

Series: Christ in the OT

Text: Psalm 22

Message #4

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Introduction

1. A few weeks ago we considered the encounter that Jesus had with the 2 men who were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus on a Sunday afternoon following the crucifixion of Jesus. As Jesus came alongside the men, they were kept from recognizing Him. As the conversation unfolded, Jesus rebuked the men for their unbelief and beginning with Moses and the prophets He “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Though we do not have the text or the outline of that conversation, we do have same source Jesus used in His teaching – the OT. We have begun to consider some OT texts in order that we too might see Jesus there. Today we continue that study with a look at Psalm 23.
2. At first glance, we might not immediately think of Jesus when we read the opening line of the 23rd Psalm. We might be thinking more generally that surely God is the shepherd of His people and that must have been David's perspective. However, as we read the Gospel accounts we come into contact with John 10. Jesus begins to speak using this very familiar metaphor of sheep and a shepherd. Those listening must have thought about Psalm 23 as Jesus spoke. Suddenly in the lecture, Jesus makes the startling declaration, “I am the good shepherd.” Instantly the hearers are made to consider that the shepherd in Psalm 23 is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ who is standing before them teaching! In one sentence He affirms His deity and His identity as the main character in our text!
3. As I mentioned last week Psalm 22 and 23 and 24 all seem to fit together and could be referred to as the Shepherd Songs. Psalm 22 connects with John 10 as the Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep. Psalm 23 continues the connection but also could be seen in relation to Hebrews 13:20-21 which reminds us that not only did the Shepherd die for the sheep, but because of the resurrection, this great Shepherd now lives for the sheep. That is the content of this 23rd Psalm!
4. The time and circumstances surrounding the recording of Psalm 23 are not certain. David is the author. His experience as a shepherd on the hillsides of Judea certainly must have influenced what he wrote. With beauty and simplicity he recorded this

brief but profound verse.

5. Consider for a moment the sheep. They are helpless in a hostile environment; they are not mindful of the future, of what lies ahead; they lack courage and confidence but they do trust the shepherd and when they follow the shepherd they remain safe and well cared for. The application to us is obvious.
6. Concerning this shepherd, various character qualities of shepherds come to mind. Some shepherds deeply cared for their sheep and exercised much effort and much courage to care for the flock; others did not – it was merely a job – the sheep meant nothing to this type of shepherd. Such shepherds had no relationship with or attachment to the sheep. These creatures were not worth risking life or limb. Some shepherds were knowledgeable of the care and protection of their sheep and their surroundings and these shepherds worked hard to see that their sheep were protected and well cared for. Others made no such effort. Some shepherds would know the characteristics and personality and maturity of individual sheep and others could care less. Again, the application to the Lord and to us should be obvious. Here we have the wonderful picture of the great shepherd of the sheep who lives for the sheep and this psalm tells us what this Great Shepherd does for those who belong to His flock.

I. WHEN THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD – I HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED FOR LIFE (Actually the remainder of the Psalm answers the question “What will I not lack if the LORD is my Shepherd?” The answers are: I shall not lack rest, life, guidance, safety, provision, or a heavenly home). Notice what the Psalmist says about the Shepherd. (LORD and shepherd form a rather odd juxtaposition. LORD is Jehovah or Yahweh – the self-sufficient, covenant-keeping God. To be a shepherd on the other hand was among the lowest of all work. Should a family need a shepherd, it was often the youngest son who would likely fill the position! This was a 24-hour per day, 7 day per week, unpleasant task that continued week after week, through summer and winter, fair weather and foul! The primary point in this section of the Psalm is that when the Lord is our shepherd we are not in want – this is, positively, we have everything we really need for life. We should not be surprised at such a statement. A millennium later, Peter wrote that it is in Christ that we have everything we need for life and godliness! What is it that we need and that He supplies as our shepherd? There are four verbs that help us see the profile of the shepherd.

- A. He makes me ... (lie down in green pastures) – Surely this speaks of rest and provision. I am told that sheep do not easily lie down. They tend to be skittish due to perceived fears around them, friction in the flock, insects and pests bothering them and hunger. To get the sheep to lie down is to bring them to a place where they are reasonably comfortable and cared for. He is the shepherd - He makes us lie down!
- B. He leads me ... (beside quiet waters, literally, “by waters of rest”) (Sheep are reluctant to drink from rushing water, preferring a quiet pool of clear gently flowing water. Sometimes a shepherd would wade into a rushing stream and with rocks dam up a place where pools of water would collect allowing the sheep to drink more freely without fear). It is a challenge to find such water in desert places. The shepherd knows where to go and where to lead the flock. He leads me beside quiet waters.
- C. He restores (me) ... (my soul). There are times in our lives when we feel like we are on our backs spiritually. We are down and discouraged and disheartened and ready to give up and give in. The Good Shepherd is able to restore our soul. The word restore can mean to “bring me to repentance”, but it can also mean to refresh or renew. That seems to make the most sense here. Philip Keller wrote a book many of you may have read. It is called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. He speaks about a condition that sometimes happens to sheep when they become “cast.” It happens this way. A fat, heavy sheep will lie down comfortably in a depression in the ground. Perhaps it will roll on its side to stretch or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity shifts and the sheep is on its back with its feet in the air, unable to move. As the sheep lies there struggling, the ruminating gases began to build and blood circulation is cut off to the extremities of the body. If left without help, the sheep is likely to die in a few hours. The good shepherd finds the cast sheep and pushes the sheep over so that once again it can get back on its feet. He restores my soul! Listen to Keller: ***As soon as I reached the cast ewe my very first impulse was to pick it up. Tenderly I would roll the sheep over on its side. This would relieve the pressure of gasses in the rumen. If she had been down for long I would lift her on to her feet. Then straddling the sheep with my legs I would hold her erect, rubbing her limbs to restore the circulation to her legs. This often took quite a little time. When the sheep started to walk again she often just stumbled, staggered and collapsed in a heap once more. All the time I worked on the cast sheep I would talk to it gently, “When are you going to learn to stand on your own feet – I’m so glad I***

found you in time, you rascal!" And so the conversation would go. Always couched in language that combined tenderness and rebuke, compassion and correction. He restores our soul!

D. He guides me ... in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. There were no fences. Paths separated the fields. Where and how the sheep walked reflected on the shepherd. If the sheep damaged the property of another, it would cost the shepherd to make restitution and perhaps ruin his reputation. Left to themselves, sheep will destroy their environment and eventually self destruct. They must be carefully managed and continually guided. If sheep remain in the same place, they will destroy the area in a brief time. They must continually be on the move. A good shepherd guides the sheep in narrow paths. The Hebrew word can be translated, "wagon tracks." The paths of righteousness are narrow paths but they are safe paths and good paths and paths that lead to good growth and long life. The application again is obvious. When the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need for life.

II. WHEN THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD – I HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED FOR DEATH To pass from pasture to pasture it was necessary to walk through the rocky areas. Snakes would hide in the rocks and would often bite the sheep in the face. The shepherd would use his rod and his staff to protect his sheep as they passed through the valley of dark shadow. There is a bit of a change here in the Psalm. Earlier the work of the shepherd was recorded in the third person – "He makes, he leads, He guides..." But now the Psalmist switches to the second person as he speaks not merely about the shepherd, but to the shepherd.

A. You are with me – There is no direct statement in the text concerning death (valley of dark shadow), but rather this refers to dark and bitter experiences of life, of which death is included. The great encouragement of this section of the text is that through the dark times, the shepherd is present with us. "The valley of the shadow of death" is just as much God's right path for us as the "green pastures and quiet waters." Though evil is lurking around every darkened corner, the Shepherd is with us! Is it any wonder that we are never so conscience of His presence as when we pass through life's dark valleys? I am reminded of another psalm of David when he wrote triumphantly, **"If I say, 'surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."** It may appear as the darkness of the darkest night, but he is with me and it is not

even dark to Him! From John Piper I read: ***There is a danger in the valley that we might get angry at God and reject him, there is an even greater danger in the green pasture that we might become satisfied with the grass and forget the shepherd. In the dark we hug his knee; in the light we are prone to wander off in all directions.*** We can take comfort in the dark valley because there He is with us.

- B. (You) comfort me – The staff (a long pole often with a hook on the end) was used to lift sheep over perilous places. The rod was a shorter stick with a knob or nails at the end, used as a prod to get the sheep to move into the fold, but also as a weapon against any of the sheep's natural enemies. The key idea here is that of comfort. More than 60 times in the Hebrew Bible this term is used to express comfort and compassion. It was often used in the relation to danger and death. Like a caring shepherd tending his sheep, God tenderly loves His own, even when they are unruly or try to wander away. Whether it is a tender touch or a painful prod, the ultimate goal was to comfort and care for the sheep.
- C. You prepare ... The best grassy spots might also be a haven for snakes and other dangers, but because of the presence of the shepherd and the work of preparation by the shepherd, the sheep would be safe. Like a loving shepherd who prepares the pasture, removing harmful obstacles and poisonous plants and who drives predators away, so the Lord prepares the way for His people. They remain safe as long as they follow closely behind Him!
- D. You anoint ... Soothing oil and an overflowing cup were images of joy and prosperity. It could very well be that this psalm makes a transition in verses 5-6 from the shepherd with the sheep in the wilderness to the return of the shepherd with the sheep back home where there is a time of feasting and celebration. The word anointed here actually means "fat" or "well fed." Fatness was considered a mark of health and the fat was considered the best part of the sacrifice. Whether in life or death, the shepherd supplies everything needed for the journey. One of my seminary professors wrote, ***The spirit of Psalm 23:5 was more than adequately captured by the little girl who went home after Sunday School and reported on her studies of the morning: "I don't remember what all the lesson was about, but we did study the verse in the Old testament that said, 'Mercy, Goodness, my cup's runned over.'"*** That's the way it when the Lord is your shepherd! You have everything you need in life and everything

you need in death.

III. WHEN THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD – I HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED FOR ETERNITY

- A. All the days of my life – The description here seems to be that of the joyous festival after the summer grazing period. All of the work had paid off in the profits from the flock). The promise of the goodness and mercy of God for a lifetime is a priceless blessing. The word for mercy (or loving-kindness) is the Hebrew word “hesed.” It is a word hard to translate because it speaks of God’s love and His tender kindness and His faithfulness and His mercy. The word could mean “to bend or bow oneself” or “to incline oneself.” This would denote the condescending love of God toward his people. We can immediately see how the Lord Jesus could be so described! Our Great Shepherd extended His loving-kindness, tender mercy and all-sufficient grace to us that we might be amply supplied for a lifetime and throughout all eternity!
- B. Forever –
1. One author said it this way: ***The world could spare many a large book better than this sunny little psalm. This has dried many tears and supplied the mould in which many hearts have poured their peaceful faith. One of the most precious gems in the treasury of Biblical literature, its appeal to the human heart has been constant and incalculable. The reason is not far to seek. The meaning and helpfulness of this perfect little psalm can never be exhausted so long as men, like sheep, wander and need guidance, and so long as they learn to find it in God their Shepherd.***
 2. Hopefully, this entire psalm leads us to God Himself as the fulfillment of all our longings. May we feel ourselves drawn with David not so much to love the green pastures but rather to love the good shepherd, not so much to love the lavish banquet but to love the bountiful host.

Conclusion

1. I hope we understand that if we are to assume the full blessings of Psalm 23 that we must first have a vital encounter with the Good Shepherd of Psalm 22. “It is the agony of Calvary that provided the pathway of blessing to green pastures” (John Davis, *The Perfect Shepherd*, p. 18).
2. Not everyone can confidently say, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” If He is, you have everything you need for life and death and for eternity. If He is not, conversely you have nothing you really need for life and you have nothing you must have in death

and you are in serious trouble heading into eternity. It is my prayer that the Good Shepherd will find you and open your heart to believe in Him that you might be described as belonging to Him.

3. In Jesus' own words, **"I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."**

Does He say that of you? As others have discovered, when we view the character of this perfect Shepherd we must conclude that since He leads, the way is sure, and since He cares, the way is safe, and since He feeds, the way is sweet. The Lord is my shepherd – I have lack of nothing!