

Studies in Psalm 23

Psalm 23:3a

4.

Verse 3a *“He restores my soul”*

Introduction

1. It can sometimes be very difficult to know how to approach people with the Gospel. What should be our opening words? We do not want to put them off immediately, so how should we frame our words? One way is to ask them this question, *“Do you ever think about spiritual matters?”* This could prove to be the opening of a door for one to one evangelism.
2. *“Spiritual matters”*. This is the essence of the Christian message. There are many folk who are very busy with Church business. They are concerned about the building, the organisation, finances, structure, singing, time schedules and many other issues that permeate through Church life. But this is not the essence of Christianity. This is not essential Christianity.
3. Jesus had a conversation with a Samaritan woman. In their discussion she suddenly said, *“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship”* (John 4:20). This is the same kind of statement made today. People are so concerned about external practice, order, form, building etc. But what did Jesus reply, *“God is spirit, those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24). Jesus did away with this woman’s focus on the externals and drew her attention to the inward, the spirit. Christianity is not tied up with denominations, buildings and form. It is essentially spiritual. I am not suggesting that the building and its organisation is unimportant, but what I am suggesting is that we can so easily, like this Samaritan woman, think that the physical structure is what really matters. No, it is the spirit that matters.
4. With this in mind we now approach verse 3 in the Psalm. As we do so we must remind ourselves afresh that the over-riding emphasis in this Psalm is our spiritual needs. Whereas verse 2 spoke about God’s faithful provision of

our material and physical needs, from verses 3 - 6 that the writer concentrates on our spiritual needs.

5. He does this in at least in three ways addressing three individual, but essential, areas of our Christian lives. In verse 3 he speaks about sanctification; verse 4 speaks to us about our fear of death; verse 5 speaks to us about our battle with our spiritual enemies. Then, in verse 6 the writer summarises all that he has been saying with words of victory and triumph. Because Yahweh is our great Shepherd (King) it is with confidence that we can say that He will guide us through all the perplexing paths of life and eventually bring us into the glory of His “*temple*” where we will dwell for ever. This is why those very simple, yet most powerful words in verse 1b are so important for us, “*I shall not want*”. There will be no deficiency in our salvation. God will make sure that we come through in the end. Our confidence in knowing that we will finally succeed in our salvation is solely due to God’s own personal involvement in our lives.

There are three issues that we need to look at in verse 3.

1. **Our spiritual encouragement** “*He restores my soul*”.

- 1:1 First, let us define these words. In the first place the word “*soul*” (sometimes referred to as “*spirit*” as the bible uses these two words interchangeably) is probably not a good translation of the Hebrew. We tend to think that we humans are alone in possessing souls. In fact the animals were also created with souls. In Gen 1:20 the phrase “*living creatures*” has נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה (nephesh āyâ) which can be rendered literally, “*living souls*”. The same appears in Gen 1:4, 2:7 where man is said to become נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה (nephesh āyâ). Both man and beast have this נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה (nephesh āyâ) living souls.

- 1:2 In reality, then, the Hebrew word for “*soul*” which is “*nefeš*” ((nephesh), means the life of an individual person. It means “*a person; an individual; anyone*”. Then it goes on to mean “*the whole inner self with all the emotions, desires and personal characteristics that makes a human being unique*”. In

other words, the word “soul” just means “you”, “you as a person with all your characteristics”. You are not just a body, you are a “nefeš”, a person. So, Psalm 23a could read, “*He restores me*”, because you are your own soul.

- 1:3 I think this is an important concept. We must not separate the soul from the person. The person is the soul. When the bible says, “*The soul that sins shall die*”, it does not mean a separate part of you, it means the person, the individual, you yourself. So when the NT speaks about the soul in relation to salvation, it means the person themselves.
- 1:4 The second word in this part of the text that needs explaining is “restores”. It simply means “*restoration; the soul is returned; brought back; to turn*”. The Greek version has “*He turns my soul*”. The Greek word ἐπεστρεψεν (epestrepse) means “*to return to a point or area where one has been before*”. That is a very helpful rendering because the writer has in mind an action of God by which He brings the person back to where he or she was at the beginning; the relationship is restored.
- 1:5 Sometimes we use the term “*backsliding*”. It is a word coined by the AV translators and then used in the ESV in passages in the OT (Jer 3:6, Hosea 4:16 AV; Is 57:17, Jer 8:5 ESV). The Hebrew word שׁוּבָה (mishovah) means “*turning back; apostasy; defection*”. All the modern translations do not render the Hebrew as “*backsliding*” but “*apostasy*”. Today, however, it is a term applied to a person who claims to be a Christian but has drifted away from a life of godliness and spirituality, but who still claims to be a Christian. Perhaps after a while such a person returns to their original spiritual state.
- 1:6 Whatever term we use it does not really matter, but we know that from time to time we lose the edge of our Christian experience and realise that we have, as it were, entered a backslidden state. I suggest that as David writes these words he is thinking of his sinful episode with Bathsheba which resulted in adultery, deceit, lies and murder. It was for David a time of spiritual backsliding. When David poured out his heart in Psalm 51 he said, “*restore to me the joy of your salvation*” (vs 12). He uses the same Hebrew word in Psalm 23:3. So, in our Psalm he is reflecting back on that situation and

realising that God, in His grace and mercy, brought him back to the spiritual condition that he initially enjoyed.

1:7 From our own Christian experiences we all know of the incidents of temporary drifting away from our relationship with God. Sin intervenes; we succumb to temptation; the pull of the world becomes too strong for us and various material idols take the place of God. Our frequenting Sunday worship becomes less often; bible reading seems to have lost its attraction, and of course prayer has become non-existent apart from the occasional petition offered when in distress.

1:8 But then we have also known the experience of spiritual restoration. Something has broken into our spiritless hearts and minds through a sermon, or reading or conversation. We have come to our senses like the Prodigal son and made a determination to return to God. Thankfully we have known a spiritual restoration and we have been turned away from our sin, the world and temptation, and have regained our original spiritual standing in Christ. We could almost say that we have been re-converted.

2. **Our Encouragement – “He restores my soul”**

2:1 If we stop and think about our experience in the light of Psalm 23:3 we must say with David, “*He restores my soul*”. It is correct to say that we have to “work out our salvation” in terms of sanctification and spiritual restoration. But we must acknowledge that we do so because “*It is God who works within us*”. Ultimately it is God who restores us. We owe all the credit to Him. We bless Him for breaking into our stupid downward trend by bringing us back to repentance and establishing us back into the joy of Christ. “*He restores my soul*”.

2:2 I have wondered whether Peter in his first letter actually refers to this verse in Psalm 23 when he writes, “*For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*” (1 Pet 2:25). Here it seems that the verb “*returned*” is active and that the one responsible for this returning is the individual themselves. But in the Greek it is written in the passive (ἐπεστράφητε epestraphete) and this is clearly retained in the AV but not in the NKJV. I think it should read as it does in Psalm 23:3, “*For you were*

straying like sheep, but have now been returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls". Of course, it is difficult to determine whether Peter is thinking of his readers having drifted away from God but have subsequently been restored. The point that Peter is making is that it is God who has restored us to Himself. He took the initiative. He restored our souls.

2:3 A most significant truth that I think Psalm 23:3 brings out for us is that not only was our very conversion the result of God's active grace, but so is our spiritual preservation, our sanctification. God has not saved us only to leave us to our own devices. He is currently active in maintaining our spirituality. He will not allow His people to be lost in sin or the world. If we are still *"going on with God"*, it is due to His sustaining grace. Think of Peter's comment in his first letter chapter 1 and verse 4-5. He tells us that we have been born again into, *"an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time"*. These are the important words, *"kept by the power of God"*. Yes, we are spiritually vulnerable in this life, we are prey to the devil and his forces, the world and its temptation, and there are times when we will fall, but we will never completely fall away because we are constantly guarded by the power of this sovereign omnipotent God. He restores my soul.

2:4 Jesus taught the same principle when He said, *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand"*. It seems as if Jesus makes a bold statement in verse 28 but feels the need to strengthen His teaching in verse 29. He tells us that we *"will never perish and no one can snatch them out of my hand"*, then re-affirms this by adding, *"My Father who has given them to me is stronger than all and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand"*. God, who is responsible for our salvation is stronger than Satan; stronger than sin; stronger than the world. It is God who will not allow you to fall away completely. We can be certain of this – not because of our great personal spiritual strength and tenacity – but because of the power of God. God Himself will go on restoring your soul even though – and I say this with caution – you fall into the foulest of sins. He restores my soul.

- 2:5 Then we have the clear words of Jude 24, *“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy”*. There it is again. It is God who will *“keep us from stumbling...”*. He will ensure that we finally succeed in reaching glory. Notice the words *“Him who is able”*. It means *“Him who is powerful”*. God has the power. We are guarded by the power of God. Here is another reason why Paul was so proud of the Gospel, *“because it is the power of God unto salvation...”*. The Gospel has the power to save and the power to keep.
- 2:6 If we are still not convinced I bring you to Ephesians 5:25-27, *“.....Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish”*. Paul presents us with a picture of Christ and the Church which he illustrates by pointing to marriage. In this passage he spells out for us the quality of the love that Christ has for His Church. To Him, the Church is like a bride; it is so important to Him. Indeed, not only has Christ died for the Church, but He is working to fully sanctify her so that sometime in the future He will *“present the Church to Himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish”*. We will win; we will succeed in our salvation. Why? Because *“He restores my soul”*.
- 2:7 Can you see the argument? Christ is more interested in the success of the Church than you or I can ever be. To Him it is a bride. He has paid a high price for His bride through His death on the cross. We must never belittle the effectiveness of the cross by leaving it at the initial redemption from sin. Remember Paul’s words in 1 Cor 1:30 *“And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption”*. The death of Christ covers everything that is necessary to salvation. Each of these four words constitute our complete salvation.
- 2:8 The cross was the most momentous event ever accomplished by God and it dwarfs the creation. He is not going to loose her. The price, I say again, was a very high price. He became the substitute for the Church; and took on Himself the full weight of the wrath of God which was rightfully due to the Church; He paid the penalty for the sin of the Church. Therefore, in view of all this He will

make sure that the Church is not lost in the depths of sin and that she is finally “*presented*” in all the glory of her holiness. This means you and me. Christ has not only saved us, He is working in us to complete the work bringing it to a final and glorious conclusion. He will not lose His bride. Consequently, every time we slip away from Him he will “*restore my soul*”. He will bring us back. Look at the end of the verse in Psalm 23:6 “...for His name’s sake”. For whom is He doing this? It is for Himself; for His own glory; for His names sake.

2:9 Finally, we can add the words of Philippians 1:6, “*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*”. This is something of which Paul could say, “*I am sure*”, or “*I am persuaded*”. God will finish His work; it will be completed on that Day; we will succeed and we will not fail to enter glory.

2:10 How does God “*restore*” us? There are many and varied methods that God uses, but here are some suggestions.

2:11 In the first place I would suggest that God uses the conscience. What is the conscience? It is a part of our psychological make-up that provides a warning when some unethical or unspiritual behaviour is practiced or contemplated. In Romans 2:15 “*They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them*”, Paul shows that we all have a conscience that represents a kind of moral law written on the heart. Our conscience will either “*accuse*” or “*excuse*” our actions. When we are doing right the conscience lies dormant, it “*excuses*” our actions, but when we are doing wrong it “*accuses*”. In other words, the conscience only comes into active operation when we are doing wrong; it rings warning bells.

2:12 In the Christian the conscience is made more sensitive than in a non-Christian. God uses the conscience to awaken us to any backsliding. We become inwardly aware of our spiritual decline. It worries us until we make amends. God allows the conscience to trouble and distress us. We know what it means to have a “*bad conscience*”. This is one method God can use to restore us.

- 2:13 A second method is through the scriptures. It may be hearing a sermon; or reading our bibles in private, or even the remembrance of a verse of scripture. Something in the reading or sermon strikes us. Having read the scripture we make a resolution to improve our spiritual condition; to repent; to return to God. It is the scripture that God has used. It is for this reason that we should be in the habit of continually reading and understanding the scriptures. The Psalmist put it this way, *"I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you"* (Psalm 119:11). We need to nurture the habit of *"storing up the word"* of God in our hearts. At a time of hearing the Word we may think we do not need it, but at a later date it comes back to trouble, disturb and awaken us. Get as much of the Word of God as you can stored up in your mind.
- 2:14 A third method that God uses to restore us is through the action of the indwelling Spirit. Part of the Holy Spirit's task is to convict us of sin. Jesus said of the coming Holy Spirit, *"And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment"* (John 16:8). This does not merely relate to an initial experience of inner conviction of sin. The Spirit goes on with this task. When the Holy Spirit performs this work do not ignore Him. It is God working in you His process of restoration.
- 2:15 A fourth method used by God, and perhaps used only if the above methods prove to be ineffective due to our lack of response, is His chastising hand. This is taught in Hebrews 12:6 *"For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."* That this is His method in the realm of sanctification is proved to us in the following statement, *".... he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness"* (Heb 12:10).
- 2:16 I do not believe that it is always possible to identify this in practice. We cannot point to any experience with absolute authority and say that this is God punishing me. But it is a fact. In any case, we all know that when some misfortune afflicts us we turn to prayer. Sadly, sometimes it is only when we feel driven into a corner by unfavorable circumstances that we are forced to seek the face of God. This also is God's method of restoration. He does this because He loves us – like any parent who disciplines and punishes a child out of love.

2:17 Another method used by God is through the rebuke or warning of a trusted friend, or a Pastor. Just as Nathan came to David informing him of his sin with the words, "*You are the man*", so God may use the words of another person in his work of restoration. If this happens, sadly, we are apt to rise up in protest, but it might do us good if we quietly reflect on the kindly words of a trusted person.

3. The spiritual danger

3:1 Now, all this might be wonderful and encouraging information but it can also be dangerous. You might think that it does not really matter how much you sin and fall back into the world, you will be quite safe in the end because God will "*restore your soul*" and made sure you do not lose your salvation. I have known people who have quite boldly told me that that they are backslidden but that they are not thinking of getting right with God just yet, they will leave this for some unspecified time in the future. It is as if they are having a "*holiday from God*" and enjoying a time of sin.

3:2 This is highly dangerous. Whenever people came to me and said they were backslidden I always told them that I would treat them as if they had never been converted. Why? For this reason. A real genuine Christian, when he or she realises they are "*backslidden*", immediately cries out to God for restoration and uses all means possible to get re-instated spiritually. They do not boast of their backslidden state; they do not postpone the time when they will return to God; they do not procrastinate; they do not stay backslidden so that they may enjoy a time of sin. The moment they are convicted by the Holy Spirit they immediately make amends. This is what happened to David when Nathan the prophet uttered those memorable words, "*Thou art the man*", and David was convicted of his sin. There followed from David instant remorse, sorrow, grieving and a crying to God to "*restore the joy of your salvation*".

3:3 But let us view this issue from a different stand point. How do we know that we are Christian men and women? How do we know that we are part of the Kingdom of God and in the hand of God from which none can snatch us? What is the final evidence? It is that we hate sin and anything that spoils our relationship with God. Such a person does not dally with sin; play with sin; willingly giving in to the temptations of the world.

3:4 Imagine a very rich man who has advertised for a chauffeur to drive him around. His house is situated on a tall cliff set back from edge away from the sea. He has three likely candidates. He takes the first to look over the edge of the cliff and asks, *"If I was in the car how close to the edge would you go and at the same time keep me safe in the car?"* The man thought he could be very clever, so he said, *"I could take you within three metres of the edge of the cliff and you would be perfectly safe in your car"*. The second candidate decided that he could do better. *"I could take you within one metre of the edge of the cliff and still keep you safe in the car"*. The third man said something different. *"If you were in the car Sir, I would not go anywhere near the edge of the cliff; I would keep you as far away from the edge as possible"*. Which one of the three got the job? It was the third of course.

3:5 But what do we do in our folly? We think we can get so close to sin that we will never fall off the edge of the cliff. We have a false conception of our spiritual strength, feeling that we can watch anything on our computers or TVs; go into any kind of company; imitate our neighbours and fellow workers in their conduct; indulge in our use of alcohol may be to excess; enjoy pleasures like the world without falling over the edge into sin. Yet, the true genuine Christian, like the third man in the story, says to himself, *"With Jesus in my life, I will keep as far aware from the edge of sin as possible"*.

3:6 A genuine Christian will not presume on the restoring power of God. He or she will not put the Lord to the test. John has his way of putting it. He says, *"No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him... No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God"* (1 John 3:6,9). Very blunt words. Not the kind of words we like. But John is very stubborn. You cannot say you are a Christian whilst at the same time enjoying sin; making a habit of sin; giving in to sin; failing to fight against temptation and sin.

Conclusion

1. “*He restores my soul*”. Salvation is all of God! He who brought us into the kingdom keeps us in the kingdom. If it was not for His sustaining grace none of us would survive in this evil world. We have only Him to thank.
2. This, I believe, gives us confidence. When a person knows that their salvation is secure they feel strong and have a deep sense of security. God has committed Himself to see us through this life with all of its battles, pitfalls and struggles so that we successfully enter the glory He has prepared for us.
3. This is no more evident than in the words at the end of the verse, “*for His name’s sake*”. One could render the words, “*in order for His name*”. In other words, the ultimate reason why God “*restores my soul*”, is for His own benefit. He does it for Himself. The word “*name*” stands for God Himself. If God is therefore out to secure a people for Himself, for His own glory, then He is bound to succeed along with our final salvation. He will not allow His people to fail otherwise His own “*name*” would be dishonoured. This must be the final and absolute confirmation and assurance of our ultimate salvation.
4. But this must not create in us complacency. We must not presume upon His kindness. If we do then it might indicate that we were never converted in the first place. Our desire to persevere and the efforts that we make will be the evidence that we need to show that we genuinely are the people of God.
5. What of our position today? Are some here in a backslidden state? How long have you been aware of this? I need to warn you that if you do not approach this seriously and make every effort to return to the Shepherd of your soul, then to use the words of Jesus, “*you will die in your sins*” (John 8:21). This is serious. Do not say that you are backslidden unless you can also say that you are being restored.

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