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May 5, 2020

He makes me to lie down in green pastures,



He leads me beside the still waters.

Greetings Brothers and Sisters: Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome back to our fireside chats. We are entering a new phase in our life-changing journey with Covid 19 as the nation transitions into reopening the country. Perhaps this will uplift the spirits. But we are also entering into a period of increased risk of exposure to the virus, which perhaps lowers the spirits. Remaining in our homes remains as the most secure place we can be at this time, but we cannot live there forever without serious non-viral consequences. If you feel anxious these days, there is good reason for it. The immediate question is how to cope with it all.

Some may be cavalier about it, albeit foolishly I think, as they are already patronizing restaurants, beaches, and city parks without masks, gloves, or recommended social distancing. On the other extreme some have become sort of prisoners in their own homes nearly afraid to move. Still others are, as they say, stir crazy resulting in domestic disturbance, depression, and sometimes suicide. Everyone else stands at varying degrees among this tri-cornered set of extremes. If the crisis would end this week, all would heave a sigh of relief and we would slide swiftly into our old and comfortable habits, but this has little chance of happening. Considering all of this, where should our conversation go? What level of emotional state should be addressed? The best choice for the moment seems to me if not the worst states, at least reasonably troubled ones. Except for the blind and oblivious, I cannot imagine that at least from time to time we are all significantly troubled by the current state of the world.

In times of trouble Christians through the ages have turned to and taken comfort from the Psalms. Of all the Psalms none is more famous or used more often in times of distress than Psalm 23. The twenty-third Psalm is the only one I have memorized. For that matter it is the lengthiest passage of Scripture that I can quote; perhaps the only one of more than one verse. It is ideally suited for every age and every life challenge. Psalm 23 appears as if it were written purposely for our current distress. But, a problem accompanies very familiar scriptures that were written in ancient times and used symbols and metaphors suitable for an unfamiliar culture. Consequently, they may not have the full heart and soul penetrating power as when they were written several millennia ago. For this fireside chat I would like to share some thoughts from the Twenty-third 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.

The opening lines immediately bring forth an image of peace, or at least they are supposed to. In challenging times we are not at peace. Even in an uneventful day we are troubled inside. One moment we may feel just fine, like any other day in our memory. The next moment something may draw our attention to the life-threatening virus; the loneliness of isolation; the awkwardness of doing simple things; the postponement of the things, both large and small, we used to enjoy but cannot do now; or the uncertain future. Possibly it comes across like a wave starting somewhere in the area that the King James Version calls the “bowels of compassion (1Jn. 3:17). Modern translations call this location “the heart.” The meaning is the seat of our emotions. This emotion of which I speak now is not pleasant. When experienced for the first time, it can be scary. One can think there is something more wrong than there is. Distress, anxiety, fear, and other such strong emotional experiences can produce profoundly disturbing physical effects. Thus, the psalmist tells us through the image of “green pastures,” literally, tender grasses, the shepherd is giving us ease in our bowels of compassion; that is, the seat of our emotions.

We may not experience the full strength of the blessing expressed by this image because we are not a sheep herding people. If we lived three thousand years ago raising sheep in an arid to semi-arid region, we could relate easily to the joy of moving sheep from one worn out pasture through an arid stretch into another fresh pasture of green grass. But this time of year gives us the greatest chance to gain a sense of the beauty and repose of green grass.

In the midst of our distresses God is supplying us with the opportunity to feel His calming, providential care if we but go outside and look at the green grass. Unfortunately, we need a sunny day to experience the full impact, but we do get one once in a while. When we have sunshine, be sure to go outside; go somewhere where you can see the fresh green. Reach down and touch it. Feel its coolness; its tenderness. If you are young enough and the day is warm enough, lay down in it. Breathe in, as it were, and sense the earth coming to life; of renewal; of providential blessing. See if it does not produce some sense of peace to the soul. Remember: The green pastures are a blessing from God and symbol of His providential care.

There is a knob directly behind our house from which we have a 360° view. Last Saturday was a beautiful 70° day with a cool breeze that did not shiver. The leaves of the trees were barely emerging, the skies were blue, the pastures lush, and the weeds had not yet made their presence

known. Our minds were transported to the Emerald Isle, oddly a place we have never seen it. The scene before us was glorious, the world seemed in order, and for that moment worries dissipated. Perhaps this was something like the green pastures about which David wrote.

Another symbol is the quiet waters or, literally, “waters of rest.” I hope everyone has experienced at some time the psychological benefits of water. Whether a bubbling brook that sings to the troubled mind, waves of the sea shore that can serenade to slumber, or a placid lake that silently shouts peace, quiet waters give rest to the soul. Perhaps the quiet waters are contrasted with the turbulent waters of stormy seas that threaten life; perhaps they are metaphors for peace to the soul that is roiling through nerve-racking days and sleepless nights; perhaps they are symbols of the peace that is found in the Lord; perhaps, and probably, all of these.

The sound of singing water is what inspired me to build a waterfall, a small stream, and a pond (several times over, I might add. It took a while to get it right... sort of right). But, when we can have the windows open or have the time to sit in the back (and the system actually works), the water calms the heart and brings peace to the soul. Somewhere around you, not far away, you can find some peaceful water. If you are really troubled and need relief, find yourself waters of rest. When you do, remember these waters are a gift from God. If you don't know where to look, let me know. I will help you find them.

The Good Shepherd not only provides the tender grass and the pleasant waters that bring hope for the future and peace to the troubled heart in this age, but He also provides the path to the ultimate pasture and calm waters of eternity. Follow the Shepherd and we can find it now and in the future.

Of course we can find “pastures of tender grass” and “waters of peace” only if we follow where the Shepherd leads. Maybe we can talk about that the next time. Until then,

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may His light shine upon you and grant you peace,

Love

Jim and Sharon