

STRUGGLES ON THE JESUS WAY

Despair

Psalm 23

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AUDIO: <http://fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/161753>

Last week, we considered suffering as one of the struggles on the Jesus way. This morning, we tilt the focus slightly. We take that theme of hardship a bit further and deal with the temptation to give in and give up, the temptation to active despair--to give up on faith, on church and on God. Despair--from the Latin words, "without hope." The New Jerusalem Bible translates v. 4 as "a ravine as deep as death..." and The Revised English Bible says it this way: "the valley of deepest darkness." I've had feedback from some of you, reporting that you are in a dark place. Several people used the same words, describing a sense of isolation and that they've lost your capacity to trust.

Every living organism experiences anxiety, from the tiniest amoeba to the largest elephant. Simply put, that organism can adapt--or die. Here's my concern. When we are tired and discouraged (biologically, emotionally or spiritually), we are more susceptible to attack and invasion. Continual assault tires us, discourages us and tempts us. It wears us down.

I'm suggesting that we not only get tired in the struggles; growing bitter actually makes us more tired. So what if this famous 23rd psalm is about more than helping us through a scary surgery? More than our fear of death? What if the dark valley is the valley of despair, of giving up, giving in to evil?

During WWII, a name was coined by French doctors for a disease that appeared in prison camps. They called it barbed-wire sickness. One of its symptoms was an appalling sense of futility and meaninglessness of existence among the POWs. No matter what camp activities, conversations or games, nothing could banish the obsession with the barbed wire. These prisoners were not only captives of the guards and towers; they were captives of their own despair.

I was intrigued back in February as I listened to an elderly man in Ukraine being interviewed. He said of the uprising in his country, "This is my fourth revolution. I should know better than to be optimistic." But it's not just overseas. I'm picking up on a lot of barbed wire sickness in our souls. A sense of futility. People coming to a place where they don't expect anything from their government or schools or churches or from their God. Within church a lot of people have a "been there-done that" attitude. Perhaps reflecting the cynicism of our age, playwright David Henry Hwang said, "The fact that something is new simply means it hasn't had time to disappoint us." Wow. That's cynical.

Enter the 23rd psalm. A Sunday School teacher once asked if any of the children could quote Psalm 23 and one little boy started out, "The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I want." Yes! And all we need. A modern-day shepherd from Illinois tells this story. A ewe was lambing and she was in trouble. She heaved herself up and ran away when the shepherd approached. The shepherd caught her with her crook and the ewe struggled. Finally wrestled to the ground by the shepherd, the ewe gave birth to twins and a few minutes later was lying content on the straw. But she ran away from the shepherd! [*The Upper Room*, Aug. 31, 2006]. At the exact moment she needed the help the most, she ran away! When our need is most critical, why do we run?

Mark me. We will lose our way in the dark times unless we believe in the purposes of God. Hope is rooted in God's purposes (green pasture, through, not stuck in the valley, arriving in God's presence where a banquet is prepared for us, God's loving kindness pursuing us always). God's purposes.

We must not run from the Shepherd, but know of God's power to restore and refresh us (vv. 2-3). One translation of v. 3 reads, "He repeatedly restores the core of my being." During the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in the 1950's, Mother Pollard, vowed to walk until the boycott was over. Someone asked her, "Aren't your feet tired?" "Yes," she replied, "my feet is tired but my soul is rested." He restores my soul.

And then notice there is a switch in v. 4. No longer talking ABOUT God, but talking WITH God. Personal relationship with God. There is no substitute. We know God through His Son, Jesus, made real in up-to-date experience by the Holy Spirit dwelling within. And the same God who is with us in the righteous paths is with us in the dangerous valley. And that's what keeps us out of despair. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this, "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope. Only in this way shall we live without the fatigue of bitterness and the drain of resentment." Never give in to despair!

We often say that we are like sheep--not too bright and prone to wander. True, perhaps. But I think the most fundamental truth about our similarity to sheep is our vulnerability. Sheep are basically defenseless. That is to say, they are not in control. And we aren't either. We like to think we are. But we're not. And that may be the source of our despair. We are angry or bitter that we are not in charge. But we are not. God is. In one of his books, John Stott reminds us that our security is not in the green pastures, the clear streams or the dark valleys. Our security is in the Shepherd! [*Favorite Psalms*, p. 27]. Move past the despair! Move into restful trust. Because God's goodness and mercy will pursue you all the days of your life.