



Praying Psalm 23:

Following the Shepherd of our Souls

Led by Bill Gaultiere

& the Spiritual Formation Ministries Team

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

Crystal Cathedral, Family Life Center 470

WEEK 3: Take Jesus' Hand and Follow Him

"He restores my soul. He guides me..." (Psalm 23:3)

September 23, 2009

Psalm 23 begins in a winter season with Good Shepherd at his home ranch. Don't think of winter as cold, windy, icy, and snowy like it can be in Chicago where I grew up. Think of a winter in Israel: cool and quiet, a welcome relief from a hot desert summer full of activity.

"The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want"... We see our Good Shepherd standing tall with his staff. We see his smile. He is so strong and good and kind. He cares for us at his ranch. We thank him and praise him.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters"... The grass is lush green and the waters are refreshing at the home ranch. The Shepherd of our souls teaches us to trust him and to rest in his grace.

And so last week we talked about the importance of learning to "be still with Jesus" in his green pastures, beside his still waters.

I hope that you tried this in your "weekly experiment." It's hard to make much progress in our apprenticeship to Jesus if we don't learn to slow down our pace, calm down our ambitions and anxieties, and tune into God's presence.

If you read the e-mail I sent you I suggested a few ways that we can practice resting in Jesus...

- Breathe a prayer like, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want"
- Meditate on (or sing!) Psalm 23
- Intentionally slow down as you drive or walk or talk
- Linger in bed in the morning to submit your day to God

- Set aside an hour or more to be quiet and alone with Jesus

I elaborated on these things in the article that's on our Crystal Cathedral website. You could e-mail this to a friend to help them participate in what we're doing.

Make a Personal Growth Plan

Growing to be more like Jesus doesn't just happen by trying harder. Remember, "Don't try – train," is the wise dictum for us as students of Jesus'. We need to apply our effort by developing an exercise program with Jesus.

Let me share with you my spiritual growth plan. It's a good illustration because it speaks to my struggle to learn to be still with Jesus in the green pastures and beside the still waters.

First, a word of caution... Don't take my growth plan as a prescription for you! You are a unique person. Jesus, your Good Shepherd, is your Coach. He knows you – your personality, your season of life, your strengths and weaknesses – and if you ask him he will guide you into a rhythm of life to help you grow.

And a rhythm of life is not a legalism! It's a rhythm for living. It's a life-giving approach to using a few means of grace for your personal spiritual growth in Christ.

I do hope that my example will help you to see that it'd be good for you to ask Jesus to show you *one* area that he wants to help you grow to be more like Jesus. (Note, the I said "one" issue to work on – one struggle to overcome with God's help or one Bible teaching to learn to obey from your heart by his grace.)

About a year-and-a-half ago Christ has said to me: "Bill, learn to rely on the Holy Spirit, not on your productivity."

At first, I thought, can I do this? Can I slow down and rely on the Holy Spirit? All my life I've been Type A, moving fast to get more done in less time.

Well, I'm in process, but I'm learning, little-by-little.

Here are some ways I'm training to set aside my hurry and worry, my ambitions and agendas so that I can "be still with Jesus", to enjoy him, talk to him, and listen to him...

- Put on my seat belt and pray before I drive! (I know this is a little thing, but it's these routine small changes that help us over time to make big shifts in our attitude and approach to life.) I used to start my car and get going and then I'd put my seatbelt on. Now I pause to say a prayer. Take a breath. Sometimes I even wait for 30 seconds or so before I start driving.
- Pray the Psalms. Every day I pray from the Psalms. I go through all 150 Psalms every two months. I'm learning the ancient prayers and praying them with Jesus. I keep returning to these simple prayers and going deeper.
- Submit my ministry to a group of elders. I have a lifelong problem with doing too much and doing it on my own. It's not only a problem; it's also my independent personality and gifting as a creative thinker. But I need to remind myself to live and minister in community. And I need the wisdom and feedback of others. So once a month I meet with a group of people and one of the main things we do is look at Bill's schedule to help him say no!
- Keep a weekly Sabbath. This is a day where I don't work. I get alone with Jesus to meditate and pray. Often I go hiking. Sometimes I sit by the lake near my home. Sometimes I stay in the prayer room in

our house and I kneel at the altar or get flat on my face before God. Usually I do this for a few hours. And then I do some journaling and other writing.

It's Springtime in Psalm 23!

"He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness."

Now we're in the springtime of Psalm 23! New life is budding and blossoming and birds are singing their love songs! God is restoring our souls and guiding us on a new path.

What does it mean that our Shepherd restores our souls? When a sheep falls down it can get stuck on its back.

Picture a sheep fallen down on his back... Its body is so round, so fat and plump, and its legs so short and stubby. He flails his little arms and legs and cries out for help.

It's a scary scene actually. The vultures swirl overhead ready to attack and devour the sheep as soon as it stops flailing and screaming wildly. But the Shepherd looks for his lost sheep and puts it back on its feet again.

"He restores my soul" means that God in his mercy puts us back on our feet! He forgives our sins and heals our brokenness. What a blessing! What a Good Shepherd we have!

Then we come to, "He guides me in paths of righteousness." I come to a fork in the road and he leads me onto the good path. We're going to focus on this for the rest of our teaching time.

How does this work? How do we know what is the right path to take? What is our part in following the Lord's direction for us? Let me offer some of my thoughts and then I'll share a personal example...

As I said last week, the order of the verses in Psalm 23 is very important. The best way to discern God's path is to...

- Give thanks and praise to our Good Shepherd, to live by the prayer, "The Lord is my Shepherd – he's all that I want."
- Learn how to lie down in his green pastures, beside his still waters. We hear God's voice best when we're focused on him and we've quieted ourselves. It's hard to hear God's guidance when you're busy and stressed – you need to slow down.

Implicit in this counsel from our Good Shepherd is that, to discern God's will, we need to study his Word and apply it to our lives. We need to learn how to put Jesus' teachings into practice. Learning to obey Jesus from our hearts, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, is essential, not only for discernment, but for all of life.

Probably you also know that God guides us in his will through wise counselors and also through circumstances, particularly as we submit situations and outcomes to him.

You may also know that God guides us through the desires of our hearts, by his peace and consolation. But this is risky. We all have good and bad desires. We need to attune our hearts to God's revelation. (Remember, in Biblical language the heart is deeper and larger than feelings and emotions – it's our will, our spirit at the center of our being.)

And I hope you know that God still speaks today. We can learn to listen to his voice. For many years I've been practicing listening prayer. Sometimes – usually when I'm not expecting it – I sense that God is speaking to me

and so I listen to the thoughts that start forming in my mind and I write down what I'm hearing. I turn off the editor in me that might say, "Bill, how do you know that God is saying that? Maybe it's just your own thoughts."

Obviously, this is risky too. But after I've written down my understanding of God's message to me then I compare it with what I know to be true of God's counsel (the Scriptures) and I seek feedback from godly people I trust.

Discerning God's Will

The most helpful counsel I've received on discerning God's will comes from Ignatius of Loyola who lived in the 16th Century. He started the monastic order called the Jesuits. I'd like to share with you the gist of his "Rules for Discernment"...

Ignatius teaches us that the best way to discern God's will is to become emotionally neutral, to become like a pointer in a balance waiting to be moved by God's Spirit. Be like a weathervane ready to be moved by the breeze to point in a particular direction.

This means dying to self. It means laying down on God's altar what we want and preparing ourselves that it may be best to go the opposite way from what we want. We empty ourselves of ambitions, agendas, hoped-for blessings or influence, and we pray from our hearts, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Or God taught me a simple prayer of submission that I use often: "Lord, your will, your way, your time."

The idea here is that, in matters of discernment, we want to become "passionately indifferent." We need to be passionate about becoming indifferent to which course God leads us to take, and okay with whatever direction he guides or whatever outcome he ordains. We want to be passionately indifferent about all things except knowing and following Jesus Christ!

And the more we are neutral, the better we can distinguish between what Ignatius refers to as the "good angel" and the "bad angel," God's good path for us versus Satan's deception.

God gently draws and encourages us on the good path he has for us. God's way is winsome and it brings inner peace (note that I said "inner" peace because the circumstances surrounding God's will may be difficult and conflictual). Along with a quiet peace, God's guidance brings us an inward joy.

Satan pushes us and condemns us to get us going in a bad direction. He'll use lies to make it sound appealing, but it leaves us confused and restless, even hopeless or apathetic.

Now, one thing that's tricky is that, if you're not following Christ, if you've been stubborn or selfish, God may have to get your attention in the opposite way – not with gentleness, but by shaking you up.

And when you're walking away from God, Satan is the one who will be nice to you and make you feel good!

Prayer Practice / Weekly Experiment: Breath Prayer

Last week I briefly introduced you to Breath Prayers as a type of Centering Prayer. It's an ancient way to pray. Once you learn it, it is delightful, peaceful, grounding, simplifying. It helps us, little by little, learn to be still with Jesus, which in turn, helps us to discern God's guidance in our life situations.

Offering a Breath Prayer can be a way of meditating on a short phrase of Scripture. And it's a way to let your breathing become praying to God.

Let's do this with Psalm 23:1: "The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want." Try this for your weekly experiment with God. It'll be fun to share with our friends what we discover!

"The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want."

Let's set the scene... Picture being with the Shepherd in his green pastures, beside his still waters... Feel the soft, green grass... Imagine sitting beside a quiet stream or a very still lake...

Let your breathing become a prayer by seeking to breathe in and out God's Spirit which like the air is all around us and within us... Breathe in deep... Hold your breathe... Exhale... Continue...

Breathe in God's Word: "The Lord is my Shepherd..." Hold the Word in your heart... Release your worries, "I shall not want..." Continue...

Now consider a decision that you need to make... Or a struggle you're not sure how to handle... Just name it to the Lord... Lay it down and follow Jesus over to the still waters...

Breathe your prayer: "The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want..."

Become neutral about whether you decide to go right or left, say yes or no... Set your heart on one thing: "The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want..."