



Praying Psalm 23:

Following the Shepherd of our Souls

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& the Spiritual Formation Ministries Team

Five Wednesdays, 7 to 9 pm, through October 7, 2009

Crystal Cathedral, Family Life Center 470

WEEK 1: The ____ is my Shepherd

"The LORD is my shepherd I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1)

September 2, 2009

Welcome to "Praying Psalm 23." We're so glad you've joined us so that we can encourage one another to follow Jesus, the Shepherd of our Souls.

Entering Into Psalm 23

When my teenage son David was a little boy of about a year-and-a-half old he started trying to be like his Daddy. He saw that everyday when I went to work I carried a bag with me (it was my lunch bag) and he decided that he needed a bag too! So he got his own little bag and in it he put his special comfort objects: His "me me" (pacifier), his "nee nee" (silk blanket), a box of raisins, and his favorite little car. I smiled as I watched him carry his little bag all around the house with such pride and happiness. With his bag in hand he was ready to face the world!

Do you have a bag like this? What would you put in it? I think we all need to carry a bag with a few special blessings from God that help us to step into his kingdom of heavens. I have a bag. And Psalm 23 is in it.

If Psalm 23 isn't in your special bag you'll want to put it in! For the next five weeks we'll be immersing ourselves in the 23rd Psalm and using it to help us grow in our apprenticeship to Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Together we'll be feeding on God's Word. You see Psalm 23 isn't just a beautiful poem full of soothing scenes and inspiring words. It isn't just a prayer to God for every season of our souls, every hurt or need we have...

It's REALITY! It's a doorway into real life with God. When you pray Psalm 23 you discover that you're not alone: Someone is already there waiting for you with arms open. It's Jesus, who prayed this Psalm and fulfilled it to prove that he is the Good Shepherd.

The 23rd Psalm is an exceptional example of Scripture being heavenly manna – real soul food – to sustain our lives and grow us to become more like Jesus. Whether we realize it or not we live off of God's Word and we will for eternity in heaven.

One way to discover that God's Word truly is a life-giving substance – when God speaks things are created! – is to fast from food for a period of time (could be a partial fast from solid food, certain foods or a reduced quantity of food – something that leaves you a little hungry, but make sure you're not overambitious!) and then, while hungry, meditate on Scriptures like: "The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want... I shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God... My food is to the will of the Father with Jesus" (Psalm 23:1, Matthew 4:4, John 4:34).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd

Jesus said...

¹"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:1-4, 9-11).

Psalm 23 begins with, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want..." Jesus is our Good Shepherd. But what does it really mean when we pray, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want"?

There was a Sunday School teacher who asked her group of children if anyone could quote the entire 23rd Psalm. A golden-haired, four-and-a-half-year-old girl was among those who raised their hands. A bit skeptical, the teacher asked if she could really quote the entire psalm. The little girl came to the front of the room, faced the class, made a perky little bow, and said: "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want."

Alcohol was Lisa's Shepherd

I want to tell you about Lisa (not her real name and identifying information has been changed). Lisa was raised by a Baptist pastor and for as long as she could remember she had believed that Jesus Christ was her Good Shepherd.

Church had always been her second home. In fact, as a 38-year old woman she was still going to the same church that she went to with her family as a girl! She was even teaching the same catechism classes in the same room that she had gone through 25-years ago! Obviously, her conservative Baptist Church hadn't changed much! (Except that her father had retired from the pastorate and, of course, some of the old stalwarts had gone on and younger people had taken their place.)

Lisa was a good Christian. She was also a good mother to her school-aged girls – except when she was drinking.

I met Lisa because her husband insisted that she talk with me. She was proud to share with me her church history and Bible knowledge. I could see that the theology of grace was very important to her. And it was obvious that she was a good catechism teacher who imparted faith in Christ to her students.

It was important to Lisa to have the right beliefs about God. But she enjoyed fine wine! When she talked about vintage wines her face lit up. She couldn't imagine a dinner party without wine! She loved to have her glass of wine to help her settle down and get to sleep at night, though she insisted that she could go without it. She knew that sometimes she drank too much and so she tried not to do this. She felt like things were under control. But her husband said he was leaving if she didn't change.

I assessed Lisa with an alcohol-screening test and it was clear that she had a significant dependence upon alcohol. Over time her alcohol intake had been increasing. She drank alone. She used wine to deal with her stress. There were conflicts in her family because of her drinking. And she didn't think she had a problem. ("Da Nile" isn't just a river in Egypt!)

Because of wine Lisa's life was out of control. But it wasn't until she got a DUI shortly after beginning treatment that she admitted that she had a problem.

I helped Lisa to see that even though Jesus was her Shepherd in her doctrinal beliefs, wine was actually the shepherd of her heart beliefs. She was trying to live for Jesus and wine. She turned to Jesus in church and in other "religious" situations, but in everyday life she relied on alcohol, not Jesus.

- She turned to wine when she wanted to loosen up and have fun
- When she was bored she looked forward to her next drink
- In her free time she enjoyed reading about wines and became an expert on them
- She visited vineyards for her vacations
- She went to wine tastings whenever she could
- She always had a glass of wine to help her socialize without being self-conscious

Perhaps you relate to Lisa's struggle or you know someone like her? Maybe the problem isn't with alcohol. All compulsive behavior problems work in a similar way.

What do you rely on emotional for your sense of well-being? What lifts your spirits? Comforts you when you're discouraged? Keeps you company when you're lonely?

- Food
- Caffeine
- Television
- Shopping
- Accomplishing things
- Adrenaline
- Pleasing people
- Trying (feeling compelled) to "fix" people
- Anger

Don't misunderstand me. For instance, I'm not saying that it's bad to watch television! You could watch a show with Jesus! But if you are more interested in your favorite show or sports team than meditating on the words of Jesus what does that mean?

The core problem here is: relying on someone or something else besides Jesus for shepherding. False shepherds (the "thieves" that Jesus was referring to) lead us into emotional dependency and eventually addiction, depression, or anxiety.

If you wanted to make Jesus the actual Shepherd of how you live your daily life how would you do that? What do you need to do in order to learn to become the kind of person who depends emotionally on Jesus, not _____?

How Lisa was Transformed

Vision. Lisa discovered that the Gospel is a Good News story that she could participate in by becoming Jesus' apprentice in daily life. She was inspired by the hope that David's prayer could be true in her experience (and not just her intellectual belief), "Your love, O Lord, is better than life" (Psalm 63:3), or, translated for her, "Your love, O Lord, is better than wine." So she asked God to heal her broken, nonfunctional life and write a new storyline for her.

Intention. Of course, Lisa had to wrestle with whether or not she really want to give up wine, whether or not Jesus was really enough for her. Did she want to become the kind of woman who looks to Jesus to meet all her needs? Did she want to pray throughout the day instead of sipping wine? It felt like a change like this would obliterate her personality! At first she held back.

I helped her to discover why she had made wine so central to her personality. She'd been using alcohol to deal with unwanted emotions like self-consciousness, boredom, loneliness, and anxiety. And she began to see how this was causing more problems like being emotionally removed from her family and friends (including her children who needed her), drinking more and more, missing work, waking up with headaches, and getting a DUI. Realizing that wine was a bad shepherd and that Jesus was a Good Shepherd helped her to turn her will and her life over to Jesus, her "Higher Power."

Means. Change doesn't just happen because you really, really want to change. It isn't enough to try hard. You have to train. It's like an exercise program. This is really what the "Come and Grow with Jesus" ministry at the Crystal Cathedral is about. We want to help people to train to be with Jesus in order to become like him.

Because Lisa's problem was server she needed substantial help in order to heal and change....

- She got in counseling with me and learned to feel her emotions and verbalize them to me, asking me to understand and care for her. She learned to "talk out" her emotions instead of "acting out" by drinking. She overcame the shame she felt over having emotions and needs. And she grew trust me as "Christ's Ambassador," depending on Christ's love for her through me (2 Corinthians 5:20).
- She joined an Alcoholics Anonymous group and practiced the 12 Steps of Recovery which included things like admitting to the unmanageability of her life with wine in it, taking inventory of her moral faults, asking the forgiveness of her family members and others that she wounded because of her irresponsible behavior, being accountable to her group and her sponsor, and being encouraged by group members who shared their experience, strength, and hope.

Lisa also needed to learn how to utilize a variety of spiritual disciplines or prayer practices to help her learn to rely on Jesus as her Good Shepherd and not wine. These were "means of grace" for her...

Here are some disciplines (in addition to the ones imbedded in her therapy and her AA program) that helped Lisa...

- Each morning she focused on praising God for specific characteristics about him that she admired.
- She memorized and meditated on Psalm 23 in mini-solitude spaces during her day like driving to work, cleaning house, and in the evening. She filled her mind with Psalm 23 and let its healing images and transforming wisdom seep down into her soul.
- About twice per month she fasted from food for up to 24-hours, but drank plenty of water. And I taught her when she felt physically hungry during a fast to pray along these lines: "O Jesus, it's you and your love that I'm longing for, not food or wine. Your love is better than wine"
- She formed a new habit of her heart that whenever she was tempted to drink instead of indulging the thought or desire she'd breathe over and over: "Jesus... Your love is better than wine." Or "Jesus delights in me... I delight in you, my Lord."

I coached Lisa using this VIM Plan for a little over one year and Christ transformed her character! She no longer thought wine was good for her. She didn't feel like she was "missing out" when she saw other people drinking. She didn't want to use alcohol to manage her life – and she didn't. Jesus was now the Shepherd of her soul and he was enough for her!

Apprentice Training: Memorize Psalm 23

To help us grow in our apprenticeship to Jesus I ask you to join me over the next five weeks in a Psalm 23 training program. Will you do some daily spiritual exercises with me? It'll be fun! And it'll help you tremendously.

Starting any training program is hard at first. But with practice it becomes easy – even delightful. I enjoy running 13 miles up in the hills while I pray and meditate. It's not hard for me because I've practiced and worked up to it over time. I don't think you want to try that!

For your training this week I want to ask you to memorize Psalm 23. Now don't say this is too hard! My daughter memorized it when she was nine years old! Your memory is like a muscle. If you exercise it then it will gain strength! Just start with one verse and add another.

You will find it especially helpful to memorize Psalm 23 if you do it for the purpose of growing in your apprenticeship to Jesus in a particular area of your life, one that you're committed to working on with Jesus over some months. For Lisa this was overcoming her addiction to alcohol. For you it might be trusting your Heavenly Father's love instead of worrying. Or it might be becoming the kind of person who by God's grace learns naturally to bless those who curse you. This is the way to life transformation that leads to effective witness for Jesus! The great monk Thomas a Kempis in 1486 said, "If each year we would just seek to eliminate one fault we'd soon become perfect" (The Imitation of Christ).

To memorize this Psalm will do wonders for you. It's an incredible summary of life in the kingdom of the heavens, life as a disciple of Jesus. In Psalm 23 our Good Shepherd teaches us deep truths and leads us through all the challenges and issues of our lives. We'll be discussing this in the weeks ahead.

Committing an especially powerful passage of the Bible is an indispensable practice for disciples of Jesus. It's good to memorize favorite verses, but to commit a whole passage to memory has far greater effect! You get into the whole flow of God's life!

Memorizing Scripture will automatically lead you into meditation. Because to memorize something you need to visualize it, understand it's meaning, and keep going over and over the words in your mind.

Once you've memorized it you can meditate on it morning, noon, and night. If you can't sleep, don't count sheep, talk to the Shepherd by meditating on Psalm 23! Let the healing images and soothing scenes wash your mind... Become like a cow chewing its cud and keep turning over God's Word in your mind... Let certain insights lead you into praying about challenges your facing or things the Lord is teaching you... Become as a lamb in Jesus' arms or walking beside your shepherd as you go through your daily life...

This won't take a lot of your time. If you haven't memorized Psalm 23 it could take you an hour or two to memorize it. But once you've got it in your mind you can pray through it in just a few minutes. It's best to do this in a quiet space, but you can also do this as you're laying in bed, brushing your teeth, driving your car, walking, or waiting in line.

To help us participate in Psalm 23 we're going to chant it together. Which in turn will help us to memorize it!

Some time ago the Lord challenged me to begin singing some of my favorite Psalms by making up my own tune. Everyday I sing at least one Psalm. This has helped me greatly! Singing out a Psalm to the Lord while showering or walking out and about has lifted my spirits and lightened my burden. No doubt I need lots more spirit-lifting and burden-lightening! But I'm on my way.