

The Care of Sheep [Psalm 23]
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INTRODUCTION

1. Whenever the movie Interstellar comes on TV, I want to stop and watch it.
 - a. This drives my wife crazy; she's seen enough of it (and I have it on DVD).
 - b. But there are those movies that, even though you know the outcome, you watch over
 - c. I'm not sure why I do it, but I often catch something I never noticed previously
 - d. **Question:** what is that movie for you and why?
 2. Today we'll be exploring one of the most famous chapters in the Bible.
 - a. Psalm 23 is likely the most popular psalm in the Bible, and you're likely familiar with it.
 - b. Interesting enough, I've never actually preached about it
 - 1) And I'm not sure I've actually heard anyone preach it before.
 - 2) Perhaps its so commonplace that ministers actually avoid the text.
 3. But tonight, I want to give you something that you haven't thought of in reading this.
 - a. The imagery of God in Psalm 23 is powerful, but what does it say between the lines?
 - b. Thus, I want to examine the text in light of the fact that it talks about us as DUMB SHEEP.
 - c. While some might be insulted by this, it's the implication of the text
 - d. Throughout the Bible, people are likened to sheep, and you need to know their ways
 - 1) In the ancient world they were used for both meat and wool.
 - 2) They are generally moronic animals.
 - 3) And we humans are likened to them. **Isaiah 53:6** "We all like sheep have gone astray"
 - 4) Sheep are not great independent thinkers, unaware of the dangers around them.
- ***We're going to read it out loud together, in the KJV for old emphasis.

VERSES 1-3

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

1. The vocation of shepherding (caring for sheep) is centuries old in the land of Israel.
 - a. It's still practiced today and we saw it firsthand when we were there a few years ago.
 - b. Shepherding was the chief occupation of the Israelites in the early days of the patriarchs.
 - c. Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and likely the author of this psalm, King David.
 - d. An interesting phrase here that many of us take for granted: "My" shepherd
 - 1) The image of God as shepherd over Israel is found elsewhere in the Bible.
 - 2) But the idea of him as personal shepherd is unique.
 - 3) One of the biblical concepts we miss is the communal God, who brings us together
 - 4) Here, the relationship is individualized, continued throughout the rest of this song.
2. Israel has a diverse topography. A shepherd's job requires searching for hospitable locations
 - a. The Judean wilderness (pictured here) was more of a desert than anything else.
 - b. The shepherd would need to know where to find grass and water and how to get there.
 - c. The role of the shepherd is to ensure the sheep have sustenance.
3. But look at the dumb sheep: don't know where to get food or drink or find the way to go.
 - a. Our human inclination is to trust our own instincts; in fact, we're encouraged to do so.
 - b. A sheep's natural instincts will take them someplace from which they can't return.
 - c. A sheep will search aimlessly for food and drink with no concept of where to find them.
 - d. This is why we need a shepherd, friends.
 - 1) Self-reliance might seem to be a virtue, but it can easily lead to our destruction.

- 2) When we talk about faith, it's entrusting our lives to a shepherding God.
- 3) It's a shepherd who knows us personally and cares about our well being.
- 4) Can sheep get lucky and find their way? Certainly. But they'll eventually be in need.
- e. "I shall not want" = I am not wanting = The shepherd gives me everything I need.

VERSE 4

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

1. Growing up, this verse troubled me. I loves me some valleys. I find them very pretty.
 - a. In the world of shepherding in Israel, valley could spell death for sheep.
 - 1) In valleys, rocks could settle, producing an uneven terrain for hooved animals.
 - 2) In valleys you're exposed and in danger of attack from wild animals,
 - 2) In valleys, you're in danger from flash floods that occur in the land. Sheep don't swim.
 - b. An experienced shepherd knows the land, the animals, and the flooded areas.
2. This verse mentions the tool of the trade for the shepherd: the crook.
 - a. The stick normally had a hook on the end of it, so it could encircle the neck and guide.
 - b. It also was a weapon of battle in case a wild animal approached.
 - c. A sheep would find the rod comforting b/c it was symbolic of shepherd's power/authority
3. One of the things that make sheep dumb is their lack of a vantage point.
 - a. The average adult sheep measures just three feet tall.
 - b. From a four-legged perspective, they are unable to properly survey the land for dangers
 - 1) The reality is: you and I lack the perspective that a shepherd has.
 - 2) You will go through a day, week, or month that you believe is absolutely horrible.
 - 3) You might even be inclined to pray that the Lord relieve you from that struggle.
 - 4) But what you perceive as death, might actually be an incredible opportunity to grow.
 - c. What I'm saying is, the shepherd knows when you're in a pasture or the valley of death.

VERSE 5

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

1. Many scholars cite this as a shift in metaphor, from shepherding to a dinner party.
 - a. My opinion (and other scholars as well) is that it seems to hard of a shift.
 - b. But many times we view the Scriptures via our modern lenses and miss what is happening
 - c. "Prepare" here is literally "to arrange in order"
 - d. A table for shepherds: animal skin or cloth laid on the ground to keep dirt away from food.
 - 1) This could be viewed how many shepherd would prepare a resting place for sheep.
 - 2) They would clear out an area from thistles, poisonous herbs, and scorpions.
2. As sheep navigate/maneuver they could scratch their heads, requiring oil to heal the scratch.
 - a. And some scholars actually attest that exhausted sheep could be given wine.
 - b. In the end, it shows the level of care and tenderness given by the shepherd.
3. But we are just dumb sheep, ignorant of the special care provided to us.
 - a. We have a tendency to focus on the strife and ignore the blessings that the Lord provides.
 - b. Stop and think of the overlooking grace you've received from God,
 - 1) Health, Food, Shelter, Family, Friends, Love, Beauty of Creation.
 - 2) If we only spent the time to thank the Shepherd for the provision of his blessings.

VERSE 6

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

1. Goodness and mercy follow the sheep. Usually, the things "following" were predators.
 - a. Here, the shepherd has guided the sheep to a brand new place.

- b. The allusion here isn't to a heavenly abode, but towards the end of the life.
 - c. "The house of the Lord" isn't heaven, but the temple.
2. So now, we have an interesting image: that of a sheep, leaving the fields, entering the city of Jerusalem, and walking into the temple.
- a. Sheep did exist in the temple, but not for food or wool but for sacrifice.
 - b. This is fascinating as we look towards an image of Jesus, whose entry into the city of Jerusalem and the temple in the book of John is likened to that of a sacrificial lamb.
 - d. **John 1:29** *"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*
 - e. And here we see the fascinating thing about dumb sheep: Jesus became one too.
3. The brilliance of this metaphor is that Jesus embodies both the sheep and the shepherd.
- a. **John 10:11-14**

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me

CONCLUSION

1. Dumb sheep: we don't really appreciate the shepherd at all.
 - a. This psalm is one of the reasons I tend to shy against the term "pastor."
 - b. The word "pastor" is a synonym for shepherd. And, as a leader/elder, that's my role.
 - c. But even though I try to live up to this ideal, I know that I'm lacking in comparison to him.
 - d. But we're all lacking, because WE ALL LIKE SHEEP HAVE GONE ASTRAY.