is, and to show us the great loving kindness of God towards all who belong to him.

Because of Christ, we are confident to use the present tense in the first phrase of Psalm 23, even though we must still use future for the second. The Lord *is* my shepherd; I *shall* not want. That is a great tension to live in, sometimes it is even the valley of the shadow of death, but we do not surrender to fear. Rather,

. . . we walk with courage in the paths of righteousness in which he leads us, serving God with gladness, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the fainthearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all people, loving and serving God . . .

because we trust the shepherd . . . because we belong to the shepherd, because he has made us his own.

This is what it means, to make Psalm 23 work for us:

We are not proud, as though we were able to make this world good, or ourselves good, by our own efforts.

Nor do we despair, as though sin were capable of destroying ourselves or our world.

We walk by faith in the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for us sheep. Faith that God is with us as we walk in good paths, and that in the end his goodness will totally catch up with us, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.