

The Shepherd
Rodolfo Rodriguez
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Psalm 23

Good morning my dear friends.

Last week the message about dealing with disappointment was both hilarious and painful. I used a lot of stories, including the impossible week I was by myself, a good amount of scripture and not so much of phrase by phrase analysis to go over a difficult issue.

Today I will do the opposite: very little of stories a good amount of scripture and a lot of analysis to go over a very easy issue.

Psalm 23 is undoubtedly one of the best-known passages in the entire Bible and definitely one of my favorite. Let's read it before we start.

Psalm 23

**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.**

Most of us learned it as children and it continues to be a comfort to those who are dying, or those who have lost loved ones. Maybe it's so well-loved because it is so personal and individual. When we read it, we don't think of David shepherding his sheep 3,000 years ago. It applies to us. "The Lord is my shepherd".

Unfortunately, we live in a society where tending sheep is not your ordinary occupation. In fact, I dare say that none of you even know a shepherd, much less are familiar with what a shepherd's life is really like. And so I think we have a tendency to lose a little bit of the meaning that David intended when he wrote these words.

This morning, we'll look at this passage from the perspective of a shepherd and taking into account the problems he and the sheep might face. This will help us to understand what David probably felt as he wrote these words, "The Lord is my shepherd."

“The Lord is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want”

As you know, David was himself a shepherd. He was known as the "Shepherd King" of Israel. But he saw Jehovah, the Lord God of Israel, as his shepherd. He speaks in this psalm as if he was one of the flock, one of the sheep. And it is as though he literally boasted aloud, "Look who my shepherd is -- my owner -- my manager! The Lord is!"

Because after all, he knew from firsthand experience that the luck of any particular sheep depends on the type of man who owns it. Under one man, sheep might struggle, starve and suffer endless hardships. But under another shepherd, they might flourish and thrive contentedly. As it is with pride that he says, "The Lord is my shepherd." He chose us, he bought us, he calls us by name, he makes us his own and he delights in taking care of us.

That last aspect is really what this psalm is all about. How the Lord takes care of us. So David continues by saying, "I shall not want." The idea here is that the Lord supplies our every need. The NIV says

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not lack anything”

In his book, *I Shall Not Want*, Robert Ketchum tells about a Sunday school teacher who asked her group of children if any of them could quote the entire twenty-third psalm.

A little four-and-a-half-year-old girl was among those who raised their hands. A bit skeptical, the teacher asked if she could really quote the entire psalm. The little girl came to the podium, faced the class, made a little bow, and said:

"The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want"

She then bowed again and sat down. She may have overlooked a few verses, but I think that little girl captured David's heart in Psalm 23. The idea throughout the psalm is that we are utterly contented in the shepherd's care and there is nothing else that we desire.

Notice that our Lord supplies our every need and not our every want. As Paul told the Philippians,

Philippians 4:19

"And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus"

The same one who sustained the children of Israel, the one who fed Elijah by the stream, the one who provided the needs of the disciples sent out without staff or shoes, has promised to provide our needs both physical and spiritual.

But let's get into the interesting part, let me tell you what a good shepherd is like. He loves his sheep. For him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing his sheep contented, well fed, safe and flourishing in his care. That's what his life is all about, and he gives everything he has to it.

He goes to a great deal of trouble to provide them with the finest grazing, ample winter feed and clean water. He provides shelter from the storms, protection from the enemies and the diseases and parasites to which sheep are susceptible.

From early dawn till late at night the good shepherd is alert to the welfare of his flock. He gets up early in the morning and goes out first thing to look over his flock. He examines the sheep to see if they are fit and content and able to be on their feet. He can tell if they have been molested during the night, whether they are ill or require some special attention.

Throughout the day he looks over his flock to make sure everything is all right. Even at night, he sleeps with "one eye and both ears open", ready at the least sign of trouble to get up and protect his sheep.

That's the kind of shepherd we have. Jesus said,

John 10:11

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep"

Truly, "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"

1. It's not easy to get a sheep to lie down. A strange thing about sheep is that they will refuse to lie down unless four requirements are met. They must be free from all fear.
2. There must be no tension between members of the flock.
3. They must not be aggravated with flies or parasites, and...
4. They must be free from hunger.

It is the shepherd who must see to it that his flock is free from any disturbances. Sheep are very easily frightened. A stray rabbit jumping out from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. When one startled sheep runs in fright, all of the others will follow behind it in blind fear, not waiting to see what frightened them. But nothing quiets a flock of sheep like seeing their shepherd in the field with them.

Like sheep, we also are easily frightened, aren't we? We live in an uncertain life. Any hour can bring disaster. And generally, it is the unknown, the unexpected, that frightens us most. But nothing quiets our souls like knowing that our Shepherd is near. Suddenly things are not half as black nor nearly as terrifying. Our Lord is with us.

1 Timothy 1:7

"God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind"

In every animal society there is an established order of dominance or status. In chickens, it is known as the pecking order. Among sheep it is called the butting order. Sheep maintain their status by butting and driving away other sheep from their favorite grazing spot. When there is this tension in a flock, the sheep can't lie down and rest. They must always stand up and be ready to fight. The result is that it wears the sheep out; they lose weight and become irritable. But whenever the shepherd is around, they forget their rivalries and stop their fighting.

That's a lot like people, too, isn't it? There is a struggle for status in our society, to "keep up with the Joneses". There is a struggle for self-assertion and self-recognition. Most of us fight to be "top sheep". We butt and quarrel and compete to get ahead. It is impossible to relax in that kind of environment. You have to always be ready to stand up and defend your rights. But things change when our Shepherd is around. The Lord's presence puts an end to all rivalry.

The sheep will not rest when bothered by the aggravation of insects and parasites. The shepherd must provide them with relief. We'll talk about this more in a few minutes.

And sheep will not rest until they are free from hunger. A hungry sheep is always on its feet, searching for another mouth of food, trying to satisfy its hunger. Keep in mind that in Palestine where David wrote this psalm, it's a dry, brown, sun-burned land, not too different than our beloved Baja. Green pastures didn't just happen by chance. Shepherds had to search hard for green areas or cultivate them themselves. But when a sheep had eaten enough, when it was free from fear, tension and aggravation, it would lie down.

Our shepherd provides us with the spiritual food we need. If we hunger and thirst after righteousness, he has promised to fill us. All of our needs are met in Christ. After seeing this from the shepherd and sheep perspectives, the words "he makes me to lie down in green pastures." Has a richer meaning.

He also "leads us beside the still waters". Sheep also need water to survive. And they will not drink from noisy, turbulent water. They require a well or a slow-flowing stream, "still waters".

Jesus made it clear that the thirsty souls of men and women can only be fully satisfied by coming to him. In John 7:37 He stated:

John 7:37

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink"

Our Shepherd leads us beside the still waters

"He Restores My Soul"

There is an Old English shepherd's term called a "cast" sheep. This is a sheep that has turned over on its back and can't get back up again. It happens frequently. And when it happens, all the sheep can do is lie on its back, with its feet flaying frantically in the air. Sometimes it will bleat, but usually it will just kick.

How many times has our life felt like we are one of those cast sheep? lying upside down and kicking like crazy without result...I think we called it disappointment last week, sometimes we will bleat (pray in our case) sometimes just kick...

If the shepherd doesn't arrive within a short time, the sheep will die. That's one of the reasons why a shepherd is always looking over its flock, counting them to see if they are all on their feet. If one is missing, he thinks, "One of my sheep is cast and I've got to find it." This is the thought behind the parable of the 99 sheep and the one that went astray.

Many times a shepherd will search for hours for a single sheep, only to find it on its back, lying helpless. He will turn the sheep over on its side, rub its legs to restore circulation and then lift it to its feet. After a while the sheep will stumble and stagger, and then eventually walk steadily and surely.

If you're ever cast, dear brothers and sisters, do pray so your Sheppard can come and help you without delay and before you need restoration to get back in your feet.

That's probably what David had in mind when he said, "He restores my soul" because that's how our Lord treats us. We stumble and fall, we become so helpless. And yet our shepherd is patient and tender and helpful in getting us back on our feet.

I read the gospels and see the tenderness that Jesus showed toward sinners. I see how he restored Peter's heart after his denial. And I understand that Jesus also restores my soul.

“He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake”

If sheep are left to themselves, they will continue to graze the same hills until they turn to a desert waste. They will eat the grass to the very ground until even the roots are damaged. They need a shepherd who will lead them to good grazing area.

We are a lot like sheep in this too. As humans, we prefer to follow our own fancies and turn to our own ways.

Isaiah 53:6

**"All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way..."**

And so we need a shepherd who can lead us in paths of righteousness, and our Lord does just that. Notice that our shepherd is not a driver but a leader. He doesn't stand behind us with a stick, saying, "Go on, and do that." No, he goes ahead and leads the way for us.

1 Peter 2:21

"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps"

In the Civil War, in the battle of Franklin, the Rebels charged, were shot down and fell back. One man rode back to the general to get instructions. The general ordered, "Charge them again!" That's easy to say from behind the lines.

Our Lord leads and he always leads us in the paths of righteousness. He said,

John 14:6

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"

**“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me”**

This section marks a new tone in the psalm. Up until this point, it is as if the sheep has been boasting to its unfortunate neighbor across the fence about the excellent care it receives. But now it turns to address the shepherd directly.

There are going to be valleys in life for all of us. Some of us have many valleys, some few. Some of us have deep valleys, some not so deep. But, somewhere in our journey, we must all cross the valley of the shadow of death, for

Hebrews 9:27

"It is appointed to men once to die, but after this the judgment"

Its time may be unknown, but it's certain to come.

And we must walk it one by one, unless we walk it with Christ. We cannot walk this valley with our husband or wife. We cannot walk it with our business partner. We cannot take our friends or relatives. As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we walk with Christ or we walk alone.

Remember how when you were a kid, you considered yourself to be big. You didn't understand restrictions. You could take care of yourself. But whenever a thunderstorm came up, you climbed in bed with your parents. We needed to know our loved ones were close. So it is in life. As adults, we often don't feel like we need God. We can take care of ourselves. But as death approaches, we all run to someone stronger.

However, you can only be close to the Lord at death if you are close to him during life.

“Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me”

When a shepherd is out in the fields with his flock, he carries very little with him. Today's shepherds will carry a rifle, a staff and a small knapsack. In the M. East the shepherd carried only a rod and a staff.

The rod is kind of like a club. The shepherd learns from childhood how to throw it with amazing speed and accuracy. It becomes his main weapon of defense for himself and his sheep. He uses it to drive off predators like coyotes, wolves, cougars or stray dogs. In the brush it is used to beat away snakes.

But it is also used for discipline. If a sheep wanders away or approaches poisonous weeds, or gets too close to some danger, the rod is thrown to send it back to the flock.

The staff, on the other hand, is a long, slender stick, often with a crook or hook on one end. The shepherd will use the staff to guide sheep along a new path or through a gate. He doesn't beat the sheep. He just nudges them along. At times, the staff may be used to get a sheep out of trouble, to pull it from the water or to free it from thorns.

To those of us who are God's sheep, the authority, power, might and guidance of the Lord are indeed a comfort. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies”

This struck me as an unusual image. I've never seen sheep sitting at a table. In much of the world, though, the high plateaus of sheep pasture are called "mesas" which is Spanish for "tables". This seems to be fairly common language and David probably means the pastureland has been prepared.

In the spring, after the snow melts, the shepherd will take his sheep up the mountain to finer pastures. But first he will go up into the rough, wild country to check it out. He will take along a supply of salt and minerals to distribute over the range. He will decide where his camps will be located. He will make sure the vegetation is sturdy enough. He will check for poisonous weeds and uncover any snakes.

In similar fashion, our Lord takes care of us in the presence of our enemies. In effect, he has gone ahead and checked things out. He has already been

Hebrews 4:15

"but was in all points tempted as we are"

He has known our sorrows and endured our struggles in order to help us through. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies"

**"Thou anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over"**

A particular problem sheep have is insects -- flies, mosquitoes, gnats. Sheep are especially bothered by the nose fly, or nasal fly. These flies buzz around the sheep's head trying to deposit eggs on the damp nose of the sheep. If they are successful, the eggs will hatch to form small worm-like larvae. They crawl up the sheep's nose and cause a great deal of aggravation.

So, at the beginning of fly season, shepherds will mix up an oil concoction. In Palestine, they used a mixture of olive oil, sulfur and spices. It would then be applied to the heads of the sheep. Oil is also used to cure scab, which is a highly contagious disease among sheep. This is just another way of saying, "Our Lord takes care of us."

In fact, our Lord gives us everything we could need and more. Paul expressed that thought in this way,

Ephesians 3:20

"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us"

It is true that "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"

Sheep with a shepherd like this knows that he is in a privileged position. Our Lord truly cares for us as a good shepherd. No matter what else may happen, we know that goodness and mercy will follow us.

And we are so content in our flock and in our shepherd that there is no desire for a change. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." But we can only confidently state this last verse if we can state the first one

"The Lord is my shepherd"

Conclusion:

The Lord desires to be our shepherd. He wants to bless us. He wants to care for us. But Jesus never hesitated to make it clear that when we come under his management and control there would be a new and unique relationship between him and us. There would be something special about belonging to this shepherd. There would be a distinct mark upon the man or woman that would differentiate them from the rest of the crowd.

Let me tell you what a shepherd does when he buys his sheep. He takes a large, sharp knife. And each shepherd has a distinctive earmark that he cuts into one of the ears of his sheep. In this way, even at a distance, it is easy to determine to whom the sheep belongs. It is not an easy thing to do, for either the sheep or the shepherd. But from that mutual suffering an indelible lifelong mark of ownership is made that can never be erased.

For the man or woman who recognizes the claim of Christ and gives allegiance to his absolute ownership, there comes the question of bearing his mark. The mark of Jesus is the cross. Jesus stated emphatically

Luke 9:23

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"

It's a sad fact, but I think a true one that many people who have never submitted their lives to him in obedience still try to claim that "the Lord is my Shepherd". They seem to hope that by merely admitting that he is their shepherd, they will enjoy all the benefits of his care without ever being marked. Not so.

The Lord is my shepherd. What a difference that little word "my" makes. It is all the difference between joy and sorrow, purposefulness and meaningless, eternal life and eternal death.

I will finish with a little story:

A famous actor was once the guest of honor at a social gathering where he received many requests to recite favorite excerpts from various literary works. An old preacher who happened to be there asked the actor to recite the twenty-third Psalm. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would also recite it.

The actor's recitation was beautifully intoned with great dramatic emphasis for which he received lengthy applause.

The preacher's voice was rough and broken from many years of preaching, and his diction was anything but polished. But when he finished there was not a dry eye in the room. When someone asked the actor what made the difference, he replied

"I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd"

Is the Lord your shepherd?

Let's pray,

Dear Lord, let us learn to be Your sheep and trust You for all our needs. Let us lie down in green pastures while you watch our sleep. Let us praise You and follow You in the paths of righteousness. Let us fear no evil for You are with us. Let us pray when we are in trouble so You can come and help us get back in our feet. Let us come to you and drink from your still waters so we can quench our thirst. And let us dwell in Your house forever.

Amen.