

Sermon 27, My Good Shepherd, Psalm 23

Proposition: Yahweh is the king's shepherd, and therefore your shepherd too.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, “Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD? Who can declare all His praise?” (Psa 106:2). That’s what the psalmist wanted to know, and that question is uppermost in my mind as I struggle to declare the glory of the Good Shepherd. As with some of the other psalms, it would seem to be enough simply to read this psalm. It is perfection itself. Even those churches that have given up Psalm-singing know Psalm 23. It is the most famous of all the psalms, and it is read at many a funeral. In *With the Old Breed*, E.B. Sledge tells about being a Marine in the Pacific. When the Japanese bombarded his position, or when he had to leave cover and charge their pillboxes, he recited the 23rd Psalm over and over again. It was the only thing that could give him the courage to fight under the withering machine gun and artillery bombardment. I personally have fought down fear with this psalm many times, when alone at night in a darkened room. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.” *I will fear no evil*. What exposition does that phrase need? It is utterly powerful, transcendent, and true. And thus, it is with great fear and trembling that I dare to approach this holy ground. In one sense, my whole sermon amounts to this: read the 23rd psalm. Memorize it. Sing it. And believe it. What I hope to say further than that is simply this: Yahweh is the king’s shepherd and therefore He is your shepherd too.

I. The Metaphor: Yahweh Is the Good Shepherd, v. 1

I just spoke of how Ps 23 is unique among the psalms in its use. All Christians that I’ve spoken to of this subject know this psalm and use it to deal with fear. There are many sentences of comfort in this book, but the most comforting of all seems to be “The LORD is my shepherd.” But Ps 23 is also unique in its construction. No other psalm is built around the exposition of a single master metaphor. Ps 80 traces the metaphor of the LORD’s vineyard through half the psalm. Some of the psalms of ascents are highly metaphorical. But I believe I am on firm ground

to say that no other psalm pursues a single metaphor from beginning to end. Yes, some have made a case that vv. 5-6 move from the metaphor of shepherd to the metaphor of host, but the acts described in those verses can also be predicated of a shepherd. And thus, we simply should accept the obvious: this psalm is the psalm of the shepherd. From beginning to end, it describes the relationship between the king and God in terms of the relationship between a sheep and his shepherd.

Yahweh is my shepherd. That's what the king says. This is not a literal statement, but a metaphorical one. The king is not a sheep, and Yahweh is not sitting out in the green pastures with him. Rather, the metaphor translates the reality of the king's relationship to God into the terms of a sheep's relationship with its shepherd.

A shepherd cares for a flock. He ensures that the flock can thrive and he does this by feeding, watering, shearing, and otherwise sustaining them. That is one key term here — shepherd. The other is Yahweh. Yahweh we have met. He is the overwhelmingly dominant character through the Psalms and throughout Scripture. He is the God of Heaven and Earth, the Lord of Hosts, the king of ages, the creator of all that is and the unchallenged ruler of all that He has created.

Ps 23 fuses the two in a sublimely apt metaphor. Yahweh is shepherd.

Remember, a metaphor does not mean that the things metaphorically compared are alike in every respect, but only in some respect. Shepherds smell like sheep; does Yahweh smell like a sheep? Shepherds keep dogs; does Yahweh keep dogs? Obviously no. Rather, the king explains his metaphor to us.

II. Seven Implications, vv. 1-6

The respect(s) in which things metaphorically compared are alike are called the points of comparison. What are the points of comparison between the shepherd-sheep relationship and the Yahweh-king relationship? The king lists seven of them.

A. Provision, vv. 1b-2

The first is provision. The shepherd provides food and water for the sheep and keeps them from being in need of those things. A sheep with a competent shepherd always has enough food and water.

If I've said it once to you, I've said it a thousand times: The key to individual health is herd health, and the key to herd health is nutrition. And that is exactly where Ps 23 starts. If Yahweh is the king's shepherd, then Yahweh turns His attention to providing green pastures and still waters. His sheep can eat and be filled, drink and be satisfied. The pastures are not brown and dead; they are green and flourishing. The waters are not rushing and inaccessible; they are quiet and still. The summary statement in v. 1 reminds us that the king will never be in need. If Yahweh shepherds, then the sheep will not lack for any good thing. The sheep will not be hungry or thirsty. They will be healthy and strong, because the key to health is nutrition.

We all know that grazing animals can live indefinitely on green pastures. But if we translate the metaphor into human terms, what is the king referring to? The answer, of course, is spiritual food. The one shepherded by Yahweh will have no lack of Jesus Christ, who is the bread

of life. He is the bread who came down from heaven. No one who eats of Him will die, for His flesh is food indeed and His blood is drink indeed.

How can Jesus give us His flesh to eat? One obvious answer is in the Lord's Supper. Another, perhaps harder answer in some ways, is that we partake of Christ by faith when we listen to His words, for they are spirit and life.

The one who is shepherded by God can lack physical food and drink. Christians have died of hunger and thirst in this wicked world. But the one who is shepherded by God cannot lack a full portion of Christ and His benefits, His flesh and His blood. If you belong to God as one of His sheep today, then He will never withhold His Son from you. You will never die for lack of Christ. You have the bread of life, and if you partake of Him by faith, you will live forever, even if your body dies.

Yahweh is the king's shepherd, and what is true of the king is true of us. Our true king is the good shepherd, and we are His sheep. His food is to do the will of the one who sent Him. That's why Jesus never lacks for food and drink; He is always doing the Father's will. As the bread of life, He gives Himself to us. He is the shepherd and the pasture. We not only follow Him; we feed on Him.

Do you acknowledge and believe in this "spiritual" meaning of the metaphor in Ps 23? I call it "spiritual" in air quotes because it is also the literal meaning of the text. Yahweh is like a shepherd, and you are like a sheep. But Yahweh is God and you are a Christian. The green pastures and still waters He provides are, in literal terms, Christ and His benefits. You will never lack for the food that endures to eternal life, for you have Christ. Your meat, too, is to listen to His words and keep them because your meat is to do His will. You have Him.

B. Restoration, v. 3a

This possession restores your soul, turns your life back. The law of the Lord restores the soul, Ps 19 informed us. The Good Shepherd also restores the soul. He turns your life back toward Himself.

Let me translate this back into another metaphor. You are familiar with the process of remodeling a home. Some of you wish you weren't quite so familiar with it. Anyway, to remodel is to take an old, run-down, worn-out home and replace and rebuild until it looks new and shiny and beautiful. That's what the Good Shepherd does with your soul. He remodels it. He restores it to what it was meant to be. In your sinful identification with fallen Adam, you have dirtied your soul almost beyond recognition. The Good Shepherd cleans and restores it.

So if Yahweh is your shepherd, you have all the bread of life you can eat. Your soul is renovated, made new in Christ.

C. Guidance, v. 3b

You also enjoy the guidance of God. He leads you the right path. Metaphorically speaking, it is easy to see that a shepherd leads his sheep out to pasture in the morning and back to the fold at night. The sheep don't need to know the location of either place. They only need to follow their shepherd. In literal terms, Jesus the Good Shepherd guides us by telling us what righteousness is (Ps 19 — the perfect law of Yahweh) and then by showing us an example of what righteousness

is. He gives us the law, and then He keeps the law in front of us to be that example of what walking down the path of righteousness looks like. All we have to do is follow Him. We do that according to the mode of the thing — according to our nature as rational creatures. We are able to read and understand and internalize the law, and the law is the primary way that the Good Shepherd guides us from day to day. When we do not understand how to honor father and mother, or how to love our neighbor as ourselves, we look to Him and see a worked example of following the law.

He does all of this for the sake of His name. He does it so that He can show His glory, so that He can make His name great. We need to behave in order to show the world how marvelous Jesus Christ is. A shepherd with a mangy, ill-behaved, undernourished flock is not going to win any “shepherd of the year” award. You can bring credit or discredit to the shepherd’s name depending on how you conduct yourself as a sheep. When He renovates your soul, you need to follow Him in paths of righteousness. Again, as we have observed many times recently, this is not an unfunded mandate. He is feeding and watering you at His own expense. He is charting the path of righteousness. All you have to do is walk on it.

D. Comfort and Presence, v. 4

The central item in the list of ways in which our relationship to Jesus is like a sheep’s to its shepherd is this: He is with us, vanquishing evil, disciplining and comforting us. Again, even to translate it out of the beautiful metaphor in which it is couched is something of an exercise in lameness. To take “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me” and turn it into “He is with us to vanquish evil, to discipline and comfort us” is sad. One is the glorious song of the sweet psalmist of Israel, of our King who teaches us to worship. The other sounds like a government report. But I do this, translating the metaphors into the debased language of our age, in order to make sure that you understand them. The valley of the shadow of death is any place of fear, of suffering, of danger. It is not the valley of death, but of death’s shadow. The shadow of death is terrifying, but it cannot kill. But of course, even at the moment of your actual death, the verse is still true. Even when you are suffering evil, all-too-real evil, you need not fear it. For He is with you. Your shepherd is walking alongside you, armed with rod and staff.

One of my daughters is terrified of the dog at the other end of our street. This animal has a habit of leaping the fence and barking ferociously at all comers. My girls don’t even want to go up the alley, lest it attack them. But the other day, I said “Let’s go up the alley. If Precious the dog is out, we will be prepared.” With that, I grabbed an aluminum baseball bat, the suburban dad’s weapon of choice, and slung it over my shoulder just a little bit like Hercules must have carried his club. Sure enough, when we got to the place, Precious put her paws on the fence and barked terrifyingly at us — until she, and more importantly her owner, saw me square off at her with the bat. Suddenly the owner couldn’t bundle Precious back into the house fast enough. My daughter was still bawling, but I thought she had a new courage in her eyes. Certainly the other children seemed much energized by the presence of the baseball bat with us. They knew that in a pitched battle between Precious’ skull and a metal bat, the skull was not going to win.

Well, if my rod and staff can put that kind of heart into my children, what can the Good Shepherd's rod and staff do for you? You know, we never depict Jesus as armed, except perhaps in scenes from Revelation. But the Good Shepherd carries a shepherd's crook, which is a staff, and also a shorter rod, it seems — something more like Hercules' club. "Smith and Wesson is a blessing to a hunter in the woods," as the jingle has it. The Good Shepherd's weapons are a blessing to you whenever the dark valley yawns before your feet. As you already know, it yawns almost every day, and sometimes you are in its depths for days or months at a stretch.

Yet look to the baton and the shepherd's crook that your crucified guardian carries. Let that rod and that staff comfort you. I pick up a bat, and my children almost cheer aloud. I guarantee you that the Good Shepherd is going to be a lot better hand at quarter-staff fighting, and at subduing thugs with a baton, than I am or ever will be.

This is why you need fear no evil. Most human beings, and especially non-Christians, spend their waking hours fearing evil, unless they can numb their fear with activity, entertainment, substances, or some combination of the three. You need not walk that path. You need fear no evil. Your king does not. You need not either, because the Good Shepherd is with you and He is loaded for bear — or should I say loaded for demon, loaded for the world and the flesh and the devil. Be comforted by how heavily armed He is. You and I know that our Shepherd beat the dragon with His bare hands. But He also carries a staff to rescue you and a rod to smash the head of the wicked.

E. Feast, Refreshment, Sufficiency, v. 5

The king returns to the theme of food. The key to herd health is nutrition. He describes following his shepherd in terms of feasting. Certainly the metaphor is weakening here, slipping more into the realm of the merely human. Sheep don't eat at tables. But the Good Shepherd feeds us — green pastures, appropriate to a sheep, but also tables, appropriate to a congregation. Why is the table in front of the enemies? None of the commentators knows. Suffice it to say that if you are in Yahweh's flock, you will have enemies, but you will feast in front of them.

The world hates followers of Christ, but we have a continual feast of which the world knows nothing. I'm serious! Have you ever wondered why church is so empty and the world's places of amusement so full? I haven't checked this, but I would not be surprised if right here in Gillette there were as many people at Walmart at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning as there are in all the churches combined. I have often thought that if the world knew the friendship, the love, the peace and joy we have in here, they would be banging down the doors to get in. But they don't know about it, and they can't bring themselves to believe in it. They can see us eating at the Lord's Table, but they can't know how good the food is. They can hear us talking about Jesus the Good Shepherd, but they have this unshakeable feeling that they are better off without Him.

My father keeps sheep, as most of you know. There is nothing sadder than seeing one of the little sheep that has run away from its mother and gotten out of the pen running around the feedlot, unwilling to go back home. Yet that is just where so many nonbelievers live — anywhere but at the feast, ready to dwell anywhere so long as it is not in the house of Yahweh.

Let it not be so with you! You have a feast, the bread of life and the water of life, spread before you this day and every Sunday.

You also have refreshment as He anoints your head with oil. This is something like the ancient equivalent of a shower, crossed with a ceremony of investiture with high office. Once again, ultimately it is our king speaking here. The Good Shepherd is the Lord's Anointed, and He describes that anointing here. In Him you too are God's Anointed One. You are not Christ, but you are a Christian, and the same Spirit that rested on Christ rests on you too. Your cup overflows. Again, this is supremely true of your king, for He did not receive the Spirit by measure. But you have far more than you need too, even measured in earthly terms but especially in spiritual terms.

I would be remiss not to mention the excellent paraphrase of this verse in "The King of Love My Shepherd Is." That poet renders this line as "thine unction grace bestoweth — and oh! What transports of delight from thy pure chalice floweth." Anointed with the Holy Spirit, you have the grace of the Shepherd upon you. You have the delight and joy of the one who was anointed with the oil of gladness beyond His companions, even as you taste the cup from which He drank.

F. Goodness and Mercy, v. 6a

You also, as a sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd, have an amazing promise for the future. Goodness and mercy will follow you. You know how people in the movies glance nervously over their shoulder and say "I'm being followed!"? Well, that won't be you. That same confidence you get from your armed Shepherd striding beside you in the valley of death's shadow you can also have when you turn around and see Yahweh's own goodness and steadfast love walking right behind you. Nothing evil will be on your tail; you have already said "I will fear no evil." Goodness triumphs over evil; goodness will be with you, and therefore evil cannot be. No matter how old you get, you will not age out of God's goodness and mercy.

G. Home, v. 6b

And in the end, you will come home. This psalm crystallizes the biblical message. We were exiled from Eden after the fall, and we have needed to get back into the presence of God ever since. But here is the great promise: "In my Father's house are many rooms, and I go to prepare them for you." You will get to live in God's house, not for a day or two, or year or two, an eon or two, but forever. Heaven will be returning to your Father's house and never having to grow up and leave again. You will soon be in your forever home, led into the fold at the day's end by the Good Shepherd Himself. "For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2Co 5:1). In that sheepfold is rest for the weary, restoration for the broken, home for the homeless and love for all. All of this is yours if Yahweh is your shepherd. How can He become your shepherd? Believe in Him. Trust His Son, the Good Shepherd who came to save you. As you believe, walk. Walk in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. A big part of the way you can do that is by memorizing, reciting, and singing this song. Trust the shepherd, and in God's house, forevermore, your dwelling place shall be. Amen.

