

**Sermon preached by Pastor Bob Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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**A LOOK AT THE SHEPHERD**

**Psalm 23**

Tim Laniak, Dean of the Charlotte, North Carolina campus of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and an Old Testament scholar, spent a sabbatical year in 2003-04 living in Jordan and Israel. His research included observing Bedouin shepherds as they tended their flocks. Perhaps these herdsman resemble closely the shepherds who cared for their sheep in ancient Palestine. One of the books that came out of his sabbatical, aptly entitled *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*, has this story:

One of my favorite experiences in Jordan was an October day in the shepherds' fields without an interpreter. Early in my "field education," I was hoping to learn first by just watching, listening, and following. In the morning, my son Jesse and I followed a shepherd who was hired by several families in Ismakhiah to take care of their respective flocks. He handled about two hundred animals. . . .

One of the images imprinted on my mind from that day was the scene of a few sheep, happily snuggled next to each other on the ground for an afternoon rest. Others were huddled or "flocking" nearby. But the ones on the ground were peculiarly peaceful. It took a good bit of the day for the flock to get used to us, but by this time I was able to move slowly toward them, sit down nearby, and take their picture.

What makes the impression so memorable is the lack of motion and restlessness that is so common. Sheep are usually on the move as they graze. They are easily provoked by other sheep or goats and typically shuttle around, clustering in their cliques.

They panic easily when an unknown person is around. They seem overly sensitive to any changes in the environment. But when there is nothing and no one bothering them, and their stomachs are full, they just lie down and ruminate in contented satisfaction.

While the sheep rested, the shepherds spontaneously began to play music on handmade instruments. They sang some songs and danced a bit, providing Jesse and me with some unexpected entertainment. There was such a natural correspondence between the carefree respite for the sheep and the shepherds. I couldn't help but think of King David who probably composed some of his psalms when he was a young shepherd.

Today, we will look at one of those psalms – Psalm 23, often known as the Shepherd Psalm. It talks about the satisfaction we get from trusting the Lord.

## **THE SHEPHERD'S WORKPLACE**

The psalm begins with those memorable words, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Did you get that? The LORD is my shepherd. James Montgomery Boice described it this way: “The psalm is a masterpiece throughout. But if ever a psalm could stand almost on a single line, it is this one.” The LORD is my shepherd. In your Bible, all the letters of the word are probably capitalized. The word “LORD” is the English translation for the Hebrew word *Yahweh*. This is the name God used when he first revealed Himself to Moses as the One who would rescue Israel from bondage in Egypt. It is the name that refers to the Lord in His relationship as redeemer of His covenant people. Literally, it means “I am who I am.” As Boice points out:

“It refers to God’s timelessness, on the one hand, and to His self-sufficiency on the other. Self-sufficiency means that God needs nothing. He needs no wisdom from anyone else; He has all wisdom in Himself. He needs no power: He is all-powerful. He does not need to be worshipped or helped or served [worship and service are for us, not God]. Nor is He accountable to anyone else. He answers only to Himself.” Timelessness means that God is always the same in these eternal traits or attributes. He was like this yesterday, He will be like this tomorrow. He will be unchanged and unchangeable forever. He is the great “I Am” (*Expositional Commentary on Psalms, Volume 1*).

The great “I Am” – the God of the universe – takes notice of you and of me. He takes care of His people. We know from the New Testament, that Jesus is that shepherd. In John 10, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd who would sacrifice everything for His sheep:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11-13).

This is one of those “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John. To His listeners, He meant only one thing – that He claimed to be God. The way that Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd” in this verse He alluded to the divine name – the great “I am.” His listeners knew without a doubt that Jesus was claiming to be God Himself, the promised Shepherd of Israel.

He said that His sheep follow Him because they know His voice. Knowing the intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd, Jesus used the metaphor to describe His love and care for us. When we read Psalm 23, we can know the Jesus, the Lord, the great I Am, is the shepherd.

Sheep need a shepherd. According to Tim Laniak, the primary breed of sheep in the lands of Israel and Jordan are historically known as the Awassi or “fat tail.” The

nickname comes from the large tail used to store up energy for the season when food is scarce. It is hardy and strong in regions where the summer heat is intense and water is limited. They retain water easily and replenish rapidly the large amounts (as much as nine liters) that they lose over several days.

Sheep in that part of the Middle East grazed on the fertile grass produced by rain. In the summer and autumn they fed on weeds and stubble left over from harvest. In contrast to goats, who are quite independent, sheep depend on the shepherd to find pasture and water for them. Shepherds also provide shelter, medication and aid in birthing. Sheep are virtually helpless without the shepherd.

In ancient Israel, sheep normally grazed on semi-arid lands that did not receive enough rainfall to sustain the growing of crops. Hillsides that are covered with green in winter hide soil that holds little water. The shepherd had to know where the water and green pastures were.

To the ancients of Israel, Psalm 23 would bring to mind the wandering of Israel in the Sinai under the leadership of Moses. There, the shepherd imagery was clear as Yahweh, the Lord, led Israel over 40 years of wandering to the Promised Land. Their desert pilgrimage to the Promised Land was the lens through which they understood Psalm 23.

### **THE WORK OF THE SHEPHERD**

Tim Laniak describes the work of the shepherd with three functions: Provision, Protection, and Guidance. Let's look at how Psalm 23 describes this work.

First, we can see provision as the shepherd leads us to green pastures and quiet waters. Green pastures are the places of fresh and tender grass, where one lies at ease, and rest and enjoyment are combined. Quiet waters are waters where the weary find a pleasant resting-place. Literally, it means "waters of a quiet place." Think of a resting- or dwelling-place, an oasis in the desert. That is the image portrayed here.

When the psalmist declares that the shepherd leads him, he uses a pastoral word for gentle leading, and more especially of guiding the herds to the watering-places. Sheep need to be led. They need everything in place in order to be at rest. Phillip Keller, a pastor and author who for eight years was himself a shepherd, writes in *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*: "It is almost impossible for sheep to lie down unless certain requirements are met." Keller explains that before sheep will lie down they need to be free of four things. Because of their timidity, sheep "refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear . . . Sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with other sheep within the flock. If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down . . . Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food."

We see that God's leading to green pastures and quiet waters leads to the restoration of the soul. The Hebrew idiom actually means to turn back or return. The psalmist returns to the Lord, the only place of rest and security.

Only our trust in God will return us to a place of rest and satisfaction. Can you recall these New Testament passages?

Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

John 6:35: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”

Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Only through the Good Shepherd can we find rest and satisfaction. Jesus is our source of help when we are in trouble because of our sin or the sins of the world. To people who know about sheep, the metaphor is useful. Phillip Keller describes how sheep can get stuck on their backs so that they are unable to move – sort of like turtles:

They lie down in a little hollow and then roll to one side to stretch or relax. If their center of gravity shifts, they may turn so far that their feet no longer touch the ground. A sheep in that position is called a “cast” sheep. It cannot get up by itself and it must be rescued . . . or it will die. They are helpless and need a shepherd who will carefully and gently put them on their feet (*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*).

We are the same. We often lose our spiritual balance, get turned on our backs, and caught up in our own sin or in our responses to the wrongdoings of others. We find ourselves foolishly trapped upside-down because we leaned after what this world has to offer. Without a Good Shepherd who knows us inside and out, loves us, and gently restores us we’d be in trouble. That’s why Psalm 139 ends with “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

In verse 5 of Psalm 23, David shifts the shepherd metaphor to that of hospitality in order to expand his description of the shepherd’s provision. A table is prepared, really a banquet is given and the psalmist – one of the sheep – is a guest. The tradition in ancient Israel included comforting and preparing guests when they arrived for the anticipated banquet. Each sweaty, dusty face would be cleaned and anointed with oil to brighten and provide a sweet aroma at the dinner table. He anoints us with the Holy Spirit, the divine comforter. We are blessed in body and spirit because God’s comforter dwells within every believer. He is always present and always available.

In this instance, the banquet is prepared in front of David’s enemies. Drawing from his experience as a shepherd, David probably wrote this while he was running away from the persecution of his mortal enemy, King Saul. But let me explain how this verse relates to us, as our table is spread before our enemies. We spend every day of our life confronted by Satan and those who do his bidding – demons and an ungodly world. Ephesians 6:12 tells us, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the

authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Our Good Shepherd Jesus is there to provide for our spiritual needs in the midst of the evil forces that attempt to destroy our lives and souls.

“My cup overflows.” This literally means “My cup is an abundant drink.” It refers to a shepherd’s cup, a large, hollowed-out stone that could hold forty or fifty gallons and from which the sheep drank. Imagine such a drinking vessel overflowing with that much water. Let me assure you, God will provide for you abundantly (physically, emotionally and spiritually) if you walk with Him. You will be full of life in every day that dawns upon you.

The shepherd also provides protection. His tools provide comfort to the sheep who follow him. The staff was the long stick with a crook at one end. The shepherd used it for leaning as he watched the flock, for picking off branches that may harm the sheep, for rescuing when a sheep gets stuck in briars, caught in a flash flood. The staff was an extension of the shepherd’s arm. He may use it to guide sheep through a pass lightly pointing the way with a shoulder tap. Phillip Keller describes the staff as an implement “to be in touch” as the shepherd walks beside a sheep, almost holding hands as he lays the staff against the side of the animal. That’s how God relates to us, His sheep.

The rod was a small club used for defense against wild animals and thieves. The shepherd was skilled in throwing the club at his foe. Perhaps David used the rod to kill the lion and the bear that Scripture mentions while he was a young shepherd. When he faced Goliath, the giant made fun by exclaiming that David came to fight with sticks. He chose another shepherds’ weapon, the sling-shot. Our Good Shepherd has the “tools” to defeat whatever may harm us. After a cruel death, He was resurrected to life, demonstrating that He was God. While we cannot stand against Satan’s power, the Shepherd of our souls certainly can!

Notes in the ESV Study Bible describe the shadow of death which may be the shadow that death casts, or it may be, as the ESV footnote has it, “deep darkness.” Perhaps the idea is that in a valley in the desert (or wadi) in Israel one can encounter deep shadows, and cannot know for sure who (bandits) or what (animals, flash floods, or other dangers) lurks in them. Even in such periods of suspense and danger, the faithful find assurance that God is with them, and thus they need not fear. This is the result of the Shepherd’s provision “I will fear no evil.” Jesus’ flock is kept from the danger of thieves, who come only to steal and kill and destroy. The Good Shepherd gives us His life, abundantly and with abandon. We need to fear no evil.

If our battle is with demonic forces, we cannot win. We need the protection of the Good Shepherd!

## **THE PILGRIMAGE IN THE DESERT**

Psalm 23 helps us draw a contrast between the uncertainty of the world and the certainty we have with the Good Shepherd. Daniel Gilbert, a psychology professor at Harvard, did a study recently that showed “Americans are smiling less and worrying more than they were a year ago, that happiness is down and sadness is up, that we are getting less sleep and smoking more cigarettes, that depression is on the rise.” In an article entitled, “What You Don't Know Makes You Nervous,” he stated that the real problem is not financial – not having enough money, but something else: Uncertainty. People don't know what's going to happen. Will I have a job next week? What's ahead in the future for me? “An uncertain future leaves us stranded in an unhappy present with nothing to do but wait . . . . Our national gloom is real enough, but it isn't a matter of insufficient funds. It's a matter of insufficient certainty.”

Our certainty with the Good Shepherd is that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. The word translated “goodness” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, a word that's hard to translate into English. *Hesed* is goodness, kindness, love, faithfulness, all rolled up into one. It describes the fathomless love of God for his people – demonstrated most profoundly on the cross. Romans 8:32 reminds us, “He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?” That is *hesed*!

Not only does the Good Shepherd give us goodness and mercy, He promises that we will dwell in the house of the Lord. Old Testament scholar Peter Craigie said in his commentary on the Psalms: “The statement should not be taken literally, as if referring to a temple servant who would actually live perpetually within the temple precincts. It refers rather to living permanently in God's presence; such a life was regularly punctuated by actual visits to the temple . . .” We will have God's presence as we journey through life to our final destination.

As we close, let's consider another psalm, Psalm 27. It echoes the same message as Psalm 23:

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His temple. For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble; He will conceal me under the cover of His tent; He will lift me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD (Psalm 27:3-6).

Think back to Israel's wandering in Sinai, a pilgrimage through which Psalm 23 and 27 are to be understood. Amidst the hardship of the journey, their Shepherd guided them with His presence: the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He never left them! At the end of Psalm 27, the writer concludes with these words: “I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the LORD” (Psalm 27:13-14, NASB). Years ago, when I struggled with fear and doubt during months of unemployment, these verses became an especially important reminder of God’s *hesed* love..

Our confidence cannot be in our circumstances or strength, but only in the providential care, provision, protection and guidance of the Good Shepherd. The psalmist trusts in the Good Shepherd because of the many ways that the Good Shepherd cares for him today and forever. The 23rd Psalm portrays life as a pilgrimage – it is a pilgrimage with God, to God – and our final destination is “the house of the Lord.”. Our final destination is unhindered fellowship with Jesus Christ now and forever. And it is our final destination that should define everything we do in the meantime.

In his book *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, John Piper offers these thoughts:

Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.

What can we take away from Psalm 23? Trust in the Good Shepherd because of the many ways that He cares for us today and forever.