

A Shepherd Explains Psalm 23 (Part 2: Psalm 23:4-6)

Franklin Church of Christ Edwin Crozier October 26, 2003 PM Worship
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Introduction:

In a previous lesson, we began to read **Psalm 23** with new eyes, learning that the Psalm was far richer in meaning to those acquainted with shepherding. Phillip Keller, a man raised among shepherds in East Africa, and himself a shepherd for several years, has helped our understanding in his book **A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23**. Allow me to repeat, as we continue our look at this Psalm we will each be listening from different needs. Some will be listening as the Lord's sheep being reassured of our shepherd and learning our responsibility as sheep. Some will be listening as the neighbor's sheep, longing to enter this fold. Others will be seeing the model of shepherding left for us by the Chief Shepherd as we strive to shepherd the congregation or our own homes.

In this lesson, we will study **Psalm 23:4-6**. There are two interesting shifts in these verses. First, the first three verses are addressed to us, as the sheep extols the virtues of his great Shepherd. However, in **vs. 4**, David speaks to his Shepherd. This is intriguing, that a sheep has an intimate enough relationship with his Shepherd to address Him. Yet that is exactly the relationship we have with our Shepherd. We can go to Him in prayer. We can lay our cares at His feet. We can offer praise to Him. We can make requests of Him.

The second shift is one known by the shepherd. According to Mr. Keller, "Both in Palestine and on our western sheep ranches this division of the year is common practice. Most of the efficient sheepmen endeavor to take their flocks onto distant summer ranges during summer. This often entails long 'drives.' The sheep move along slowly, feeding as they go, gradually working their way up the mountains behind the receding snow. By late summer they are well up on the remote alpine meadows above timberline." It is as if, in this Psalm we are being taken on a journey with the sheep through the cycle of its year. Now, as the sheep is following his shepherd through the mountain valleys to the tables of pastureland, we see the "intimate conversation" they have on their way, secluded from the sheep of other folds.

Discussion:

- I. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me.
 - A. As already mentioned, this brings to the shepherd's mind the yearly journey up to the mountain pastures. However, the sheep cannot be airlifted up to this higher ground. They have to travel through the mountains' valleys. These valleys are the best ways because they have the easiest grades, they contain the best water sources and the best grazing for the journey. Going through these valleys is a must and the goal of the mountain top pastureland is worthy, but the journey is dangerous.
 - B. Shepherds know why these valleys are a shadow of death. Mr. Keller explains:

All the dangers of rampaging rivers in flood; avalanches, rock slides; poisonous plants; the ravages of predators that raid the flock or the awesome storms of sleet and hail and snow were familiar to him. He had handled his sheep and managed them with care under all these adverse conditions. Nothing took him by surprise. He was fully prepared to safeguard his flock and tend them with skill under every circumstance.
 - C. While these dangers loomed on every hand, the vigilant, watchful shepherd is on hand to protect the flock in time of attack. To steer the flock away from poisonous plants. To keep them together and protected in the shelter of cliffs in time of storms. The sheep are not left to make this journey on their own. Keeping their eye on the shepherd they are free from worry and fear, knowing he will care for them.
 - D. Each of us, in our own way, is longing for the "higher ground" with God. But, we also must go through the valleys. We have to face the "dark and dangerous" days as well. Consider all the great Bible characters. Before Moses was a leader, he fled Egypt in fear, spending forty years herding sheep for his father-in-law. Jacob fled from his brother and spent years in the service of his father-in-law because of Laban's deceit. Joseph was sold into slavery and put in prison before he became second-in-command of Egypt. David was constantly attacked by Saul before he became king. Each of these made it to the higher ground, but not without first going through the valley of the shadow of death.
 - E. Finally, this verse speaks of walking through the "valley of the shadow of death." It does not speak of dying. This Psalm is not about death. It is about comfort that, despite what we face, God is there as our Shepherd to lead us through the dark times and bring us onto the mountaintop (**Hebrews 13:5-6**). And our Shepherd knows the best path to take that will give us the most strength.
- II. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
 - A. While traveling through the valleys, the sheep are comforted by the shepherd's rod and staff. These comprise the greatest part of the shepherd's equipment and are used for several specific tasks.
 - B. That David found the rod of his Shepherd comforting is striking. After all, the rod was the main source of discipline from the shepherd. Mr. Keller describes the rod as a sapling pulled from the ground and carved

at one end to fit the hand of the shepherd and at the other with a ball. Even as youngsters, those in shepherd families carve their own rod and spend time practicing with the rod using it as a striking and throwing weapon. This rod is used for three basic purposes.

1. Discipline: Mr. Keller says, "I could never get over how often and with what accuracy, the African herders would hurl their knob-kerries at some recalcitrant beast that misbehaved. If the shepherd saw a sheep wandering away on its own, or approaching poisonous weeds, or getting too close to danger of one sort or another, the club would go whistling through the air to send the wayward animal scurrying back to the bunch."
 2. Protection: The rod is a weapon to ward off attacks from wild beasts. In fact, when David tells Saul about striking the bear and the lion in **I Samuel 17:34-35**, it is very likely he struck them with his rod.
 3. Inspection: Because of a sheep's thick wool, sometimes it is difficult to know its true physical state. The rod is used to inspect the sheep, pushing, pulling and parting the wool, so the shepherd can examine the skin and body. God uses this imagery in **Ezekiel 20:37**.
 4. We can easily see why the rod of protection and inspection brought comfort to David. But the rod of discipline is another matter, especially in David's life. We all know the form of God's rod in David's life when he sinned with Bathsheba. His child died and trouble plagued his family from then on. And yet, this same David found this discipline a comfort. Why? Because he, as a shepherd, understood the necessity of using the rod of discipline. He understood its end. We as sheep need also to understand the necessity of receiving discipline as described in **Hebrews 12:7-11**.
- C. The staff is the equipment we are most familiar with. It is the long slender walking stick with the hooked end. While the shepherd would use this staff as a walking stick to lean on, it was also a piece of equipment designed specifically for the needs of shepherding.
1. Drawing sheep together: When a ewe is lambing, the shepherd will use his staff to lift up the newborns and place them side by side with their mothers. The staff is used, because if the mother smells the odor of the shepherd's hands on her lamb, she will reject it. The staff would also be used to draw those sheep on the fringes back into close huddle with the rest of the sheep.
 2. Drawing the sheep to the shepherd: We spoke of the rod used for examination, the staff was likewise used to reach out and catch individual sheep to draw them to the master for examination. Mr. Keller, even claimed the staff was used to demonstrate a special bond between particular sheep and the shepherd. "Sometimes I have been fascinated to see how a shepherd will actually hold his staff against the side of some sheep that is a special pet or favorite, simply so that they 'are in touch.'"
 3. Guiding the sheep: Mr. Keller wrote, "Again and again I have seen a shepherd use his staff to guide his sheep gently into a new path or through some gate or along dangerous, difficult routes. He does not use it actually to beat the beast. Rather, the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go."
 4. Rescuing the sheep: Sheep are stubborn creatures and often get themselves into dilemmas they can't get themselves out of. For instance, striving to get a few extra mouthfuls of grass, sheep will push their way into brambles and bushes or even slip down the edge of a cliff and be unable to get back up. The shepherd's staff helps him rescue the sheep from these "traps."
- D. The rod and staff are comforting. We are comforted by our shepherd's rod and staff, representative, for the most part of God's word, which protects us from sin, steers us away from danger, helps us overcome the tempter, draws us together and closer to God and will rescue us from our own undoing if we will study it regularly and obey what it says. That is why Paul commends the Word of God in **Acts 20:32**.

III. Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

- A. When I first read this verse, I pictured some type of banqueting table laid out with all kinds of delicious goodies while David's enemies looked on in hunger, drooling for a tiny morsel. However, that is not the image. The table spoken of is not the kind of table we use, but rather refers to a land table, that is, the tablelands on the mountains to which the sheep have been journeying. Even on the higher ground the enemies stalk, but the ever-present shepherd keeps his sheep safe.
- B. Mr. Keller describes the shepherd's work regarding these tableland pastures.

Early in the season, even before all the snow has been melted by spring sunshine, he will go ahead and make preliminary survey trips into this rough, wild country. He will look it over with great care, keeping ever in mind its best use for his flock during the coming season.

Then just before the sheep arrive he will make another expedition or two to prepare the tableland for them. He takes along a supply of salt and minerals to be distributed over the range at strategic spots for the benefit of the sheep during the summer. The intelligent, careful manager will also decide well ahead of time where his camps will be located so the sheep have the best bed grounds. He goes over the range carefully to determine how vigorous the grass and upland vegetation is. At this time he decides whether some glades and basins can be used only lightly whereas other slopes and meadows may be grazed more heavily.

He will check to see if there are poisonous weeds appearing, and if so, he will plan his grazing program to avoid them, or take drastic steps to eradicate them. ...

Another task the attentive shepherd takes on in the summer is to keep an eye out for predators. He will look for signs and spoor of wolves, coyotes, cougars and bears. If these raid or molest the sheep he will have to hunt them down or go to great pains to trap them so that his flock can rest in peace.

Often what actually happens is that these crafty ones are up on the rimrock watching every movement the sheep make, hoping for a chance to make a swift, sneaking attack that will stampede the sheep. Then one or other of the flock is bound to fall easy prey to the attacker's fierce teeth and claws.

- C. David refers to this kind of shepherd's work in this part of the Psalm. Jesus has done this for us. He brings us through the dangerous and trying valleys, keeping us comforted by His presence and His discipline and guidance. He leads us to the mountaintops even as our enemies look on. He remains ever vigilant to protect us. Peter claimed our adversary, the devil, prowls like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (**I Peter 5:8**). But Jesus has already prepared the way for us even in the face of this roaring lion. On the night before Jesus' death, He told the apostles, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (**John 14:2-3**). Jesus was not saying He was going to heaven to wash the sheets and clean the drapes in heavenly mansions for the twelve. Rather, He was discussing how His death and resurrection would prepare the way for our resurrection and eternity with Him (**I Corinthians 15:20-23**).
- D. In addition to His own preparation, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to prepare the tablelands in the presence of our enemy. **John 16:7-15** describes the work of the Spirit through the apostles. Through Him, all truth has been made manifest to us in the scriptures that we may graze on the tablelands with our Shepherd even as the lion prowls about. He cannot overpower us because the Good Shepherd is with us.

IV. Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.

- A. In our first lesson, you will remember that I mentioned the four requirements necessary for sheep to lie down in green pastures. One of which was freedom from the aggravation of pests. According to Mr. Keller, these summer months on the tablelands are also "fly months." Here is his description.

To name just a few parasites that trouble stock and make their lives a misery: there are warble flies, bot flies, heel flies, nose (nasal) flies, deer flies, black flies, mosquitos (*sic*), gnats and other minute, winged parasites that proliferate at this time of the year. ...

Sheep are especially troubled by the nose fly, or nasal fly, as it is sometimes called. These little flies buzz about the sheep's head, attempting to deposit their eggs on the damp, mucous membranes of the sheep's nose. If they are successful the eggs will hatch in a few days to form small, slender, worm-like larvae. They work their way up the nasal passages into the sheep's head; they burrow into the flesh and there set up an intense irritation accompanied by severe inflammation.

- B. As disgusting and irritating as it sounds, we might be tempted to think this is a trivial issue in the face of cougars and coyotes. However, Mr. Keller continues.

For relief from this agonizing annoyance sheep will deliberately beat their heads against trees, rocks, posts, or brush. They will rub them in the soil and thrash around against woody growth. In extreme cases of intense infestation a sheep may even kill itself in a frenzied endeavor to gain respite from the aggravation. Often advanced stages of infection from these flies will lead to blindness.

- C. The sheep cannot deal with these annoyances themselves. In fact, according to Mr. Keller, if the sheep are left to themselves to deal with these pests, they often end up doing more harm to themselves, running around until they fall down in utter exhaustion. The only solution is through the loving care of the shepherd anointing his sheep with the oils and salves which will repel these dangerous pests. "At the very first sign of flies among the flock he will apply an antidote to their heads," Mr. Keller explains. This is not a once a year ritual, this is something for which the shepherd must conscientiously watch throughout these times, having a constant supply of the anointing oil to help the sheep be free from these aggravations.
- D. There is amazing parallel between these little pests with the sheep and our own lives. Our adversary often refrains from blatant attacks. He is more like an annoyance. Instead of turning to the anointing cup of the Shepherd, we seek in our own wisdom to overcome the distraction, the stress, the emotional turmoil. We beat our heads against the trees and run in circles until we are overcome with utter exhaustion and give up. We desperately long for peace, but it eludes us. Our Shepherd has provided the anointing oil for us in His word. He has provided the peace for us, if we will only turn to Him. Was that not Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 6:25-34**? Was that not Paul's point in **Philippians 4:4-9**? God has promised us peace from the pests of stress, depression, emotional distress and mental anguish. Our cup of anointing oil overflows, we simply must turn to the Word of God.

- V. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life.
- A. Once again, we are astounded that David, a man whose life was marked with adversity from his own king, from the Philistines, from his own family and from his own sins, said this. Yet, as he again addresses us, his fellow sheep, he claims goodness and lovingkindness will follow him. Considering the last half of this Psalm and what it meant to shepherds, the statement is equally amazing. Here is a sheep who has been led by his shepherd through the valley of the shadow of death. He has been led on to a tableland right into the face of his enemies. He has experienced the rod of his shepherd in discipline, yet he has the wisdom to know that all of this was for his best interests. And he expects that to continue for all his life.
 - B. Can we be sheep like this? Surely, it is easy to feel goodness and lovingkindness will follow us right after we have killed Goliath. But what about right after Absalom has stolen the kingdom? Can we give thanks to our Shepherd for goodness and lovingkindness in the difficult times?
 - C. To the shepherd, this statement has a double meaning. It refers to the goodness and lovingkindness this sheep expects from his shepherd. It also refers to the goodness and lovingkindness that the sheep will leave in his wake because of the work of the shepherd. Consider Mr. Keller's description:

Sheep can, under mismanagement, be the most destructive livestock. In short order they can ruin and ravage land almost beyond remedy. But in bold contrast they can ... be the most beneficial of all livestock if properly managed.

Their manure is the best balanced of any produced by domestic stock. When scattered efficiently over the pastures it proves of enormous benefit to the soil. The sheep's habit of seeking the highest rise of ground on which to rest insures that the fertility from the rich low land is re-deposited on the less productive higher ground. No other livestock will consume as wide a variety of herbage. Sheep eat all sorts of weeds and other undesirable plants which might otherwise invade a field. ... In a few years a flock of well-managed sheep will clean up and restore a piece of ravaged land as no other creature can do.

- D. When we, as sheep, allow ourselves to be blessed by following the Good Shepherd, we in turn leave a wake of goodness and lovingkindness. It is much like Jesus' statement to Simon the Pharisee in **Luke 7:47**. The one who truly realizes the blessing of goodness, and lovingkindness he has received will be the one who emanates the most love to the one who bestowed that mercy and to others who need mercy.
 - E. We must examine and question our own lives as Mr. Keller advises, "Do I leave a trail of sadness or of gladness behind? Is my memory, in other people's minds, entwined with mercy and goodness, or would they rather forget me altogether? Do I deposit a blessing behind me or am I a bane to others? Is my life a pleasure to people or a pain?" When the Lord is really our Shepherd, we truly wear His mark and carefully follow His lead, goodness and lovingkindness will follow us.
- VI. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
- A. David began this psalm with the proud proclamation, "The Lord is my Shepherd." He ends with the equally thrilling statement, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." And why wouldn't he remain? He would be foolish to seek the shepherding of another master.
 - B. While this statement is a reflection on the ability of the Shepherd, David's statement also says a great deal about the sheep. Despite the walks through the valley of the shadow of death, despite pasturing under the menacing eyes of the enemy, despite having endured the sting of the Shepherd's rod, David has no desire to leave the house, the flock, the fold of the Lord. He wants to be a part of this family.
 - C. In view of this psalm, I am puzzled at the thought of why anyone would ever want to leave the fold of God. Yet, people do. Having come to a greater understanding of David's pastoral poem, I recognize it has a great deal to do with outlook. How do the sheep perceive what goes on around them? Do they trust the Shepherd's judgment or are they wrapped up in their own desires? Do the sheep find comfort in the rod and staff or do they become angered by it? We, as the sheep, are the only ones who can determine our outlook on these things. Let us boldly make this psalm our own anthem of life in following Jesus. Let us proclaim, "The Lord is my Shepherd ... I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Conclusion:

There are some who have listened as sheep in another fold. For some reason, you have stayed in the barren, burned up, disease and parasite infested grounds of another shepherd. The Good Shepherd has laid down his life for you and is holding open the door into His fold so He can make you lie down in green pasture, lead you beside quiet waters, restore your soul, guide you in paths of righteousness, comfort you in the valleys, prepare a table for you before your enemies, anoint your head with oil and follow you with goodness and mercy. Despite what you may think, you will not find that where you are now. Please, take this opportunity to be marked by the Good Shepherd and enter His house.