

## **“The Lord Is My Shepherd”**

Today we are looking at the most familiar Psalm in all the Bible. Most everyone has heard this one before. It is the default Bible passage to pick at funeral. When in doubt read Psalm 23, you can't go wrong.

When I asked for suggestions from the congregation on which Psalms they would like a sermon on this one was not recommended. I think I know the reason for that. It's not because it is not loved but rather it's because we are so familiar with it. Some people say familiarity breeds contempt. Sometimes we become so familiar and used to something we begin to take it for granted or grow tired of it. “I know this Psalm, I have heard it a million times why would I pick this one for my preacher to preach on?”

Yet this one I picked because it is such good news. The Lord is my shepherd. I have a leader and I have a caretaker. I have a God who walks with me through the quiet waters of life and the darkest valleys of death. This shepherd is not a hired hand who quits when he is tired or when danger comes, but he is my Savior and loving Father who never abandons me.

### **We are Sheep**

I am a sheep and so are you. Sheep are not the brightest of creatures. They are quite stubborn, weak and helpless. It is an apt metaphor to describe the human condition.

Because I am a sheep I am prone to wander from my shepherd. As I think that I am reminded of the great hymn, “Come Thou Fount of every Blessing.” The last stanza of that hymn says, “Prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love”

That is to say that I am easily distracted by the cares and temptations of this world yet my shepherd is faithful and will not let me go. He loves me enough to pull me back into the pen when I wander astray, even if he has to leave ninety-nine. This is what the parable of the Lost Sheep teaches us in Luke 15.

The rod and staff of my shepherd are tools that chasten me when I walk away from God and also tools of compassion because the crook of his staff brings me back to the fold to eat from the green pastures of his abundant love. The Bible us in Hebrews 12 that God disciplines those whom he loves. The Lord is my Shepherd and he is good to me, even when he must discipline me.

The thing that really makes this Psalm come alive is to understand how much it truly follows the journey of a shepherd leading his sheep. A book that helps do this is “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23,” written by the late Phillip Keller, a child of missionary parents, and a former shepherd himself.

The first part of the psalm tells us that the Lord is our shepherd and because of that we lack nothing. He makes us to lie down in green pastures and he leads us to quiet waters thereby restoring our souls. This is the first part of the shepherd's journey with his sheep.

### **A Place of Rest- v.1-3**

The first thing that a shepherd must do is to create a place of quiet rest for the sheep and this is not easy.

Sheep, by nature, are not inclined to lay down if they feel restless, under threat from predators, if there is discord in the flock, if they are agitated by pests, or if they are hungry. So a faithful shepherd has to work hard to create and find the right kind of environment where his sheep are protected from these problems so they can lie down.

He will not take his sheep to a pasture that is barren or close to a wild pack of animals, or loaded with pests. The shepherd will scope out the land first to make sure he is not putting them in danger when they get there, so they can graze and get the rest they need. And when they need water or have to cross it the shepherd will not take them to stagnant dead water or roaring out of control water, but rather gentle, flowing, fresh water that is good and safe for them.

In the same way, our Heavenly Father takes care of us. He is a good God who desires to give us good gifts, especially Jesus our Savior, the good shepherd of his sheep, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Lord seeks our welfare, not our harm.

Jesus said, “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:28) The Lord wants to create this space for us in our lives.

### **The Journey- v.3-4**

Having created that quiet place of rest for his sheep the shepherd will soon have to relocate his flock. Sheep cannot graze in one place all year long so they have to be moved as the seasons change and this we see in the language of that part of the psalm that tell us that “the shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness for his name sake.”

In many parts of the world, including the Middle East, shepherds lead their flocks from the lowlands to highlands in the summertime in order to graze on the mountain tops. This is because in the winter you would not be able to go up to the higher elevations because of cold weather and the snow; therefore it was necessary for the shepherd to lead his sheep on the right path in the right time of the season. As the shepherd would do that his sheep had to be led on narrow pathways with deep drop offs to the side of them. This is what the psalmist is talking about when he speaks of walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

For us this means that world we live in is beset with sin and danger all around us and we cannot avoid these valleys of the shadows of death but we do have a faithful shepherd who is leading the way for us and walking with us through these dark valleys so that we can get to our final destination place and because of this we can fear no evil.

The scriptures promises us over and over again in many different ways that our God is with us, (lo I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth) that our shepherd will never leave or forsake us, and that he is with us, especially when we go through the darkest valleys of death.

### **The Destination- v.5-6**

After having passed the valley of the shadow of death the sheep reach the pinnacle of their destination, the highlands. When David says that the Lord his shepherd “prepares a table before him in the presence of his enemies” what he has in mind is the shepherd who has successfully led his sheep to the highlands for the summer in order to graze. The highlands are often referred to as the tablelands. The journey now having been complete, the sheep are able to settle down to graze on the tablelands, just as a family does at the supper table at the end of the day.

The highlands, just like the lowlands, has its share of enemies such as mountain lions and pests, but the good shepherd has already been to this land in the springtime in order to find safest and best spots to graze, plus he is with his sheep right now in order to protect them from the enemies of the sheep. This is what the oil did for the sheep. The shepherd would place olive oil on the noses of the sheep in order to keep the flies away so that they would not get infected or become agitated. So when David said “You anoint my head with oil” he had in mind the imagery of the shepherd who put oil on his sheep in order to keep the flies away.

The fact that the shepherd has successfully led his sheep to the highlands in order to graze reminds us that our lives as Christians are also on an upward path as well. We too are being led on a trajectory toward heaven in order to live in the eternal presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In light of eternity, our life on this earth is short. We get 70, 80, 90 years at best and then it is over.

No doubt, for now, we are in this world and because we are, we are to love God and our neighbor while we are in it, and we are to work and pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. But we should never lose sight of the fact that this world is not our final home. One day we will leave it and we will be take nothing with us when we go. Therefore it would appropriate for us to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven because only they will never be destroyed. This is what Jesus instructed his disciples to do in the Sermon on the Mount.

What kind of treasures are you storing up?

David reflects this awareness of the upward journey of our lives in the Psalm when he says that he will now dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

In the OT the temple in Jerusalem was the ultimate “house of the Lord on earth.” It was the place where God was understood to dwell, especially in the inner sanctum of the holy of holies where the Arc of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments were kept.

Today we too are in a temple of sorts in that we are all gathered in this sacred space of worship.

What makes this space sacred are not the bricks and mortar but the presence of God in the gathered community. And as we are gathered again in worship today we are reminded yet again of the trajectory that our lives are on as Christians. Our trajectory is heaven in the eternal presence of the God. Heaven is the true “house of the Lord” and everything we experience here on earth that is of God is only a taste of the heaven to come.

So what lies ahead of us, after our deaths, is “dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.” In that place we will finally be safe from all of our enemies and “there will be no more crying, death, or pain.” For our Lord will “wipe away every tear” and we will worship and adore him forever.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.