

A SUMMARY OF LESSON 1/ 3rd Qtr, June 25-July 1, 2022

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THE SHEPHERD'S CRUCIBLE

Memory Text

"He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Psalm 23:3, NKJV

INTRODUCTION:

We are starting a long but all-important JOURNEY this quarter—a journey into the meaning of SUFFERING, EVIL, and DEATH. If we imagine LIFE as a JOURNEY, then PSALM 23 is one of the best places to start, because it talks about a PATH. This PATH takes us through the HIGHS and LOWS of our LIVES. More important, SOMEONE is guiding us on that PATH. That SOMEONE is more than a GUIDE; He is a CARING and LOVING SHEPHERD.

Here are the THREE POINTS that SUMMARIZE our lesson this week:

1. A GUIDE FOR THE JOURNEY(SUNDAY & MONDAY)

Because of the PASTORAL LIFESTYLE of the people in OLD TESTAMENT times, PSALM 23 uses the IMAGE of a SHEPHERD to describe the way GOD CARES for us. The SYMBOL of a SHEPHERD is used for GOD—in both the OLD TESTAMENT and the NEW TESTAMENT. It's a wonderful PICTURE and one that is CHANGELESS, as well. You can see some PLACES CLEARLY, but other parts are totally OBSTRUCTED by dangerous OBSTACLES. Some parts of the path are EASY to WALK along; others are DIFFICULT.

Here are FOUR IMPORTANT REASONS why these paths are called "PATHS of RIGHTEOUSNESS" or "RIGHT PATHS" (NIV, NRSV). FIRST, they are the right paths because they LEAD to the RIGHT DESTINATION—the SHEPHERD'S HOME. SECOND, they are the right paths because they KEEP US in HARMONY with the RIGHT PERSON—the SHEPHERD HIMSELF. THIRD, they are the right paths because they TRAIN US to be the RIGHT PEOPLE—like the SHEPHERD. FOURTH, they are the right paths because they GIVE US the RIGHT WITNESS—as we become the RIGHT PEOPLE, we give GLORY to the LORD. They are "RIGHT" or "RIGHTEOUS" paths, whether the going is EASY or HARD.

2. UNEXPECTED DETOURS IN THE JOURNEY(TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY)

PSALM 23:4 states, "Yea, 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, they comfort me" (NKJV). You see, at

CERTAIN TIMES of the year, the WADIS and RAVINES found in ISRAEL are prone to FLASH FLOODS that can come UNEXPECTEDLY and prove OVERWHELMING. These PLACES also are characteristically NARROW, with STEEP SIDES that block out the light. Hence, “the SHADOW of DEATH” is an image for “VERY DEEP SHADOW” or “DEEP DARKNESS.”

The PSALMIST continues in VERSE 5, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (NKJV). DAVID shows us an INTERESTING WAY of dealing with ENEMIES. He OBSCURES their PRESENCE by LOOKING instead at what GOD is DOING in his BEHALF. And GOD is there PREPARING a BANQUET for him. In DAVID’S CULTURE, when an HONORED GUEST came for a FEAST, the HOST would ANOINT his HEAD with OIL as the guest was about to enter the BANQUETING HALL. The OIL was a mixture of OLIVE OIL and PERFUME. Then the GUEST would be SEATED in FRONT with far MORE FOOD than one could ever EAT.

3. A PROMISE FOR THE JOURNEY (THURSDAY)

The LAST SECTION of PSALM 23 holds a CERTAIN PROMISE (VERSE 6): “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (NKJV). When we are in the VALLEY or SURROUNDED by ENEMIES, it is sometimes TEMPTING to BELIEVE that we have been LEFT ALONE. It does NOT ALWAYS FEEL as though GOD has been DOING MUCH; we reason that if HE had been HELPING, we wouldn’t be in this SITUATION to begin with. But DAVID obviously DOES NOT see it like this.

The HEBREW VERB in the PHRASE, “Surely goodness and mercy shall ‘follow’ me all the days of my life” is MUCH STRONGER than the translated word “FOLLOW.” The text SHOULD BE READ that goodness and unfailing love will “PURSUE” me all the days of my life. This MEANS that no matter how DEEP the VALLEY or how PERSISTENT the ENEMIES, the CERTAINTY of GOD’S GOODNESS and UNFAILING LOVE and the CERTAINTY of HIS GUIDANCE to the VERY END of our JOURNEY is UNQUESTIONABLE.

CONCLUSION:

This week’s lesson highlights THREE MAJOR THEMES: (1) LIFE is a JOURNEY that takes different turns. (2) This JOURNEY does not wind chaotically by chance. (3) There is NO WAY to SURVIVE the CRUCIBLES of LIFE if we do NOT TRUST our SHEPHERD. The most IMPORTANT QUESTIONS for our JOURNEY, for our HIGHS and LOWS, are: Do we KNOW the SHEPHERD? Do we TRUST HIM whatever happens or WHEREVER He may decide to TAKE US?