

Praying With The Psalmists: A Study in the Psalms, Psalms 23,
Preached @ Harambee Church by Pastor Michael Gunn on October 26th, 2008

Intro:

Psalm 23 is possibly the most known and used section of the bible. It is most used at funerals, which may be comforting, but totally misses the beauty and intent of this great poetic prayer of praise and description of our God. I want to take a look at this great Psalm heavily borrowing from Phillip's Keller great devotional work on this Psalm. Keller was a shepherd and a pastor, and helps us understand some of the background and details that illuminate this great Psalm.¹ I hope to see that this Psalm points us to the "*Great Shepherd*" our Lord and savior Jesus Christ (See **John 10**).

From the Head...

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"

(Psalm 23:1)

First, we begin again with this word LORD (Yahweh), the personal name of the God David worships. Just this symbol (God being our shepherd) should warm our hearts. God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit (The Holy Trinity) is YOUR Shepherd! That's pretty personal, and blows away the notion that God is an impersonal entity. This implies a working relationship between our maker and us. This is very unique in all of "Spiritual/Religious" writings. You can't find this type of intimacy in eastern thinking, and Islam has a personal God, who is too holy to actually approach in the same way.²

It is important to note what is inferred from this notion; if God is our Shepherd, then we are His sheep (**Psalm 79:13; 95:7; 100:3**). There are a lot of inferred realities here. Sheep are basically stupid animals that need someone to lead them, and to ultimately save them from themselves and their own fears. According to the word, we like sheep have gone astray (**Isaiah 53:6**) and are in need of a shepherd. This is very hard for us as humans to accept, and is usually rejected by man from both a religious and anti-religious point of view.

The second statement, "*I shall not want*," is an incredible statement of faith. As Keller writes it means, "*I shall not lack the 'expert' care and management of my master. To grasp the inner significance of this simple statement, it is necessary to understand the difference between belonging to one master or another.*" Jesus lays this idea out in **John 10**. The "Good" shepherd is the one that takes care of His sheep. The question here is do we believe that? Do you believe that God is good? This idea is not that we will never have problems, but that our desires would be satisfied in our Lord alone. This can only take place when we submit to God, and believe that He has our best interest. Do you believe that the Lord has your best interest? Are you willing to submit to Him as a sheep to his/her shepherd?

"He makes me lay down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters"

(Psalm 23:2)

According to Keller sheep struggle to lie down and relax unless they are free from general anxiety (Sheep are very skittish), communal friction, the torment of flies/parasites and/or if they are hungry. They cannot rest unless they are free from fear, anxiety, tension and hunger. What is it that our shepherd does to give us rest? As Augustine said, "*Oh God, though has made us for yourself and our souls are restless, searching, until they find their rest in thee.*" Our human desire is to know God.³ God Himself is those still waters (See **John 7:37-39**). The problem lies in the fact that we trust so many other things to quench this thirst (See **Jeremiah 2:13**). Only God can truly soothe our anxiety, fears and tension by giving us what we are made to have, but fail to obtain in a fallen world that tells us that all we need is their product to be happy. For a sheep to be truly free from anxiety, it is important to know that the shepherd is near by, and has taken care of all of the potential problems. How comforting is it to know that our shepherd is an ever-present help in trouble (**Psalm 46:1**). Like a good shepherd God guides us into things that will ease our tension and our anxiety. Like a shepherd who uses healing salve to keep irritants away, and who leads his sheep to "Still" waters because of their fear of running water, God heals us and anoints us with healing salve of the Holy Spirit to restore us, and give us peace in the midst of turmoil (See **John 16:33**). This passage also reminds us that the good shepherd leads his sheep to the "Green pastures," which took a considerable amount of work in the arid dry land of the Middle East.

"He restores my soul, He leads me in the path of righteousness for His name's sake"

(Psalm 23:3).

There is a significant inference here that can't be overlooked; **our soul is in need of restoration!** There are many who believe that God doesn't allow His sheep to be distressed, but the fact is, in a sinful world, it happens! David understood this reality. He had his life threatened, his enemies were forever before him, he lost in battle, he sinned greatly, and he lost his son, and had another son who hated him and opposed him. The latter issue is enough to destroy a man! **Psalm 42:11** asks "*Why are you cast down, oh my soul?*" We cannot live our lives under a false understanding of the gospel, and the God we serve. Our world is fallen, and the fact is, believers in the family of God are affected by it every day. The

¹ See A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller

² We too believe in a very holy God, but we have direct access to Him through Jesus our Shepherd as a result of what He accomplished on the cross (**Ephesians 3:11-12; Hebrews 10:19**).

³ I believe that even atheism is a pessimistic desire to find god, but they have given up hope in finding it outside of human ingenuity.

psalmist answers in Psalm 42 when he says, "...*Why are you in turmoil within me? **Hope in God**, for I will again praise Him.*" The idea that the word "Cast Down" evokes is of a sheep that is on its back and cannot get up. The sheep will often lie there in a frantic, struggling fear, usually without a sound, but in much panic. If the sheep remains in this position, it will ultimately die due to the vulnerability of the position; he/she is open to attack! This is so true of us. When we are in panic, and fearful that our shepherd is not good enough, we leave ourselves open and vulnerable to the attack of our enemy.

This shows that when we are down-trodden, and fallen in sin, we do not have a shepherd who gets fed up with us, but one who works to the restoration of our soul (see too **Psalm 56:13**).. What is interesting is how the sheep become "Downcast." First they often look for the "Soft" spots to lie down in, which often gets them turned upside down. We too look for the comfortable way out, and in reality it is that choice that often gets us in the situation we are in the first place. Another reason the sheep becomes "Downcast" is they have too much wool, or they are too fat. Wool in scripture is often a sign of the "Old self," which we are told to cast off in **Colossians 3**). Often times it is in our success that we loose sight of the goal, which is the "*the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" (**Philippians 3:14**).

Sometimes it is a loving God that removes the fat and the wool from our lives in order to restore our soul! And He does so to secure His name's sake and reputation in the community. It is here that we see God's intent is His own glory, not ours! God saves us to make worshippers of us, so that we would establish just communities for the whole community to flourish. It was important for the good shepherd to keep his flock on the move so his sheep would not rape the land and consume everything in sight, which a sheep will do. A good shepherd will move his sheep in order to let the land restore itself, and be plentiful for the next herd of sheep. He does this for his own names-sake. His reputation is on the line here. God is in the business of restoring people as worshippers (Because that was what they are created to do) for His glory! It is very important to understand this about God. His interest in His own glory is inextricably connected to His interest in restoring our souls!

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff they comfort me."
(**Psalm 23:4**)

Here we see the conversation turning from a description of the shepherd to a direct conversation with the shepherd. Here is the every day, nitty gritty life on this earth. It is easier to live the Christian life from the mountaintop, but it is hard to grind out a life with God in the midst of our every day "Valley Life." A good shepherd in Palestine would take his flock of sheep to the higher, cooler areas during the summer, and then move them to the lower grounds in the winter. It is in the valleys that can be a dark, dangerous area. While this verse is often used at funerals, it is important to see that the shepherd is leading his sheep "Through" the valley of death. The Christian doctrine of death is nothing more than a doorway to glory, which gives us great hope in this life, and beyond. The shepherd is with us during these dark moments, which is a comfort. This is a true Christian doctrine, but this verse is not discussing death as much as it is discussing God's role in our life during dangerous and stressful times. Keller notes that the valleys are the "best" way to enter into the mountaintops. It has the best water supply, and it is the most gradual climb. It is in the valleys that we find the best refreshment (Water, and Food) for our souls. For sure the valley brings many fears of flash floods, wolves and snakes, rock slides and other perilous realities, but the valleys are imperative to reach safer places of grazing. The good shepherd understands these dangers and keeps his sheep moving in order to be safe.

The second part of this verse ("*Your rod and staff they comfort me*") is really important, and a key to walking with our Good Shepherd" Jesus. The shepherd's stick was unique to the shepherd, and had two parts the Rod, which was used for defense, getting the sheep's attention (Discipline) and counting of the sheep. The Staff (The curved part) was used to gather the sheep to one another (Community) and to himself (Comfort and examination), and finally to guiding the sheep to safety. The rod is connected with the word of God and to discipline. The word both protects and disciplines us (See **2 Timothy 3:16**). Another use of the rod was to count the sheep. They would pass under the rod (See **Ezekiel 20:37**) so the shepherd could count and examine the sheep for any disease they may have and help them heal. This is the idea behind **Psalm 139:23-24**. Where the rod was an authoritative symbol of God, the staff was a symbol of comfort. The staff was used to bring the sheep back into community, and bring them close to the shepherd so that he could examine them and properly apply what that sheep needed for healing.

In similar fashion, our "Good Shepherd" leads us. He uses discipline and might to save us (**Hebrews 12:3-9**), and He uses the power and authority of His word to cut to the heart of our problems (**Hebrews 4:12**). We, like sheep, are also guided by our shepherd during the most anxious times in our life, as well as we are protected from our enemies by the power of His rod.

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

(**Psalm 23:5**)

Here we have an incredible picture of God's great banquet on our behalf; the marriage feast of the lamb (**Revelation 19:6-8**). God is a God of feasts and parties, We see them all the time in the Old Testament, and it is fitting that heaven would be described as a party. One of Jesus' most important miracle is His turning of water into wine in Cana, which clearly looks forward to His own wedding feast, made possible by His death on the cross. Here David paints a picture of

the good shepherd, preparing a table for his flock. The table is the high mountain ranges, where a good shepherd would go before his sheep to clear out the watering holes, remove any poisonous plants, and oil the snake holes to keep them away from his flock. He would also try and trap any hazardous animals that could harm his flock. The picture is that any "Good" shepherd will go before his sheep and work hard so that it could be safe for them. This banquet is what we commemorate every week at Harambee. The communion is a "Feast" describing how our "Good Shepherd" went before us, so that we could be made safe. His compassion for His sheep caused Him to give His life for them (See **John 10: 11-18**). This provision results in our cups overflowing. The idea of oil has a long history of anointing in the Old Testament. For the shepherd it meant regularly checking the sheep for flies, ticks and gnats, and pouring oil on their heads in order to keep these insects away that would cause disease, and a huge amount of anxiety to the sheep. We are anointed by the Holy Spirit, and God continues to empower us to do His will, which frees us from a lot of the anxious moments that make up our life (**Ephesians 5:18**). Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can we react in a godly manner to the many aggravations and irritations that we encounter regularly in this life. It is the Spirit who produces love, peace, joy, patience, etc. in our lives (See **Galatians 5:22**), and it only when we yield to the Spirit of God in our lives that we will experience the fruit of the Spirit. When we try to control the situations of our life, we will always experience disharmony, because no matter how "Balanced" you think you are, you are a sinful, messed up person in need of a shepherd!

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of Yahweh forever."
(**Psalm 23:6**)

What we have here is a reminder of the "Goodness" and "Mercy" of God in our lives. His goodness is lavished on us regularly, and is seen most evidently in the cross of Jesus Christ. But as Phillip Keller reminds us, *"Just as God's goodness and mercy flow to me all the days of my life, so goodness and mercy should follow me, should be left behind me, as a legacy to others, wherever I may go."* Here we have a clearly missional element in this Psalm. We are made righteous, and nourished by God, *"For His name's sake!"* Not our own sake! With that, we are called by God to join His family, and join in on His mission to restore His kingdom to the place it was created to be! As I said earlier, the sheep can be the most destructive livestock anywhere, but it has the capability, if cared for well, to produce the most amazing manure of any other animal. It has the capability of destroying or healing the land. Sound like humans? Sound like God's people? We are called to justice and mercy, and the healing of the land (See **Jeremiah 29:4-7**). You don't exist for yourself. Do you leave peace wherever you go, or turmoil? Do you leave forgiveness or bitterness? Contentment or conflict? Joy or frustration? Love or hate?

...to the Heart

I pray that Psalm 23 gets into your brain, and into your heart! Really, the way we think about God is important. If we do not believe that God is **Good**, we will take control for our own lives, and enter into many different life-styles to satisfy ourselves. If we do not see God as **Gracious** and that He is our advocate, we will live defensively, always feeling like we have to justify ourselves. If we do not believe that God is **Glorious**, we will always seek our approval and identity elsewhere, where we will never seem to measure up, and if we believe that God is not **Great**, we will fear for our lives, not believing that God is sovereignly in control of this world. Psalm 23 shows us all of these things about God, and to the degree that we believe these things is related to the Love and Trust we have for our creator and savior. Are you willing to submit to God as your shepherd, or are you still treating God as your "Co-Pilot?" That's not a place that He intends to occupy.

Books for Further Study: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Wisdom and Psalms, Psalms Vol. 1-2, John Goldingay; Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer, Eugene Peterson; The Message of the Psalms: A theological Commentary, Walter Brueggemann, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Praying the Psalms, Thomas Merton; Bread in the Wilderness, Thomas Merton, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, Peter C. Craigie, New International Biblical Commentary, Psalms, Craig C. Broyles, The Book of Psalms, Robert Alter, Psalms Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller

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