



Dr. James C. Howell
Psalm 23
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He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. It's not paved over places and it's not polluted water. It's interesting, isn't it. On Earth Day this week, there's a growing attentiveness to this, a growing concern about the environment. Our church's strategic plan even has a plank that "We Shall Be Green." I'm struck by this. We couldn't have gotten that done in a church 10 or 15 years ago. It's perceived as being too liberal, too liberal. But we're learning that the world matters. And it certainly is a theological phrase. In Bible times, people lived in a world that was not paved over yet. When they went outside and looked around, they saw what God had made. They saw it as the theater of God's glory that had a kind of reverence for the earth. They knew their dependence upon it. When they saw the beauty of the earth, they saw a mirror reflection of the beauty of God's heart – green pastures.

The 23rd Psalm – Dee and I were talking before we came in – it's an old, familiar Psalm. Some people don't know any other part of scripture but they know the 23rd Psalm. They recall it being read at certain important moments, especially at funerals. When we have funerals here, whereas you print the words in the bulletin – this is always amazing to me – we print the words in the bulletin so that we can say the 23rd Psalm together, but people do not look down into the bulletin. They look up. They like to look up, some with their eyes closed when they say *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.* It's old, it's familiar. It's like an old photo. We have in the insert of the bulletin, the kind of before-and-after photos (of high school seniors). We're actually going to do this to you guys next Sunday. We're going to have before-and-after photos. I don't know about you – my before photos always look better than the after photos. In fact, my favorite photo of myself was taken when I was probably 18 months old or so. It was taken in the little town of Oakboro, North Carolina. That's up in Stanly County. In this photo, I'm on the front porch of my grandparent's home and I'm sitting on the knee of my grandfather, Papa Howell. I'm kind of turned toward him. He's got his arm holding me there on his lap. I don't think there will ever be a better shot taken of me. It's old – it's odd to think about what's old in a world that is so obsessed with what is new. I try to keep up with things that are new but I'm not always so good at it. I'm going next month to Nashville to give a lecture on preaching, and the host called me the other day and said he wanted me as part of this he wanted me to "tweet" or "twitter" – I don't know which is the verb and which is the noun. I protested that "I don't really know what tweeting and twittering is" and he tried to explain it to me and I said, "I don't see the value of this." He said "Well, you have to think, like when you're at the airport or when you check into your hotel you can tweet or twitter" – I forget – "and tell us what you're thinking." I thought, "I'm going to be thinking, Where is Starbucks?" That's some of our profound thoughts all the time. It's new, we like what is new.

The next service we're going to send off these high school seniors. It's a day of new beginnings. Let me suggest that we make a new beginning. When we think about what is new, what we really need is old. We need to be tethered to something. We need some anchor. We need some mooring. Our only hope really is not in what is new but in what is old, what has

withstood the test of time. Psalm 23 is very old indeed and as often as we have said it, sometimes we don't recognize that it was originally written by somebody. The best way I can describe what happened to that somebody is he had been through it – I love that phrase – he had been through it. If I asked you to raise your hands if you had ever been through it you'd probably raise your hand and the question then would be, "What is the it, what is the it that you've been through?" Each one is unique. Each one is confused. Each one is painful. You've been through it. The psalmist had been through it and after having been through it he is still tethered and he can say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

It's fascinating – somebody went off and counted the number of Hebrew words in the 23rd Psalm. I would never get around to doing something like that if I had a lifetime. Somebody did that. It has exactly 53 words and the very middle word, the 27th word, 26 before and 26 after, is the Hebrew word – it's just a three-letter word in Hebrew... We translate it in English by either a three-letter or a four-letter word... I think for most of us, we are more attached to the four-letter word translation of it which is thou – thou – or Thou art with me. It's fascinating to me that we love modern translations of the Bible, but I can never talk people into a modern translation of the 23rd Psalm. There's something in us that wants to cling to "for thou art with me."

The King James Version will be 400 years old next year. Why do we cling to old language? Is it because it's familiar and there's so little that's familiar in our world? Is it that we live in a world where language is so debased, where language is so cheap?

I'm going to be on a panel next week at Myers Park High School and what we're going to talk about is the meaning of words. Because people do not any longer believe that words matter. So we've got kids at Myers Park High School using the N word and the F word and the S word, using all these words. But they just say, "It doesn't matter, it's just words, just words." We live in a little world where words are cheap or words don't matter. They don't carry any freight. But maybe we have some dim recollection that words do matter. Maybe we remember that when they said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me" we realize that words have, in fact, hurt us, wounded us more deeply even than sticks and stones. Words matter. Maybe when we speak to God, we need not just the cheap words that we always use for everything else. We need some special word. We need some elevated language, a word with some lineage, with some dignity. So instead of saying to God "You," which God would welcome, we want to go higher, we want to capture in our word the grandeur of God and so we say, "Thou, thou, thou, thou." It's the very center of the Psalm and it's the very center of the universe. It is the axis around which everything else turns. It is the very heartbeat of our existence, "For Thou art – the other important word - with me." God is with us. Thou art – what could be more comforting than that?

We live our lives and you may have a thousand friends and go to lots of parties and rub elbows with all kinds of people, but somewhere in there is some kind of loneliness, and the Psalm wishes to cure this by saying "For Thou art with me, Thou art with me." We're not alone.

John Wesley's dying words were this: "The best of all is God is with us, God is with us." This God is amazing. This God at the beginning of the Psalm is spoken of in the third person, *The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down* – and so on, but at that turning point, that

middle word of the Psalm, it shifts from third person to second person. Instead of talking about God, we turn and we address God. We speak to God.

I see Amanda in the choir – a couple of years ago, she sang a song here called "Dove's Eyes" and I love the lyrics of "Dove's Eyes." A woman speaks to God and says, "I don't want to talk about you like you're not in the room. I want to look right at you. I want to sing right to you."

We do a lot of talking about God, but God doesn't want to be talked about. God wants us to speak to God. God is listening. God is open. God is ready to gather us in and have us share, speak, cry, rejoice, ask, whatever it is that we need to do in this speaking to God.

Well, if God is with us and if we can speak to God – I just have a couple more things to say about the Psalm and then I'll be done. If God is with us and if we can speak to God, then there's a logical conclusion to all of this and it's spoken in the Psalm: *I shall not want*. How lovely would that be, to be in a position that we could say "I shall not want." It's what we're schooled to do in our society, to want all the time. Our whole life is about wanting. Our whole life is about accumulating – "I shall want, I shall want and whatever I get, I shall continue to want. I shall want to do things at all times."

I read a book a few years ago and I laughed out loud when I read it because the author described what I had just been through myself. He was talking about freedom of choice and how it kind of creates a lot of stress and actually doesn't deliver the good life that we hope it will. We have so many choices and we think this is a great thing, and the instance that he described is he had gone to buy jeans and when I read the book I had just gone to buy jeans. He thought he just needed jeans; I thought I just needed jeans. But I went into the Levi store and had the same experience that he did. A teen-age girl came to help me and she asked what kind of jeans and what kind of stress level. I didn't like that word "stress level" in the jeans. I wear jeans trying not to have stress. Then she asked what fit did I need and I thought "I just want jeans." She said "Well, there's a slim fit" and I knew that wasn't the one for me. She said there was a loose fit and that seemed like admitting too much. Then she said there was a relaxed fit. I said "That's the one for me."

These choices, choices, we have so many – we want, we want. The Psalm actually is translated – it's not "I shall not want." The Hebrew original says "I shall lack nothing." Imagine getting to that point in life that you can say "I lack nothing." It doesn't mean that you own everything. It means you have a different disposition inside. You have somehow been healed. You have somehow been converted. It's not that I finally now have enough stuff. It's that I've changed. I lack nothing. We seem to lack so many things. I lack an iPod, I lack a house at the beach, I lack my friend who died that I miss so very much. What do we lack? We're getting to have a long list of the things we lack, but Jesus has a conversation with a man in Luke, Chapter 18, a man who is very religious, who owns a lot of things, and Jesus says, "Well, you lack one thing." It's always that way with Jesus. It's not that we lack a bunch of things. There's just one thing that we lack. There's just one thing that we need and what happens, we get tripped up in life.

The folk singer, David Wilcox, has a great song where he imagines that we go through life and we miss the one thing. He says like you go in the store to get the one thing but they've got Blue Light specials and stuff in the aisles with big signs on them and you start grabbing all that stuff and you leave and you check out and you've got all this junk and you didn't get the one thing that you came in the store to get. Or he says sometimes he's going somewhere and somebody gives him directions and they say, "You can't miss it" and he says, "That's the kiss of death" because you can miss it. You might miss it. You can get all this junk but you missed the one thing. There's just one thing that we need, and what is that one thing? Psalm 23 says it perfectly, *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It kind of calms you down if you think about it, doesn't it? I think I need all this other stuff. I look around and think I might just grab 17 more things or have 28 more experiences. These seniors, we're going to send them out and I know they're thinking "Oh, there's so much, so much. I have to get my arms around so much." But that's not really right. It's just grabbing the junk from the Blue Light specials and you miss the one thing. The one thing is to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It takes me back to that photo of me on my grandfather's lap. You see, a part of what I love about that photo, it's not that I'm a little kid and I'm irresistibly cute in the photo and it's not just that my grandfather is there and he was a fantastically wonderful man that I still miss. To me that photo is an image of home. I was home there. We all have the yearning for home. We move all over the place. We redecorate our house. We do all kinds of stuff trying to feel at home. Our home is with God. Our home is with the Lord and no place else, no place else really will do. The Lord is our home. And what this Psalm invites us to do is what I did right before somebody snapped that photo. I either climbed up or was pulled up into my grandfather's lap and somebody captured the moment. I would give everything that I owned to go back to that moment.

How should we say it, God invites us to climb up onto God's lap, be held, with tender embrace, strong, secure, full of love, tenderness. Our home is with God who is our shepherd, and if we can figure out that that's where we belong, then we will lack nothing. Whenever we go through it, we will be OK because the Lord is with us. Not the Lord that we just talk about, the one that we speak to, the Thou, oh Lord, you are with me, you are with me.

Thanks be to God.