

Trust

Psalm 23

Eighth of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, March 6, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

Let us take a moment to pray. We acknowledge now in this moment Lord, that you are my shepherd ... you are our shepherd together. You will not leave us wanting for the sustenance that you provide in your word. So help us to be still now and enjoy your presence to restore our souls and give us the insight to lead us in right paths. Help us to go out and walk through the dark valleys and not be afraid of evil. Help us to enjoy the good things that you prepare for us even in the midst of adversaries. Help us to be assured that you will bring goodness and mercy after us and you will bring us into your house forever. Speak the words, Great Shepherd of the sheep. In Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Psalm 23 – the most popular, the most esteemed and comforting psalm, is about trust. Trust is developed – it just doesn't happen. Psalm 23 takes us on the journey to the nurturing of trust, from God's trustworthiness. It is important that we rely upon trust for our culture to prosper. Without trust, nothing will work. Marriages do not work without trust. Marriages over a period of time, if they're nurturing trust, will grow; if not, they're not, they will enter into demise. As you may be aware, my wife and I have spent the last seven months living in two different places commuting between Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC. We are glad to say that we have an offer on our house and we invite you to pray that it be sold. And not too soon, I believe – just in the nick of time, for this past week, I received a call on my cell phone and I looked at the name and it had my wife's name on it. And feeling rather cheery, I answered the phone and said, "Hi, Sweetie," to which she promptly replied, "Oh, I'm sorry, you're the wrong number, I dialed you by mistake." Now, I could have understood this happening once in a week, but it happened twice this week. Now if you think that's a sign of serious problems in our relationship, I want to let you know that that's not the case.

Trust is an important experience that we have in walking with God. Psalm 23 is a confession of faith. It is a confession of trust. Faith and trust in Scripture are reciprocal terms. If we have faith, that means we trust God. Psalm 23 does that in two ways: it not only looks back at the personal experience of the psalm writer, but it also looks back at the experience of the people of God and how they have experienced the trust of God in places like Exodus and the wilderness. By their experience of their daily walk with the living God, they know they can trust God with their lives. It is personal. It is historical. It is an extraordinary expression of intimate and personal relationship with God. The psalm sets the agenda with the first phrase: "the Lord is my shepherd." It's an extraordinary statement in the psalms; there are very few psalms that become so personal, so fast. Trust does not come, the psalm leads us to understand, from a quick action or quick fix. Trust is not an event. Trust is a journey that we enter into, when we walk with God over a sustained period of time. And God's trustworthiness as we walk along the way, leads us to grow in our trust for God. We trust God because God is trustworthy.

Somehow this psalm appeals especially to the western mind, I believe today, because it is such a personal psalm and we have such an interest in personal faith, and have for a long time. The psalm somehow resonates deeply in our souls: that we could have a personal relationship with the living God. It also is a pastoral psalm and there seems to be a movement in this post-modern time, in recognition that urban and suburban life is intensifying, a hunger to get away on the weekends and go to the pastoral place where we can reflect... we can rest... we can enjoy life.

David Brooks in his book, *Bobos in Paradise*, talks about the pattern in America of an entire generation of people he calls the "bourgeoisie bohemian" (Bobo). Brooks says that Bobos are very intensely committed, educated and successful (and this room is full of Bobos). These well-educated, successful business people in government will seek places of seclusion that they can get away to and not have to deal with the intensity of everyday life. He points out the number of people who are buying ranches in Bozeman, Montana and Jackson, Wyoming. He also points out that the people who live there all the time note that, even though they desire a sense of serenity and security in those pastoral scenes, people tend to bring their busy lives with them. The irony is that there is no serenity of spirit for short-term investments on weekends and vacations in the mountains. Yes, it may help us to relax for a little while, but long-term deep trust in God is not about a fishing trip to a place where a river runs through it.

How God leads us into trust is by being trustworthy. By being slowly present in an abundant way. By being quietly still... by him being intentionally engaging and keep calling us to have a relationship... by being personally and relationally accessible and available. By touching us from the inside out; because if we believe that trust will move from the outside in, we will fail in our growth of trust. By discovering that God is with us along the way – in the darkest moments, in the darkest canyons... in the shadowy places... even in the face of enemies – God is there in the midst. By being kind and good in all circumstances, the repetition of life with God proves that we can trust God. Psalm 23 is about an intimate journey with God personally. Psalm 23 begins with the first-stage affirmation that: this doesn't happen unless you have a personal relationship with God. For our new members and our long-term members today, that is the essence of our statement:

I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I am committing my life to a personal, daily experience and relationship with God, who will walk with me no matter what.

It's a developing relationship so that we can have a growing confidence, because God has a proven track record to be trusted. Because the Lord takes the initiative to build the relationship, we have the freedom to enter into it.

The second stage of the relationship with God is, once the relationship is established and we walk with God, God takes us to some wonderful places. God takes us out on those green hills, near those quiet streams, so that we can take time out for reflection... for

listening... for learning. So that, in our learning, we can learn to walk after God in the right paths and make the right decisions.

There's a recent book written by Amy Hollingsworth about Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers is historically known as the person who created space and time for children... to be quiet, to be reflective, to take time to listen. Mr. Rogers' had an impact on a whole generation. At the beginning of the time in the "Neighborhood," there would be the symbol of a flashing yellow light, that would call the children to slow down... be cautious... take some time... relax... you don't have to be so hurried. One of Mr. Rogers' concerns was that children are too hurried, too driven by hyper-kinetic activity today and they needed to have a sense of peace and quiet. He also noted that, often in those programs, it wasn't so much that children were watching, but the haggard parents who just were thankful for that half hour of peace and quiet, and they also let it slow down.

Mr. Rogers was invited to the 1992 graduation of Boston University; 5000 graduates out in the audience. He was going to be given his 25th honorary doctorate. He was announced as the one who would give the prayer of invocation, and he stood to give the prayer, and the students erupted in applause and cheers. Wave... after wave... after wave of standing ovations – the students would not let him offer his prayer. They were so positively struck by their experience of him over the years. Finally, in order to get their attention, he leaned into the microphone and kind of shyly said, "Would you like to sing with me?" And he invited them to sing, "It's a wonderful day in the Neighborhood." And here were 5,000 college graduates swaying in their red robes, joining hands in a peaceful sense of being led by their great shepherd, experiencing again that time of peace and quiet. We all need a 'wonderful time in the neighborhood.' We need those times when we can look back – where there was space to be who God created us to be... and space to listen to God... and space to enjoy the beauty that God has created.

God leads us to good places so that we can grow in our trust. But God doesn't leave us there. Some of us would like to believe that faith is all about God taking us up into a green hill and leaving us there so that we can enjoy life forever. But that's not what Psalm 23 says. God takes us to the good place to build depth and reflection, so that when we get down the hill and we start walking through the dark places... the difficult places... we can know that God is with us there. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death [the dark places], I will fear no evil, because I know God is with me." When God is with us in those dark places, there is a word that Jesus speaks over, and over, and over again; that God speaks in the Old Testament – and that is the word: "Do not be afraid." It's an irony because those are the moments when we are most terror-stricken. In almost every case, you can hear the person say, "I am afraid; I'm not sure I'm going to let go of it." And what God is saying is: Don't be afraid because I am with you; I will not leave you. I have proven myself in the good times; now I'm going to prove myself in the tough times. God is with us in the darkest places.

What are you afraid of today? What darkness haunts you today? What fear do you need to face? Because part of why God takes us into those dark places is to get us to face our fears... to name our fears... to finally look in the face of the things that frighten us. God is with you while you're looking; God is not going to let you avoid that. God is going to take you into the dark place and have you stay there until you face your fear.

The psalm doesn't end there. It takes us to another stage of trust development. Not only is God with us in the dark places, but often it gets worse before it gets better. Often we begin to be surrounded by adversaries – people who attack us and criticize us; people who are out for our demise. We are surrounded by our enemies. And this psalm says clearly: in the presence of my enemies, God prepares a table. A table – so God can feed us while we are surrounded and besieged by people who want to undo us. 'God, we would like to get out of here. Why are you taking the time to prepare a table? Can't you just get us out?' And you can almost hear the words of the psalm resonate, which is: 'No, I'm here to prepare a table before you in the presence of your enemies, because I'm going to teach you about trusting me while all hell is breaking loose and everybody wants you out.'

The psalm doesn't end there. The psalm, after the table has been prepared, takes us to a place where the person is looking back over their life. They've experienced the personal relationship. They've experienced the trust of God on the hills and the safe places. They've seen God be with them in the dark places. And they know that God can prepare good things in the midst of enemy attack. The psalmist ends by saying: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me." Because we have experienced God daily for months and years, we can look back and see that God has brought good things in the midst of all of that tough stuff.

And not only that, but God will bring us home. God brings us home daily. God will bring us home every week; God will bring us home on regular occasions. And that all leads us to finally assert that God will bring us home permanently – forever in eternity. It's only a person who's experienced that in daily life that can say it with conviction: for eternity. There's no magic potion here. There is no predetermination to help us avoid or deny the evil or the pain. This psalm says God is with us and God's going to take us right through the middle of the worst of it. Why? Because God's greatness and goodness and trustworthiness is proven most when things are most miserable.

I often have the opportunity to go to retirement communities, assisted living environments and lead worship among people who have come to the end of their life and are barely functioning. They barely function with their bodies or their minds. They often will be in the midst of a worship service with seeming total inactivity and inattention. But there are three things that I've noted over the years that almost everyone will respond to. One is the singing of hymns that they have grown to know and love; they wake up, they sing; you can see them moving the words. When we say The Lord's Prayer, they wake up and they say The Lord's Prayer. And the third is: Psalm 23. I've yet to see a person who is even in the most stoic stance, at the end of their life, not respond to the recognition of Psalm 23. Why is it? Because in their life they have experienced that these words are connected to the reality of a God you can trust; and even though they can't make sense of their life right now, at least they can grab hold to the words that have made sense to them in the past. And that is enough to give them a glimpse hope that God will take them home.

Jesus Christ is the Great Shepherd. Jesus literally lived this psalm and invited his disciples to follow him through this psalm. You are being invited to enter into a lifetime pattern of trust, through the good times and the bad times, and when the times get worse than you can possibly imagine. And God will take you home. That's Psalm 23, and that's what the Good Shepherd wants to do. To prove it, the Shepherd laid down his life for you and for me. Do you believe that the living God in Jesus Christ is your personal shepherd?

Amen.