

Greener Pastures

By Michael Clark

I never knew that picking up my cross and following Him could make one so dead! Overnight I had become an off-scouring to both saint and sinner alike.

When I got saved, like many of you, it was all "He makes me to lie down in green pastures... He leads me beside still waters... He restores my (devastated) soul." I was on a spiritual honeymoon with Jesus that lasted for months in which He never left my side. It was wonderfully beyond description! I wanted everyone to know Jesus the way I did. As a result I was rejected by my old crowd as I enthusiastically shared my Jesus with them, but what the hey! I still had my best friend, Jesus and that was all that mattered!

Well, little did I know that the way ahead was not always going to be so pleasant. What seemed to be "greener pastures" did not last. Can you relate? With Psalm 23 in mind as a time line and a pattern for spiritual growth, what lie ahead? Let's consider what David saw when he was inspired to write this psalm.

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever. (Psalms 23:1-6, NKJV)

Now what was next in my spiritual walk? I had been experiencing Jesus as my Shepherd. He had been supplying all my worldly needs. In that first year I worked full time with a street ministry without pay and at the end we were not only not bankrupt, but we were totally debt free. Even our house and car were paid off. There were plenty of green pastures and still waters. He had restored my soul. I was born again! But what was this next part about? "He leads me in the paths of

righteousness For His name's sake." What could that mean? What are paths of righteousness? What is His name's sake? There is a proverb that says, "A man make his plans, but God establishes his path." It would seem that we deal with a God that says, "It is my way or the highway!" I had all these great visions of who I was going to be as a member of the Body of Christ. Visions of Billy Graham, Art Katz, A. W. Tozer, etc. In short, I just KNEW that I had a HIGH calling. I was going to be elevated up before my fellow believers one day for after all didn't a man's gift and calling make room for him and bring him before great men, right? ALL for His name's sake, of course! Like the young Joseph with his dreams and coat of many colors, I was a bit hard to live with.

Well, I was soon to find out that His path of righteousness for His name's sake was not my chosen path for MY name's sake. What a steep learning curve I was about to embark on... STRAIGHT DOWN! "Pride comes before a faaaaaaaaaaaaaall..."

David's psalm continues, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Valley? Shadow of DEATH? What is going on here, Lord? God I am dying! "Don't you care that I perish?" What a deep valley it was. I fell for what seemed forever. His shadow of death was cast over all that I was and ever hoped to be. All was lost. My prophetic ministry dried up over night. Our home church folded. The gifts of the Spirit went flat. My prayer life was as if I was encased in a block of brass. My friends turned on me, even dear brothers in Christ that I had walked with for years. Church meetings became a time of terrible pain while others rejoiced in the presence of the Lord and I sat there like a corpse, flat lined. Next I lost my job. We had gotten back in debt, and the local banker-wolf was at our door and we were looking at losing all our material blessings as well. In short, it was all going to hell in a hand basket and nothing I could do would turn things around again.

I never knew that picking up my cross and following Him could make one so dead! Overnight I had become an off-scouring to both saint and sinner alike. He even isolated me from my own wife and kids for a season and sent me to a literal wilderness on a remote island in the Aleutian Chain of Alaska. There at one point I was so depressed that I was about to go catatonic. I whimpered a prayer, "Jesus, I know that you do not want to hear from me, but all I ask is that you keep my mind and body together until I can get off of this rock and back to my family." Well, that

prayer He heard. That was the bottom of my "valley of the shadow of death." Let me tell you, when you are in the shadow of the Almighty it is a VERY DARK place and there is not a thing you can do to reverse it or make it go away. You are there for one reason--to die and have everything in you that will not submit to His Spirit die-- it is to be so weaken that your will and soul nature only seek "His paths of righteousness," no matter what the cost.

I tried everything in the world to get out of that shadow. I confessed every sin that I could think of past, present and future! I went to everyone that I might have offended and asked their forgiveness. I tithed. I fasted. I cried out. You name it, I did it. But God was not going to let me up until I finally quit striving against my Maker and submitted to His valley, His cross, and hung there like a piece of butchered meat waiting passively to be carved up and put into the freezer.

So, dear saint, if you made it this far in my story, you are probably asking by now, "So where is the God that said that He will never leave us?" As Jesus hung there on that cross in Jerusalem, He cried out the same words that David did a thousand years earlier, "[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?](#)" I can look back now and see that He was probably closer then as I hung there on my cross than He ever had been before. It was just that He removed all tangible evidence of His presence and that was the hardest test of all. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God.

Let's go back to our road map and time line, Psalm 23. "[...I will fear no evil.](#)" After you have survived a period when it seems that God Himself has become your enemy ([see Lamentations 2:1-9](#)), you find that in his worst acts of terror, man can not hold a candle to the terror of God. You now fear God above all else.

David continues, "[...For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.](#)" Yes, the Lord's presence in a perceivable way does come back, but it is not the same. Where once His rod and staff of correction made you cringe from the pain, "[for those whom He loves he rebukes and chastens, and scourges those who are His sons,](#)" now they are instruments of comfort because when they are applied to your back side you know that it is with His love.

"[You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...](#)" Oh boy! FOOD! At last I get to eat again! Maybe some meat will finally appear on these dry bones of

mine once again. What? My dinner table is surrounded by my enemies? What happened to the green pastures and still waters? Oh, there is no going back. I see Lord, "thy will be done" in my life "as it is in heaven." Yes, I DID pray that before that awful tumble into that valley of yours. Hmmm. Well, what the hey! It is spiritual food just the same and that is what I have been begging for, pure and undefiled by religious men. It is your table. It is your altar from which we may eat the Passover Lamb.

We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach (Hebrews 13:10-13, NKJV)

Yes, Lord, we leave all of Christendom behind inside their camps (the holiness camp, the faith camps, the fighting fundies camp, etc.) and willingly come out to meet you bearing your reproach, for here you have set a table for those who gladly leave and forsake all to follow you even to the death of the cross. We are those who overcome. Death means nothing "for it is appointed once to die and we have already died." All that can be shaken has been shaken. We are that company that has crossed the bridge to what appeared to be "greener pastures." What were once green to our perception on the one side of that valley are now crimson red on this side. Your "flesh is meat indeed" and your "blood is drink indeed."

"You anoint my head with oil, my cup runs over..." The Anointing! At last! But you mean it is not just for me? The anointing is for the Body? Wow! Make it so, Lord! David knew this anointing, didn't he, Lord? Anointing for the whole body.

Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* For brethren to dwell together in unity! *It is* like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments. *It is* like the dew of Herman, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing--Life forevermore. (Psalms 133:1-3, NKJV)

But what is the order that this corporate anointing comes? It is found in that company who have taken up their cross and followed Him through the valley of the

shadow of death. That company that feasts at the table set by Him in the presence of their enemies. Only there is there ONE heart, ONE mind, ONE spirit. It is all HIM, not of them. Unity! ONE in HIS Spirit, not their own. Oh the flow of precious oil! A river that flows out to bless others like the dew that falls upon the mountain tops, cascading down, filling the valleys, always going to the lowest places... to "the least of these HIS brethren," unto Him. This sacred oil does not seek out high places. It is humble like the One who has created it in His apothecary, always seeking the lowly in heart, the very hem of His garment, kissing His precious feet. For here He does "command a blessing..." Eternal life! Not pie in the sky by and by. NO! Here and now, eternal life. Life that was fore ordained by the Father from eternity past. "Life that is the life of men."

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever." Yes! In HIS eternal living, both now and forever more! Not my goodness, or my mercy, for I am bankrupt, but HIS! Now I leave a wake of His goodness and His mercy behind me as I walk His paths of righteousness. No longer do I leave a path of death and destruction as I minister in my flesh. My life has become His life. His life has become my life... life that is the light of men. I now dwell in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... the Father's house. At last! I am home! No more wandering, no more sorrow and pain. No more rejection. NOW in this life, His life, His house. I have surely crossed that bridge over the troubled waters of the valley of the shadow of death. I have embraced the cross, my cross. Amen. So be it, Lord. Whatever the cost, it is worth it.