

## END THE OLD YEAR WELL

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Every year about this time I like to take some time to think about life as one year wraps up and another is opened.

So I've been asking questions this week.

- What kind of year has it been for me?
- What kind of person am I becoming?
- What kind of leader am I developing into?
- Did I reach the goals I wanted to reach?

By asking questions like these every year, life seems to become more focused for me. One thing that always helps with focus is the Scriptures. I relish more and more the Word of God.

Psalm 23 is often read at funerals. I understand why...because when we grieve, we need to feel God's presence and Psalm 23 is full of the reality of God in our lives. I'm going to mention two principles. The first has to do with slowing down our bodies and our minds to evaluate what and how we think about God; the second has to do with remembering the year past to sharpen our emotional experience of God in our lives.

### 1. **Reflecting and resting: reinforcing confidence in God's power in our lives.**

Look at Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; He leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to His name." (vv. 1-3) It paints a picture of tranquility and peace. David, when he wrote this, was King of Israel. It was a large responsibility, a stressful job. Earlier in his life he had been a shepherd—a much simpler, less stressful role. Going back to thoughts of shepherding, going back to a less complicated place, helped him connect with God.

So he thinks of a time when God was very real and faith was tangible. If you look at the way the Psalmist writes, he is picturing exactly what we picture as we hear it—in his mind he knows that God supplies his every need. No need to worry. True rest, renewal, peace, and strength come from God; only from that source will our future path be clearly marked out and directed. He slows his mind and releases stress.

At this point, David is making a mental checklist of what he knows to be true about God and what he knows about sheep. Because David had been a shepherd, he knew the role of shepherd well and how a flock would respond as well. David knew that sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd for everything—guidance, protection, food, and life. He writes, "Here is what I know to be true: God, You are my Shepherd, and I will choose to mentally reflect on what that means. I am a sheep. You lead me to a quiet meadow with a gentle brook nearby; I will lie down here and think about you..."

Reflecting on God's part in our lives leads us to Sabbathating because of who God is.

Today it is your life, not David's. If you want to end the year in the right way, let yourself be a sheep. Seize a little bit of this down time in the next week, slow your mind and spend quiet time with God.

Engage your spiritual life. Let your mind walk through what you know to be true about God. Get away for a time to a quiet spot and slow your mind. Release all the useless information and tidbits of conversations. Do you ever slow down long enough to know how much stuff is in your mind?

When your mind is slowed, do this exercise; Ecclesiastes 7:13: "Consider what God has done."

Consider what God has done. Include who God is also. Get a blank page and write this on the top: "Who God is and what he's done." Write out what you know to be true about God—all-knowing, all-powerful, all-seeing, Alpha/Omega, the beginning and the end. He is my Forgiver, my Friend, my Leader, my Guide, my Healer, my Helper, my Peace Provider, my Soul Companion, my Vision Sender, my Passion Giver, My Solid Rock, my Foundation, my Life, my Breath, my Love, my ALL. He is my Everything. Remind yourself of what you know to be true about God and what role He plays in your life. Consider who God is and what He has done. He is my Shepherd; I have everything I need.

We must place our minds in God's Hand. We need rest; my mind rests only with knowledge of who God is and what he's done. To properly end this year, find one day, be diligent about it, fight for it, and get a day (already voices are saying "don't do it, your schedule is booked with all those important things." Find a day, get alone, start with reflection, and let your mind rest on God for a while. Note the clarity it brings, sometimes a walk by a quiet stream in a green meadow is all your mind needs to prepare you for what God has to say to your heart.

## **2. Reflecting and remembering: rejoicing in the presence of God in our lives.**

Go back to Psalm 23 and watch for the shift in subject. David goes from speaking of God in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to the 1<sup>st</sup> person, and with that comes a growing intimacy. "Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings." (vv. 4-5). Did you see the change in wording? He changed from God being him to God being you. David is not writing about what God is able to do because He is God...instead He talks about what God is doing. He moves from mind to heart. He reflects and rests in his knowledge of God. He remembers God's role in his life which leads him to experience the presence of God. "God, you are close to me; You protect and comfort me."

Faith is not based only on head knowledge—that God is able to be God when we need Him to be. Faith is also based on the heart knowledge that God is who He says He is. He helps us, he guides us; he protects us and forgives us and loves us and heals us, right when we need Him.

Remember this: your faith has to work emotionally. It has to play out in your life when you need it to (when the chips are down and you need God to be God). It is your head that might kick in first with your knowledge of who God is, but it is your heart that finishes the game. You've got to be able to feel your faith.

Look at Psalm 23 again. What is it that brings on David's urgent faith of the heart? Where is it that God becomes so very real to him? Look at the words and phrases: dark valley, death, protect me, comfort me, enemies. Tough times in our lives bring us to a clearer understanding of God. Hard times refine our faith—the dark night of the soul. During hard times we learn endurance. In our weaknesses we see His strength.

2 Cor. 12:10, "Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

2 Cor. 4:16-18, "That is why I never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are quite small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now; rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever."

David understands it also: "Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me." (Ps. 23:4).

Death and sickness are real. Valleys are deep and dark, full of enemies, and that is when I need to know that the Shepherd is real—not in my head but in my heart. To feel Him close beside me, to know His staff and rod will protect me. Faith, when it has gone through the fire, becomes mature and strong. If everything came apart at the seams, if life got very horrible, where would my faith be? Would it be as strong as I say it is? It is a good question.

When I make this transition from mind reflection to heart remembering, God meets me in a powerful, meaningful way. Every time I move from mind to heart, from reflection to rejoicing in reality, God meets me personally. Regardless of what kind of year you have had, good or bad, it is good to reflect mentally. The text in Ecclesiastes continues, "Consider what God has done. Do not fight the ways of God, for who can straighten out what He has made crooked? Enjoy prosperity while you can. But when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. That way you will realize that nothing is certain in this life." (Eccl. 7:13b-14)

Reflect on the good as well as the bad. Consider and reflect on the tough stuff of life because God is in that as well. He walks with you during these times as well. Consider the hard times of life. Remember how He walked beside you or how He is still walking with you and helping you. Many are walking through a dark valley even now. God is with you. Sometimes remembering how hard life can be is what we need to help us see how close God is to us. It is what we need to shake us from our self-sufficiency. If we can make it on our own, what do we need God for?

Reality: God has been good to me. That's the truth. He has been good. I might be tempted to think I had something to do with those things. They are from the hand of God and to him I am very thankful.

Count your blessings; give thanks. Every good and perfect gift comes from Him. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

Reflection is not all happy thoughts. The challenges are clear, easy to name, but not as easy to fix.

This is certain: God is faithful. Know that. He will lead us strongly into the future. God is faithful.

As you finish your year (no matter what kind of year you've had), move your faith from your head to your heart and know God's blessing and leading and protection and grace and love in your life.

"Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23:6). It is with that confidence that we can face the New Year ahead.