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Psalm 23
August 4, 2019

The Lord is My Shepherd

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar and widely used of David's psalms. Some of us memorized it as children in Sunday school. Oftentimes, we hear it at funerals. I am amazed that whenever I am with someone at the end of life and I read this psalm, more often than not, the person will recite it by memory along with me.

Psalm 23 speaks of life. It speaks of hope. It speaks of trust in the face of any uncertainty...with death being the worst enemy we will all face. But David's words remind us that even death is not God's final answer. That there is indeed more life beyond the grave.

So read with me now the words of Psalm 23 as we plant and water God's word in our hearts.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The word "shepherd" is a metaphor that David used to paint a picture that opens up our understanding of who God is. There are many words that he could have used to describe God. Such as... The Lord is my God. The Lord is my King. Or even The Lord is my Father. Each of these would have been theologically correct, yet somehow David chose shepherd instead. Why?

That's what I want to touch on this morning. "The Lord is my shepherd." My hope is that we will hear Psalm 23 with fresh spirits. See it with new eyes. Make it our own. There are four characteristics of the psalm that I want speak about today. Psalm 23 is confessional. It is contractual. It is personal. And it is deeply hopeful.

I say that Psalm 23 is confessional because it conveys a sense of commitment and trust between the shepherd and their flock. One commentator wrote, "The shepherd pastured the flock, led them in the right way when they had to move, fended off predators - all pastoral activities described in the psalm."¹

Phillip Keller in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, talks about the moment he purchased his first flock of sheep.² As their shepherd he would be

¹ James L. Mays, *Interpretation, Psalms, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 116-117.

² Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 10.

utterly responsible for their safety and care. They, in return, would rely completely upon him to look out for them. He was theirs and they were his.

A moment of reality came when he learned that he would have to put his ownership seal upon them. In the husbandry world, this meant catching each ewe, wrestling it to the ground, and cutting out a unique notch of its ear so that people would know that the sheep belonged to Keller and no one else.

Keller also describes the moment when in biblical days, a new slave willingly indentured themselves to a master. The servant would literally have their ear lobe nailed to their new master's door. As if to say, let this mark upon my ear be a testament of my lifelong devotion to you. The master would be utterly responsible for their safety and care. The new servant, in return, would rely completely upon his master to look out for him. They belonged to each other.

Now, I've just returned from Young Life Camp where I was with twenty three ninth grade boys and three other leaders. At Young Life Camp, we keep the schedule a secret on purpose. We know that high probability yields low impact, whereas low probability, yields high impact. In other words, if you know what is coming next it doesn't have same impact as it does when it is a total surprise. But the most important reason we do that is that it promotes commitment and trust between the Young Life Leaders and our young friends. We commit to setting our kids up for success and having the time of their lives. And the campers have to trust that we will not lead them into something that is boring, embarrassing, fearful, or a waste of time.

We also learn that the term "shepherd" in scripture was used for Gods and kings and how they should lead us. And just as I mentioned with Young Life Leaders and our campers, good governmental leadership should not promote fear and distrust of their people, but utter dependence that our leaders will always have our best interests in mind.

How are our country's shepherds doing? Are we a more peaceful as a nation than ever before? Are we more prone to less fear? How we answer those questions should guide us into this next election cycle.

One of the most important things I can do as a shepherd here at Cascades is bring a calming and non anxious presence into situations, whether in a hospital room, a counseling session, or a contentious budget meeting. It's in those times of great stress, where fear can seep in and where we must be reminded that our God loves us, is with us, and is for us. We can trust that we do not have to figure things out for ourselves. Nor will we have to fend for ourselves. We simply have to commit ourselves to the shepherd's care and trust he or she will protect us and guide us through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This is what makes us want to confess, "The Lord is MY Shepherd."

So who's ready to have their ear nailed to the Jesus' front door?

I say that Psalm 23 is contractual. And just as with any contract, there is agreement between two parties. When we confess “The Lord is MY Shepherd,” this contract declares what the Lord does for us and what we must do or will receive as benefits in return.

So what does our shepherd agree to do...He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside quiet waters. He restores our soul. He guides us in right living. He is with us. His rod and staff comfort us. He prepares a table before us. He anoints our head with oil.

He makes us lie down...have you ever thought of what that means? Let me put it this way. Have you ever had to make a young child lie down because they were so tired from going hard all day but they refused to sleep because they were so wound up? That’s us! How often do we refuse to rest in a way that really restores our soul because we don’t want to slow down and enjoy the things that our Shepherd has for us. Peace, rest, joy. Instead, we get sucked into the rat race of other things.

My friends, our Shepherd knows what is best for us. He wants us to enter into that rest now...before our bodies give way and do it for us. What things might the Lord invite us to let go of so we can truly enter into this rest?

When our Shepherd does these things for us, this what we receive in return... We want for nothing. We rest in peace. We experience the beauty of creation. We live in right relationship with God, each other, ourselves, and creation.

We fear no evil!

We are welcomed to a banquet. We are reconciled with those whom we have been at odds. We are anointed. We experience God’s goodness, mercy, and loving kindness. And we are privileged to live in God’s house forever.

Notice that I changed the voice of the psalm to first person plural because it applies to all of us.

But the voice that David used is deeply personal. I say that Psalm 23 is personal because no one else can make this confession for us. Not our parents, our spouses, our children, our friends, our religious upbringing. Not even our pastors can declare this on our behalf. We as individuals will stand before the Lord one day and give an account of whether The Lord has been OUR Shepherd or not. We do not gain access into the kingdom of heaven by any other means than our personal declaration that we belong to the Lord and no one else.

Not Caesar. Not America. Not our political affiliation. Not our social standing. Not the Presbyterian Church.

But the Lord.

Notice how in the words of the psalm start off with statements about the Lord. The Lord is. He makes. He leads. He restores. He guides. But then the voice switches to second person singular as if David were speaking to the Lord directly.

David says, “But You are with me. Your rod. Your staff. You prepare. You anoint.” These are the words of someone who knows the Lord intimately. His words are spoken directly to God and not simply as generalities of God. These are the very words of prayer my friends. David’s heart felt prayer.

Because prayer is nothing more than conversations with God.

And who is the one who receives our prayers?

Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep...My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hands. I and the Father are one.”³

When we overlay these words of Jesus onto Psalm 23, it changes how we hear it. We say...

“Jesus is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Jesus makes me lie down in green pastures.

Jesus leads me beside still waters.

Jesus restores my soul.”

Jesus is the good shepherd who alone leads us into and through the valley of the shadow of death. No other God, king, or shepherd in all of history promises to do that.

And finally I say that Psalm 23 is hopeful. Now some translate verse 4 as “Even though I walk through the darkest valley” instead of “The valley of the shadow of death.” I would argue that that was not the psalmist’s original intent. The reason is that by including death, it encompasses everything in life and in death that we may experience...whether divorce or famine or nakedness or business failure or joblessness...even death itself... None of these are the ends in themselves. No! Psalm 23 points us to something more on the other side of each of these that give us hope.

And because Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who died for our sins and conquered death on the cross, we who believe in him, who have been called Children of God, have the hope that we too will conquer death one day. That is Good News!

I want to close by sharing a version of Psalm 23 that I rewrote while I was at Young Life Camp this past week. I wasn’t feeling very confident as a leader, nor comfortable in my skin and spirit. In truth, I felt pretty out of place. This is what bubbled up from my heart one morning.

³John 10:14-15, 27-30

“Jesus is my shepherd - he’s leading, not me. So I don’t have to be insecure with who I am here...what I can or cannot do.

He lets me stroll the hills and the grounds at my pace. Lord knows these boys can run circles around me. He invites me to lounge by the pool. He’s making me new - because this is a new group of dudes that I am called to shepherd. Giving me a fresh start.

Jesus is the leader. I am a follower.

So with him by my side, there’s nothing I can screw up. Sure there will be days when I think I can’t and don’t want to do this any longer and want to quit. But I can’t until Christ is formed in these boys.

I can be comfortable and even take pleasure in who I am as your child, because you made me this way - grey hair, no hair, hidden abs, achy body and all. Your words and loving corrections remind me that I’m your child. So I can rest in your arms.

There is a place for me here. As the guys shared last night many home situations are not ideal - many parents don’t know who their kids truly are inside. They feel alone on this journey and need me to be their friend.

Yes, there is a place for me here even though I can drive, pay my mortgage, and perhaps even be these guys’ grandfather. Ouch that one hurts!

I am not a kid, but an adult, by no fault of my own.

So relax, Montovino, breathe, slather on more sun tan lotion, soak it up and trust that God’s got this. Jesus is here and he will complete what he’s started in each of my dudes.

Praise God!

So may we each confess this morning that Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd. May we trust that he will always lead us in right paths that have our best interests in mind. And may we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there will be blessings beyond imagine on the other side of our darkest moments.

The Lord is My Shepherd. What more could we want?

Amen!

Psalm 23

The Lord *is* my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2

He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.

3

He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

4

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.

5

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.

6

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever.