

David's Story, and Ours!

Our Old Testament reading today is the 23rd Psalm, which no doubt is the best known and most frequently quoted of all of the songs in the Bible, if not the most known and beloved portion of all of the Scriptures. Although we don't live in the ancient Middle Eastern world of sheep roaming freely on the Palestinian hillside, we can nevertheless find great truths in this beloved psalm.

Follow as I read **Psalm 23**:

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;*

³ *he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;*

*for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

⁵ *You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

This great 23rd Psalm is intensely personal, being the testimony of David. The most distinctive word in this psalm is "my." Note how many times this first person pronoun appears in this psalm. Many other psalms speak of the Lord God as the shepherd of his people, but in this one, David says "the Lord is *my* shepherd." This psalm is David's story, his life story in a poem; but it is also mine, and maybe even yours.

David says "the Lord is my shepherd." David uses an analogy very familiar to him, as he remembers his days as a young shepherd, taking care of his father's sheep in the Judean wilderness. Christ made himself known to David as his shepherd, which means that David was one of his lost sheep who needed to be found. And this is the way Jesus speaks of us, the sheep of his pasture, who by his love and grace have been rescued (Matthew 18:12ff, Luke 15:1-7).

One of the most insightful and helpful books for those of us not familiar with the ways of sheep and shepherds is Phillip Keller's *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller, who was born in East Africa, worked as a sheep farmer and was

university educated as an agronomist, gives great insight into the images of this psalm. He notes what I have been told by other sheep farmers, that sheep aren't very intelligent animals and are absolutely dependent on the protection of a shepherd.

I know that is true in my life. I'm a rescued child of grace. I did not seek God, but he sought me, even by placing me in a home where I was surrounded by the message of God's love through Jesus. I came to understand the love of God as revealed in his Son. Apart from God's rescue I would be a hopelessly lost sheep, condemned to die for my own sin. Like a sheep without a shepherd, I too am dumb, dependent and doomed to eternal lost-ness apart from the Good Shepherd.

In the Palestinian fields, the shepherds would bring all of their flocks together in the sheepfolds for protection during the nighttime. But in the morning each shepherd would call for his sheep, and only his flock would follow him. Jesus says that his sheep know his voice and follow him (John 10:14ff). And this is my testimony and maybe yours—that Jesus called and we followed him, and by grace through faith became his own sheep.

As with David also we can say the Lord is my shepherd *who cares for me*. David says that because the Lord is his shepherd he shall not be in want. Our popular English translations read "I shall not want." And in our materialistic, consumerist Western culture we can easily think that David is saying that the Lord will give him all he wants. A better translation might be "I shall not *be in want*," meaning, "He will supply all of my needs, not all of my wants." The Lord will not withhold from us anything that he thinks is good for us, which will add to our holiness, joy and usefulness in his service.

Keller recalls how a tenant sheep-man, whose ranch was next to his, abused his sheep by his sheer neglect of their care. "His stock were always thin, weak and riddled with disease or parasites." But our Shepherd, who gave his life for us, will give us all we need for a life of abundant joy, and significance in his kingdom (John 10:10; Matthew 6:33; Romans 8:32; Philippians 4:19).

We can't appreciate this psalm that speaks about the shepherd making his sheep to lie down in green pastures and to drink from quiet waters until we understand that typically, in this wilderness of Judea, sheep haven't had much to eat or drink for several months. It may be the end of the 5-month dry season and the first rains have not yet arrived to fill the ponds and to cause fresh grass to sprout. Apart from the Lord as our shepherd, we too would be in severe drought and in desperate need of his love and care.

David also says, "The Lord is my shepherd" *who corrects me*. "He restores my soul." The Lord corrects with restoration. Restoration means to repair something

that's been broken and to return something to its original condition. We, like David, are always in need of the Shepherd's restoration.

Keller describes the condition of a sheep that's "cast down." He says it's a pathetic sight to see a sheep lying on its back, flailing its legs, frantically and futilely struggling to restore itself. Cast sheep were usually ewes that were "heavy in lamb," and when they would lie down and roll on their side to relax in a depression in the ground, would frequently end up entirely on their back and become helplessly and hopelessly "cast down." Keller adds that if the cast down sheep isn't helped back to its feet, it'll soon die from loss of blood circulation or attacks from predators.

I also depend on the Lord to restore my soul when I get myself into spiritual difficulty and can't climb out of my discouragement or my spiritual declension. Restoration means also refreshment, and I can identify with David in his great penitential Psalm 51, when he prays, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (verse 12a). There're seasons in my life when I become dry and empty, as well as flat on my back with discouragement. Only the Shepherd can set me back on "my feet."

David also notes in his testimony how that the Lord, his shepherd, corrects him with guidance. "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." Just like sheep, who have poor eyesight and bad judgment (read *not very intelligent*), so we depend, as does David, on God's perfect guidance in our lives. The Lord, in his wisdom and sovereignty, guides us into the right way, the way that is according to his righteous and perfect will.

I spoke over the phone with a good friend, sharing the bewildering dilemma facing us regarding Nancy's care needs. He said, "Roger, I have no doubt you'll make the right decision," a word that encouraged but also humbled me. God is able to lead and keep us on the right path. In my life God has overruled my poor judgment and has protected me from wrong decisions. He can use even the ill intent of others to bring about his good will us, as Joseph understood in reflecting on his brother's treachery (Genesis 50:20).

David testified that the Lord guides him in the paths of righteousness "for his name's sake" (verse 3b). God's work in our lives is not primarily for our benefit but rather is for his glory, honor and pleasure, which is the extension of his kingdom. Our lives and the paths of righteous living are for the benefit of others. Only when we live "for his name's sake" do we find life's greatest pleasure.

And David says that "the Lord is my shepherd *who comforts me, 'even though I walk through the darkest valley.'*" It's the presence of the Shepherd who gives comfort, whatever our circumstances might be, wherever life's path may take us. In the ancient Middle East, the shepherd was absolutely essential for the wellbeing and even the survival of the sheep. A shepherd was inseparable from

his flock. And so also the Lord Jesus is inseparable from us. As the shepherd had his rod for fighting off wild animals and his staff for corralling and directing his sheep, so the risen Lord Jesus is with us to protect us, direct us and reassure us.

Notice how the personal pronouns change in this 4th verse, from “he” to “you” and “your,” showing the intensely personal relationship between David and the Lord. And the dark valleys tend to draw us nearer to the Shepherd, as we sense our need for him. Shepherds often would run with their flocks through dangerous valleys, to elude wild predators and thieves. But the Lord walks with us and thus we learn to be calm before him and realize that he goes before us in every experience of life. Nothing can happen to us apart from his wise and loving permission. Thus we never need to fear or to panic.

My testimony accords with David’s. There are times when I feel lonely or discouraged and the Lord Jesus is faithful to come to me with an unusual sense of his presence, which instills me with a quiet joy and renewing peace. His gracious presence enables us to simply be still and wait upon him. Maybe you can say that David’s testimony is yours as well.

And next, David’s testimony seems to change scenes for us. From saying that the Lord is his shepherd, David now says in his testimony “the Lord is my host” (5-6). David retains the very personal “you” as he addresses the faithful Lord, not only as his shepherd but David says “the Lord is my host who invites me to his table.” At first glance this psalm looks like David is gloating at a feast table while his enemies must look on with envy (verse 5a). But the following picture helps us grasp the message and spirit of this psalm:

In the ancient Middle East, hospitality was never denied to someone seeking refuge from an enemy. A man or woman might have injured or even killed someone in self-defense, and then is desperately seeking a city of refuge and a house or tent of refuge from the pursuing avenger of blood. The poor person is running for his or her life and comes upon a nomad’s tent just in time to escape the deadly attack of the avenging enemy. As soon as the pursued grabs hold of the rope of the nomad’s tent, he or she is safe from the attacker. And the host, the one inside the tent says, “Come on in and eat with me.” And so, in the presence of the enemy, David says, he feasts at the table prepared for him. The pursuing enemy can only look on from the outside, unable to touch the pursued fugitive. David may well have written this psalm as he reflected on his fleeing from Saul’s relentless pursuit or when he was in exile during Absalom’s rebellion.

Throughout the Psalms we read about God as our refuge, meaning that he gives us temporal protection from life’s dangers but also delivers us from the death-grip of our real enemy, Satan. Once we flee to Christ for refuge there’s nothing that Satan can do to accuse us or to harm us. All he can do is look from the outside as he sees our being safe in the house of the Lord, who is our everlasting host.

David testifies that “the Lord is my host who anoints me with his Spirit.” His Spirit is our very life and the source of our cleansing, joy, wisdom, and power that we need for life. His presence is eternal life, heavenly life already begun and to be finally consummated with fully redeemed new heaven and earth. David says that “the Lord is my loving host who anoints me and fills my cup to overflowing, and *who assures me of his goodness and mercy*. David is certain of the continuation of the Host’s goodness and loving mercy all of the days of his life.

We can trust the consistency and constancy of God’s character. Because of the cross of Christ, we need never doubt the love of God, his unlimited and unconditional love for us. Goodness is his activity and involvement in our lives for our everlasting good and for his pleasure, honor and glory. Love is his unconditional yet desperately needed compassion and caring involvement in our lives.

His goodness and love may not always feel good to us. There’ve been experiences in my life when it’s been difficult to see behind them the goodness and the love of the Lord. You perhaps also can identify with this admission, but hopefully we can join David and say that all that God has allowed to happen to us has been out of his goodness and love. God pursues us with his goodness and love, even when in the shape of difficulties, for the greater good of our growth in the character of godliness and in the power of our testimony to a world that needs to see the cruciform character of Christ.

David’s testimony is “the Lord is my host *who will keep me in his house forever*.” Our hope is greater and stronger than David himself knew because we’re recipients of the hope of the resurrection life and promises now fulfilled in Jesus. Even if our testimony honestly speaks of disappointment and trials, because of hope we can testify with Paul that, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

My story, and I hope yours too, is just like David’s. The Lord Jesus is *my* shepherd, who has called me to follow him and has been leading me all the way through life’s journey. He is also *my* host, who invited me to open my life to him, that he might share his life and his blessings as a loving host, who actually, wonder of wonders, delights in me (Revelation 3:20). He has given me refuge from the Enemy and his demons and dupes, and he will do the same for you.

I invite you today to make David’s story *your* story.