

The Shepherd

Psalm 23



John 10:1-16

Before we get into Psalm 23, I want to take a closer look at another shepherd passage in the Bible. In this particular passage of John's Gospel we have Jesus speaking before a group in Jerusalem consisting of the Man Born Blind (of Chapter 9), some Pharisees, some of the disciples and others listening in the crowd. Chapter 9 of John's Gospel dealt with the healing of the Man Born Blind and spiritual blindness. As he continues in Chapter 10 we see he is still speaking somewhat of blindness, but more directly of those who recognize the Messiah. He uses the description of a shepherd to draw a parallel and reveal a spiritual truth. He begins Chapter 10 telling us of how it is only the shepherd who enters into the sheep pen and can call the sheep to follow him. He is using a common image of the day to illustrate his point. While this image may have been common in his day, it is less so for most of us in the 21st century.

The sheep pen would have been an enclosure consisting of a wall with only one entrance into the pen. It may or may not have had a roof of branches or vines. When the sheep were in the enclosure, a watchman or the shepherd would have lain in the doorway to keep the sheep within safe from predators and thieves or from wandering away. Anyone trying to get to the sheep other than the shepherd (or hired hand) would have to climb over the wall by stealth. Someone doing so would not have good intentions. In fact, Jesus tells us in verse 10 what those intentions are: *"[t]he thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy."*

We are also told in this passage that when the shepherd comes, he leads the sheep out through the gate to good pasture. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. The sheep have likely spent their entire lives following this shepherd. They know him well. They know his appearance, the sound of his voice, his touch. He has cared for and provided for them, even protected them from harm every day of their lives as he leads them from one lush pasture to the next. Having spent so much time with the shepherd, they recognize and follow only him and his voice. They will follow none other.

Jesus continues with this shepherd imagery to teach that he is the shepherd. He says in verse 14, *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...."* Those who have listened to what Jesus has said throughout his ministry and have taken it to heart are his sheep. They have come to know truth (spiritual truth and insight) and they know what the voice of truth sounds like. They will follow no other. Many in the crowd hearing Jesus speak this way were confounded by what he said. They didn't believe what he

claimed to be and to what the miraculous healings he performed testified. His words and actions proclaimed him loudly to be the Son of God, the awaited messiah, but many did not recognize him. They were spiritually blind. But those who did recognize his true identity became his followers, his sheep, his flock.¹ Isaiah identifies Messiah as being like a shepherd to Israel, a literary image² in scripture that would have been known to the Pharisees:

He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.
(Isaiah 40:11)

One of the many truths we are to take from this passage, and the one relevant to our topic today is that Jesus knows us as intimately as a shepherd knows his sheep. A shepherd spending every day of his life tending his flock knows the personality and needs of each individual sheep in his care. He knows which one is prone to wander off into mischief. He knows which one is fearful and skittish of every sound and shadow. He knows which one will stay close to his side trusting him to lead him through life. In times of danger the shepherd will protect the sheep from predators. (Remember David facing the lion and the bear while shepherding his flock in his youth? 1 Samuel 17:34-37). The shepherd knows where verdant pasture and calm waters can be found for the rest and care of his sheep. He patiently leads, protects and cares for his sheep day in day out, never forsaking them and always lovingly tending their needs.



Psalm 23

It seems fitting that we end our study of King David with his most famous and beloved psalm, Psalm 23 – *The Lord is my shepherd*....As a shepherd himself David knew the work and life of tending sheep. As a military leader he knew the work of leading, caring for and providing for his men. As a king he knew what was required in shepherding a nation. Psalm 23 speaks to this understanding of what it means not only to be a shepherd, but also recognizing that he is a sheep of a particular flock. As he looked back and surveyed his life he recognized the hand of his shepherd caring for him. Because the Lord was David's shepherd his needs were met. The Lord provided both physical and spiritual nourishment

¹ Jesus' reference to "sheep that are not of this pen" in verse 16 refer to gentiles who would eventually come to faith.

² Ezekiel spoke of Messiah as a shepherd in Ezekiel 34.

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for him. When David was fleeing from Saul the Lord led him to the safety of the deserts south of Judah where he was met by those who would help him and encourage him. They may not have been literal green pastures and quiet waters, but they were a safe haven to restore his soul and meet his needs. Many times throughout David's life David experienced the divine hand of God meeting his needs both physical and spiritual.

The Lord also provided spiritual restoration when David walked (or returned to walk) the righteous path with the Lord. The Lord healed, bound his wounded soul and led him to peace in his presence. The Lord does this because of his love and compassion for his sheep, but also to the glory of his name. His actions reveal him for who he is, a loving and personal Lord to each of us – not solely to the flock as a whole, but to each individual. We can see his love and care given freely to all. And we can trust, by his example to others, that he will do so for each one of us in turn.

David goes on to speak of the comforting presence of the Lord as we walk the valley of the shadow of death. Those valleys can be the result of our own waywardness and sin. They can be the consequence of another's sin affecting our own lives, the ripple effect of one's actions impacting upon another. The valley can be the painful loss of a loved one. Or it can be our own final walk upon this earth. In all these cases we walk with the Shepherd who not only knows the path through the valley, but is intimately connected with our hurts, needs and sorrows as he walks us through those times. He often is the only one who can accompany us on those spiritually trying times. He meets our needs in those times, comforts our soul, and protects us from harm. When it is our final walk and we face our own impending death, he is the only one who can accompany us and lead us through to the other side. We are not alone; the Shepherd guides us and protects us even from the enemy of our soul until we have reached another green pasture.

Verses 5 and 6 shift from the image of the Shepherd leading David through life to the image of being seated at a banquet table. The Lord's provisions and blessings are forthcoming even when we are surrounded by our enemies in life. The anointing of oil is an act of loving care. It is a soothing and refreshing act, taking away the stress and fear of living amongst the enemies of verse 5. David knew that because of the Lord he was richly blessed. His Shepherd had lead him, provided for him, protected him and tenderly accompanied him all the days of his life. His blessings overflowed as wine over pouring from a cup.

These two verses of the psalm seem to point to another banquet table as well, one not of this life. When we have passed through that final valley accompanied by the shepherd we will find ourselves in the house of the Lord, where we will dwell with him forever. David's heart was confident in the idea that even after he left this world he would dwell with the Lord. He would be received as an honored guest, welcomed anointed with

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oil, and seated at the Lord's table³. This isn't the only time David mentioned knowing he would be with the Lord after his life on earth had come to its end. At the loss of his infant son⁴ he knew that one day he would be reunited with his son. In the midst of that dark valley he was confident that something awaited beyond the grave for both he and his son. David had much to look forward to at the end of his life. He praised the Lord for the blessings poured out upon him throughout his life, and eagerly awaited joining the Lord in the life to come.

³ Recall what it meant for Mephibosheth to be seated at the king's table in 2 Samuel 9

⁴ 2 Samuel 12:22-23