

January 31, 2016
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Psalms
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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THE SHEPHERD PSALM Psalm 23

The ancient shepherd is probably most identified in our minds with the shepherd's staff. The staff was the long pole with a crook in the end of it. If we studied the shepherd's work in detail, we would understand the purpose of that crook. It was actually very helpful to the sheep, even though they may not have always appreciated it.

That picture leads me to think about a book I finished reading a couple of months ago titled *The Crook in the Lot*. It is a classic writing from Thomas Boston, a Puritan minister in Scotland during the mid 1700s. He died 1732 after enduring an extended period of suffering. During that time of suffering, Boston preached seven sermons from Ecclesiastes 7:13: "*Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?*" Through these sermons he came to grips with the reality of "living with the thorn in your side." Subsequently, the sermons were printed in book form and hence the title of the book. In which Thomas plumbed the depths of why God allows suffering and testing for His people. It is a book difficult to comprehend but of great blessing when you do.

In the process of thinking, it dawned on me that, apart from funerals, Psalm 23 is almost always considered in light of blessings and comfort from God. That is true. That is the theme of the Shepherd Psalm. However, we cannot ignore some of the clear statements in the psalm that indicate suffering or testing. Our Shepherd leads to green pastures, beside still waters, and restores our souls—for which we are very thankful. He also leads in paths of righteousness which causes our cups of thanksgiving to overflow. But why does our Shepherd need to restore our souls? Maybe because of pain or hurt or wandering? The valley of the shadow of death must involve some

kind of suffering, does it not? And why does God prepare a table for us in the presence of our enemies instead of our friends?

Sheep have good days and bad days. That is life. It's nice when the good days outnumber the bad days. But whether we face pleasure or pain, plenty or want, our Shepherd faithfully leads us with His staff. That staff with the crook in it comforts us while we are in the crooks of life and when we are not. What a wonderful, caring Shepherd is presented in this Psalm.

Shepherd of the Sheep (vv.1-4).

As David began to describe the work and nature of my Shepherd, he concluded that He leads in righteousness (vv.1-3). My Shepherd has to lead rightly because Yahweh is my shepherd. That title is contained in the phrase, *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want (v.1)*. To claim Yahweh as shepherd is significant. Yahweh is the most common title for God in the Old Testament (5,500 times). It speaks of God's eternal existence, dependance upon no one or nothing. It reminds us that He is the mighty Creator, Sustainer, and Judge. And yet Yahweh is the loving Father to His children.

Notice the personal pronoun "my." How amazing that the Creator God is **MY** Shepherd. The gods created by human imagination are distant, capricious, and not easily appeased. Again, they are figments of human imagination. But the true God . . . that is something else. It is rather astonishing to rightly assess the one True God in His might and majesty and then claim a personal relationship with Him. Yet this was God's plan from the outset of creation. God created us in His own image so that we could enjoy fellowship with Him. Sin destroyed the fellowship and marred the image of God. Because of sin, no one can naturally claim that the God who is offended by our sin is **my** shepherd. He is the sinner's enemy, judge, and condemner, but not shepherd or friend.

How sad that we sheep are by nature in the enemy's pasture. But the astonishing truth is that the offended Creator/Judge provided the means for us to enjoy restored fellowship. He came to earth in the person of God the Son. God the Son is the exact representation of God the Father. He won the right for sinners to be reconciled with the Creator through the sacrifice of Himself. By confessing sin and

embracing the Son's sacrifice for our sin, we are reconciled with God and enjoy fellowship with Him.

That is the work of Him who is my Shepherd. He, God the Son, who is also the eternal Creator and Judge is my Good Shepherd. Jesus described Himself as my Shepherd with these words. *But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.* . . . So Jesus again said to them, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:2-5, 7-11).

And He is MINE. The surveyor says, “I know every inch of this estate. I have walked it and measured it. I know where every boundary stake is driven.” “Yes,” says the heir, “It is mine.” Do you **know about** the Shepherd or is He yours? Do you know people who belong to the Shepherd, or do you belong to Him? Are you familiar with His care, His discipline, His training, or do you experience it?

It is good for us to remember that a man who had been a shepherd wrote Psalm 23. He knew the concern a shepherd has for each member of his flock. He experienced the sacrifice necessary to provide care. He watched through the blazing noon time sun that baked his skin. He watched through the long nights, drenched by the dew. When a sheep wandered, he tracked it down. He defended the sheep even killing a lion or a bear that might endanger them. If a lamb was injured or unable to keep up, he picked up the lamb and carried it in his bosom. David understood that a shepherd became the sheep's friend.

And because the Good Shepherd is my Shepherd and friend, the outcome is predictable. “I shall not want.” This might be to conclude that all my basic needs will be met. David would agree with that conclusion when he wrote, *“I have been young, and now am old, yet*

I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread” (Psalm 37:25). But we run into a difficulty with that interpretation because “basic need” is relative and arguable. When David was running from Saul and Absalom, did he have physical want? One time he requested water from the well of Bethlehem, which his men gained for him at great peril (2 Sam. 23:15). Apparently, he wanted at that point.

Or does the phrase, “I shall not want” mean that I will chose to be content with what God gives? That was the lesson Paul learned. he confessed, *“I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me”* (Philippians 4:10-13).

Because sheep are very dependent creatures, their supply of care and nourishment is almost completely in the hands of the shepherd. Learning to want what the Lord supplies is found while growing in faith. Do we trust our Shepherd enough to be content with what He supplies?

We can and must because my Shepherd provides nourishment. *He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters* (v.2). The Good Shepherd always supplies sufficiency of food and water. He knows where the green pastures are. It is easy for wandering sheep to find parched, overeaten ground. Ravines full of kudzu are easy to find, but are of no value to sheep. The Good Shepherd has scouted far and near to find good pasture. In fact, in modern terminology, the Good Shepherd makes the pastures green. A farmer knows that he will have to treat the soil with lime and sometimes fertilizer in order to keep the chemical balance right for produce rich, lush grass for the animals to graze in. The modern farmer also depends on rain. But the Good Shepherd is in charge of the rain that waters the grass. He knows where the green pastures are.

He also knows where the still waters are. Fast flowing rapids that cascade over the rocks are exciting. But that is no place for sheep to assuage their thirst. They need a spot in the stream where the water

is still and quiet. The term *still waters* speaks of quietness and calmness. Still waters are often found in eddies off to the side of the flowing stream. They are not stagnate waters but calm, fresh waters.

At this point, we do well to stop and make some spiritual applications of these great pictures. Our Good Shepherd gives us His Word as the green pasture and still water. We are not refreshed and nourished by the over-eaten pastures of the world. All the world has to offer is weeds which are not spiritually nutritious. Rather we discover that the Good Shepherd washes us by the water of His Word as we meet in quiet with Him daily. Would you eat or drink physically for one hour each week and claim that is sufficient for you to live a healthy life? Your doctor will disagree with that conclusion.

Nor does our Shepherd expect us to be nourished by amusement park, night club kind of entertainment. Non-sheep eat and drink at those venues. When we gather for worship, we should find the green pastures and calm water of His Word expressed. In similar fashion, all the experiences into which our Shepherd leads us are intended for our growth in relation to Him.

Because these things are so, we should know secure confidence. Our Shepherd has promised the best for us. We should rest secure in His care and leading. If we are secure, the Shepherd should not find us unwilling to obey. If we truly trust the Shepherd, we will eat and drink where He leads. If we truly trust Him, we will follow Him instead of popular trends. If we truly trust Him, we will rest quietly in Him.

Furthermore, this psalm teaches that my Shepherd restores. *He restores my soul (v.3a)*. The Hebrew word for *restore* means to turn back, to withdraw or retire in order to be refreshed. The clarion call here is that our souls need refreshing. The Bible clearly affirms that it is the source for refreshing our souls. Fellowship of friends is somewhat helpful. But nothing restores us like reading the Bible, talking about the Bible, praying the Bible, and observing the Bible principles in action. That is the point. If we live in sin, we will neglect the Bible; when we neglect the Bible, we will not be restored. Therefore, there are a lot of frazzled souls in need of refreshing. While an occasional retreat helps to this end, it is no substitute for systematic feeding and drinking of God through His Word.

One great concern I have for this generation of professing Christians is their hunger for excitement and busyness. In my opinion, that perpetual motion begins to show in families. Professing Christian families often appear to be frazzled. But sadly, when they finally come to the end of their ropes and decide they need to quit being so busy, the first thing they do is stop going to the green pastures and still waters the Shepherd has provided for them. Maybe families cut back on “church” because when they do attend it is not nourishing or restoring but just more excitement and activity. The other day I drove by a church campus and as usual there was plenty of activity there. I thought to myself that I seldom have seen that place when there was not something going on. I wondered if the under-shepherd ever encouraged his people to take some time Monday through Saturday to rest in the Good Shepherd so that they would be delighted to meet on the Shepherd’s Day to be nourished from His Word and true fellowship.

Also, David stated that my Shepherd leads in righteousness. *He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake (v.3)*. Our Shepherd leads according to righteousness. He knows the right paths through this barren wasteland we call life. He knows where the right pastures and right waters are. He knows the right way to get there. That is why He always leads, and why we must allow Him to lead.

He leads rightly to the right place for His name’s sake. Our Shepherd’s reputation is at stake. He will never lead us someplace that will harm us spiritually or make us less like Him and more like Satan. His name is Holy, Perfect, Just, Gracious, and Merciful. Where He leads us, we will find those traits manifested.

But do we follow the Shepherd? He leads righteously, but we tend to move impulsively. We tend to run ahead or we lag behind or we graze off to the left or right of where He is leading. Generally the Shepherd is kind enough to come along and nudge us with His staff. How odd that we who claim to love the Shepherd are more likely to follow a fellow sheep than the Shepherd. When I was a boy, the neighbor who lived a half mile up the road raised sheep. He showed me one time how a whole flock of sheep manage to get out of the pasture and into the road. If one sheep finds a small opening in the fence, it will graze on grass right through the fence and out to the side of the road. Inevitably another sheep will follow, then another, until

they are all in the wrong place. Because that is the nature of sheep, I conclude that you should be wary when a fellow sheep comes to you and says, “I have found a really exciting pasture in which to graze, and the water is so exciting it almost takes your breath away.”

Not only does my Shepherd provide all the nourishment and refreshing my soul needs, but my Shepherd also protects in testing (v.4). Therefore, I will not fear while in the valley. David concluded, *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil (v.4a)*. This verse probably ranks up there with John 3:16 as the most well known verse in the Bible. It reminds us that sometimes the Good Shepherd leads through difficult places because He is righteous. It appears obvious that the primary application of the verse has to do with the saint’s death.

Death is no pleasant walk through a rose garden. It is a dark and fearsome valley. We are walking along the righteous path on which our Shepherd leads us to pleasant pastures and cool waters. Then one day He leads down a rocky, unsteady path of foreboding darkness. It is frightening because we have never been there before. We cannot tell from experience what is on the other side of the valley, or if we will come out of the valley.

However, at the same time, the mention of evil expands the application to include very difficult times in our lives. Sometimes the dark valley is a painful loss, a enduring sickness, or broken relationships. Do we trust our Shepherd enough in those times to keep following Him? Because He has always led in righteousness, we will continue to trust Him to bring out what is best for His name which will be best for us. That is the confidence Paul expressed in the well known passage in Romans. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:28-29)*. The purpose of the dark valley is to make us more like the Shepherd.

The valley may well be dark and fearsome, but my Shepherd is present to protect. We do not fear *for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (v.4b)*. In the darkest valley, yea, on the path to death, our Shepherd is still with us. We know He is with us because He still comforts us. He comforts us with His rod and staff.

The rod was a defensive tool. It was typically about two feet long with a round knob and a strap at the other end to fasten around the shepherd’s wrist. The shepherd wielded this as a club to ward off beasts that would try to attack the flock. Or he could throw the rod with deadly accuracy. The sheep finds great comfort in knowing that the Good Shepherd knows how to use the rod circumstances and even miracles if necessary and will use it to protect the sheep. The rod corresponds well with the Word of God.

Oh, but sometimes the shepherd would hurl this rod at a stubborn sheep who insisted on getting out of line or wandering away. That too should comfort us. If you can stubbornly rebel against the Shepherd and not get wacked by His rod of well-aimed conviction or circumstances, maybe you are not His sheep. True also was the fact that a sheep that “passed under the rod” was one that was counted by the shepherd as he went into the fold. Passing under the Good Shepherd’s rod is a good reminder that we are counted for Him. If we do not feel the occasional pressure of our Shepherd’s Bible, we might want to check to see whose pasture we are in.

The staff, on the other hand, was the long pole with a crook in the end of it. This tool, more than any other part of the shepherd’s possessions, identifies him as a herder of sheep. It speaks of tender concern and care as contrasted to the rod which was an instrument of authority. The shepherd used it to draw the sheep together, especially a newborn to its mother, or to draw sheep to Himself. He used it to lead sheep into difficult or unfamiliar places, and to rescue sheep from dangerous places like cliffs or water. The Good Shepherd does this work for us through the Holy Spirit.

But Jesus Christ is more than a Shepherd, and we are more than sheep in this relationship.

Friend of the Saint (vv.5-6).

It is possible at this point that the picture changes from the Good Shepherd’s care of the sheep to the Good Shepherd’s faithfulness as our friend. In our relationship as friends, my Lord manifests His care. David knew of the Lord, *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies (v.5a)*;

The wording means most accurately that He prepares a banquet for me. A mark of deepest friendship was to sit at a man's table with him for a meal. That is why Jesus chose that picture to express the gravity of Judas's betrayal. When Judas went out to betray Him, Jesus quoted part of Psalm 41:9 as fulfillment of a prophecy. "*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*" (Psalm 41:9). The picture reminds us that we enjoy that deepest intimacy with our Savior and Creator. The banquet He has already prepared for us is experienced as we feast with Him on His Word.

But there are more people at this wonderful banquet. Our corporate worship ought also to be a picture of this sumptuous feasting not alone with God but in the fellowship of other believers with God. As we do, we look with a longing eye to the great banquet in heaven when we will finally experience the fullness of eternal salvation.

And God showers this bounty on us while those who would do us harm watch. Satan hates for us to fellowship with God. Satan disdains our corporate fellowship and worship. So too the enemies of God, the people of Satan's realm would love to put an end to our banqueting with God. But God grants us this pleasure; and if the enemy chooses to kill us, it will only make our banquet more intimate.

I am not only invited to dine with the Savior, but He lavishly welcomes me. At the banquet, *you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows* (v.5b). A guest who was especially honored would be anointed with oil by his host as he entered the house. For example, Mary in Bethany could not imagine a better way to show honor to Jesus. So when we are drawn by the Savior's invitation to His sumptuous banquet, when we enter, He lavishes on us the oil of the Holy Spirit. Our cups ought to overflow!!! Overflowing cups have always been a picture of bountiful blessing even in secular songs and writing. How much more should we be aware of our Lord's amazing blessings to us.

In light of all this amazing mercy, love, and care, I must acknowledge my Lord's attention and concern (v.6). David concluded that life is good. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*. We have a television. I won't tell you the

brand, but some of you might guess what kind it is. When we turn it on, words come up on the screen that say, "Life is Good." That is an interesting thought to ponder. Why is life good? What makes life good? Who says life is good? One thing I know for sure is that life is not good because of what we see on television.

Life is good because Jesus loves me. In light of my Shepherd's care and in light of His provision of the banquet, I should have confidence. We should be convinced that goodness and mercy will be with us throughout life. That is not the same as pleasure and plenty. We should be confident that God will do good for us as He continues to pour out His mercy even in the dark valleys of life.

Life is good, but eternity is better. Now goodness and mercy keep following me around. Because they do, in the future, *I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever* (v.6). While we walk the path following our Lord, we keep an eye on His house. Confidence that we will live with Him forever is the hope that keeps us following the Shepherd to His house.

Do you enjoy this kind of relationship with the Good Shepherd? Sin will keep us from experiencing it or even from desiring it. However, it is the blessing our Creator desires for all His sheep. His sheep still hear His voice.