

## The Lord Who Leads – Psalm 23

June 19, 2016

Pastor Jon Haakana

Today we look at the Psalm that is arguably the most well-known section of Scripture, by Christian and non-Christian alike: Psalm 23. How many of you know all or most of this Psalm by heart? Where or when are you most likely to hear this Psalm? Yes, at time of imminent death or at funerals. What 1 Corinthians 13 is to weddings, Psalm 23 is to funerals.

But, if we look closely, this is not a Psalm about death. It is a Psalm about life, rest and peace. It is a Psalm that encompasses our lives here and even extends into eternity. So, even though this Psalm is over 3,000 years old, it is extremely relevant for our lives today.

For our focus this morning I would have us look at verses 2-3 of the Psalm (Page \_\_ 581 in our pew Bibles): “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” The words that jump out for us are makes me, restores me, and leads me. We will unpack those words a bit in a couple of minutes.

Before we do that, I think these phrases together point out the nature of sheep, and the nature of a shepherd. First, what is the nature of sheep? Simply said, sheep are not self-reliant. In our church in New York Mills we had a family which raised sheep, Dew Drop Farms. I made my way out to their farm on several occasions. And every time I saw them working with and moving the sheep it became very evident to me that sheep were not the most intelligent creature that God created. As a matter of fact, the word “stupid” was often applied to them.

Philip Keller was a sheep rancher. In his book, “A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-third Psalm,” he says that sheep require more attention than any other livestock. They just can’t take care of themselves. Unless their shepherd makes them move on, sheep will actually ruin a pasture, eating every blade of grass, until finally a fertile pasture is nothing but barren soil. Sheep are near-sighted, & very stubborn, but easily frightened. An entire flock can be stampeded by a jack rabbit. They have little means of defense. They’re timid, feeble creatures Their only recourse is to run if no shepherd is there to protect them. Sheep have no homing instincts. A dog, horse, cat, or a bird can find its way home, but when the sheep gets lost, it’s a goner unless someone rescues it. So, the over-riding principle of Psalm 23 is that sheep can’t make it without a shepherd.

In Scripture, when sheep are referenced, often it is talking about us. In Psalm 119 we hear, “I have strayed like a lost sheep.” Isaiah 53 says “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...” During Jesus ministry he often looked upon the

crowds around him with compassion, “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Spiritually, because of sin, we are helpless and lost, like sheep desperately in need of a shepherd.

But, the Lord our shepherd does not want us to be led astray or lost. He wants us near him always. Psalm 100:3 – “We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.” John 10:3 – “The Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...they follow him because they know his voice.

Bob Crabtree tells of when he was in Russia, he saw 2 shepherds come together in the middle of the road. They had 300 sheep and all became 1 group. Bob had to wait as the shepherds talked. He wondered how they would ever separate all those sheep. As the 1 shepherd was leaving, in a low voice he bade his sheep come. The 2 groups separated instantly and went on. The sheep knew the voice!

Verses 2-3 in Psalm 23 also indicate for us the nature of the shepherd. 1) a shepherd is compassionate; 2) a shepherd gives gentle care to his flock; 3) a shepherd displays much courage (King David); and 4) a shepherd gives his life as a sacrifice for the sheep.

This Psalm may not be directly quoted in the NT, or directly applied to Jesus, but shepherd terminology is used of Jesus throughout the NT: John 10:11 – “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Heb. 13:20-21 – “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep...” Rev. 7:17 – “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.” (Gospel – the shepherd dying for the sheep...)

So, what are some practical things for us to remember as we understand who we are as sheep, and who Jesus is as our Savior and Shepherd, and what that means for our lives.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters.” Notice that the shepherd “makes” me lie down. Josephus, a first century scholar, has written that sometimes the shepherd would institute forced rest periods for his sheep, especially for the pregnant ewes and frolicking lambs. The shepherd would take the sheep and fold their legs in such a way that they would become paralyzed for a while and therefore had to lie down and get their much-needed rest. Some of you have been made to lie down as a result of a broken bone, some other health problem, heartbreak, or even the loss of your job. The shepherd has slowed you down for a reason. While in the hospital, you know how many people mentioned that to me...

Jesus our Shepherd is in the business of leading and bringing you to a place of rest. We often try to work things out ourselves and we end up in a place of nervous exhaustion. We

have to learn to sit back and thank Him once again for his making and his leading. We need to learn to lie down.

But thank Jesus our Good Shepherd that He does bring us to green pastures and quiet waters. They are those times, as the Psalm says, when He restores our souls spiritually. They are quiet waters...times when you can feed and are restored. Of course, this feeding is symbolic of being fed with the Word of God...green pastures...still waters...**TO BE FED, WE MUST BE LED!**

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” The word used for “paths” refers to a “well-defined and well-worn trail.” This is one more bit of evidence about how stupid sheep really are. Even when the path is perfectly clear, sheep will still stray. Since the shepherd knows the trails, he can guide them in the best way.

God longs to lead us in paths of righteousness. Most of us know the right road we should take but our selfishness and sinfulness often lead us astray. We need the shepherd to guide us in the right way because like sheep, we often have no sense of direction. As we submit to the shepherd He will lead us in paths of righteousness. And He does this for the sake of His name. God guides us for His sake, not for ours. His reputation is at stake. His character is on display. His name is Yahweh or God and He will accomplish His purposes and lead us on proper paths.

The Message paraphrase of Psalm 23 puts verses 2-3 this way: “You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your Word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.”

Lamb Lessons – So, as we wrap up this evening/morning, I see three lamb lessons.

1. **Join the shepherd’s flock.** A famous actor with a wonderful voice was once asked by an old preacher to recite Psalm 23. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would also recite it. The actor stood up and gave a dramatic presentation of the psalm with wonderful intonation and modulation. Everyone applauded wildly. The preacher then stood up and in a very rough voice, broken from many years of preaching, quoted the 23rd Psalm from memory. When he finished, everyone was crying, with some people kneeling on the floor. A couple minutes later someone asked the actor what made the difference. This is what he said: “I know the Psalm, but he knows the shepherd.” Do you know the shepherd? If not, I invite you to join His flock right now.

2. **Stay close to the shepherd.** Many sheep will come to the shepherd daily and rub against his legs and wait for a pat on the head. They want the assurance that the shepherd is there for them. Sheep that stay close to the shepherd reach the water first. Those next

to the shepherd get to the sweetest grass first. But most of all they get to enjoy it all with the shepherd by their side. When we stay close to Jesus our Good Shepherd, He will make sure all of our needs are met.

**3. Follow wherever He leads.** When you know the Shepherd through salvation, and stay close to Him as part of your discipleship, you will want to follow Him wherever He leads you. Sometimes it's through the valley. Other times you experience green pastures. The shepherd has a plan for you and wants to lead you in paths of righteousness. Are you willing to follow Him, regardless of the direction He takes you?

**If you want to be fed you must be led.** Open your heart to the leading of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.