

## ***Recollected: On Psalm 23***

### ***Introduction & Prayer:***

Well, friends! Let's pray, and—surprise—we'll go on to talk about Psalm 23 this morning.

### ***Hearing:***

We know Psalm 23, most of us. We know it so well that we don't really hear it anymore. Look, Psalm 23 is straightforward, really. It's not tricky to talk about. I mean, what's most tricky about this Psalm is that it's really, really straightforward.

### ***A Metaphor:***

It's straightforward as long as we remember one critical thing: the Psalm is a metaphor.

The Psalm, written whenever it was written but attributed to King David, is one that is, at its most basic, a metaphor in which David is comparing his relationship to God with the relationship a sheep has to a shepherd.

This isn't news. David to God, Sheep to Shepherd. But if we're going to "get" the power of the metaphor, we have to imagine the relationship any particular sheep has to its shepherd.

King David was a shepherd, remember; like any good shepherd, he would have understood the flock under

his care particularly and the behavior of sheep generally. Most of us have been steeped in Christian culture and imagery, which is, like, “sheep-based.”

We've heard Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd.” We realize that we're the lost sheep Jesus has gone to find, leaving the safe 99 behind. We're the sheep Peter feeds.

But even though we're really familiar with sheep-language, it doesn't mean that we've lived with sheep, smelled or smelled like them because we've spent all day sleeping with them and leading them around. We're better with dogs and cats.

***A few facts:***

We do know a few facts about sheep that are useful for us, though.

***Facts: Sheep are herd animals.***

We know that sheep are herd animals.

We read Psalm 23 and we imagine, if we imagine at all, just ourselves being led by still waters, right paths, blah blah blah: But shepherds don't have one sheep. David is undoubtedly imagining himself as he pens this stuff, but he wouldn't have thought of being by himself as he goes.

This is important. There wasn't a ray of moonlight

shining down on this cozy sheep, near a quiet pond, with the shepherd leaning back in the grass. There would have been a pile of the things. You could write the same Psalm with a focus on the other sheep if you wanted: Your body heat, it warms me. Your sheep smell it brings me comfort. We will trample the muddy, poopy path together.

As far as I can tell, a sheep by itself is basically either a ewe giving birth or a baby waiting to get eaten. Sheep by themselves don't exist for long.

***Facts: Sheep are instinctual***

And secondly, sheep aren't nearly as dumb as we think of them as being. They're just smart in ways we non-shepherds don't care about. They are practically the oldest domesticated animal around, and their instincts are ones we people have nurtured over millennia. They are instincts to herd together, to follow a leader—any leader--to fear what they don't know. They have instincts against independence and curiosity. Those aren't sheep virtues, they're sheep vices.

These are two important facts. Sheep are instinctual by our design, and they're herd animals. And again, I'm an expert on sheep. I've watched the movie *Babe* like a dozen times. I'm also an expert on talking pigs, British farmers, and grumpy dogs. If you have questions, use the chat box.

Let's walk along these paths with David.

***Psalm 23: v1***

***1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.***

David begins with the truth that God is as a shepherd to him. And he has in mind the best shepherd, a good shepherd. God is the shepherd who provides everything for his sheep.

***Psalm 23: v2 & 3a***

***2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,***

***3 he refreshes my soul.***

God, as shepherd, does what a good shepherd is supposed to do: He ensures that the sheep are provided for.

There are these two action words in this sentence:  
Makes me lie down, Leads me alongside.

We don't want to be made to do anything. But a shepherd determines what the sheep are meant to do. The sheep recognize the shepherd's authority, influence, provision, and follow where the shepherd leads. You could call it trust, but it's not the trust of a child to a parent; it's the trust of a creature to

something like a God.

The shepherd builds a routine that the sheep can follow, and the shepherd takes the time to know where he or she is taking the sheep; the shepherd knows the landscape. It's been shown that sheep can recognize individual faces; they know their shepherd. And their shepherd knows where the green pastures are, and where the water that's easy and safe to drink from exist. The sheep don't need to know these things. They simply follow the face and voice they recognize. The sheep don't need to know these things. They simply follow the face and voice they recognize.

This note the psalmist gives about God, as a shepherd, "restoring my soul," or "refreshing my soul," we think we immediately get it: David is talking about spiritual refreshment here--Joy, or peace or something. Whatever it is, it's about God's goodness, providence.

But David is still talking as a sheep here, not a Christian who addictively cares about feeling God's goodness. The word that's translated here is a word that points to what gives life. It overlaps with words that mean breath and heart. In this biblical way of thinking, a living creature is one who has the breath of life in it. And I actually really like the way *The Message* translates this, when it says, "you let me catch my breath."

The idea is that God, the shepherd, leads the psalmist--the sheepist--to a place of total provision. Lush rest, where you wake in the morning and eat the green grass around you, and you don't get worms or hoof diseases from nasty, poo-covered soil. There are still waters, easy to drink from, where no predator is going to snag you or you'll accidentally fall in. You're given space where you can catch your breath and rest for a period of time, remember that you're alive, and the livin' is good, before you go on again.

We don't equate "catching our breath" with "restoring our souls," but I wonder if we should? If we've ever had a heart attack, "catching our breath" may as well be "keeping me alive," right? If we've ever had a panic attack, to "catch our breath" is to have our souls restored. My general prayer for all of us would be that we can always have moments in our day where we catch our breath, gather our strength, and keep going.

But we're still talking about sheep:

***Psalm 23: v3b***  
***He guides me along the right paths***  
***for his name's sake.***

There's almost no reason, apart from the weak sauce "that's the way I memorized it" that we should translate David's phrase here, "paths of righteousness."

But the word connects with us. “Oh,” we think, “Righteousness! Yeah. We’re supposed to be righteous!” (Whatever we mean by that when we’re thinking about it, usually “holy,” or “pious” or something, words that don’t actually mean righteous as the Bible reckons it.) And so we think, “Of course. God leads his people in ways that are holy. So this makes sense.”

But it doesn’t really make sense unless we’re jumping away from the metaphor that David hasn’t left behind. He’s still talking about being a sheep led by a shepherd, and the paths the shepherd are leading him on are right paths, proper paths. Straight paths might work, maybe. “Legitimate paths.”

This is about the shepherd’s reputation. His “name’s sake.” The shepherd--God--does what he does with the sheep for his own reputation. He has to. David knows this.

First, if the shepherd is leading the sheep down wrong paths, bad paths, he could be doing it because he’s selling off the sheep. He’s going to say he’s lost some, but really he’s selling them, trading them, he’s a scoundrel.

Secondly, if he’s going down wrong paths, untested, unsafe paths, he’s doing it because he’s just a bad

shepherd. He's no good at shepherding. Shepherds watched over flocks that weren't their own; you don't want to get the reputation of being a lousy shepherd who loses sheep or worse, loses them mysteriously, repeatedly. You won't be a shepherd long, you know? I was fired from a bank once because I just kept losing money. It wasn't malicious, I didn't pocket it or burn it, but I did burn my reputation at Huntington Bank, you know?

If you're a sheep, you want to be led by the shepherd who is concerned about their reputation, who's going to make sure that nothing bad happens to the sheep they watch over. You want this.

God is determined to make sure his reputation is the best it can be, and he proves it by guiding David and others down paths that are right and proper, safe and legitimate. At least, metaphorically.

David continues:

### ***Psalm 23: v4: Death Valley?***

**4 Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.**

The phrase “the valley of the shadow of death” just rolls off our tongues, you know? Anything else feels wrong.

This is rich stuff, what David says here.

The image here is of a valley--a closed in place, right, with no great horizons, where you can be trapped--that is dark and threatening. Threatening with the threat of death. And anything could kill a sheep; lions and bears, a trip from a narrow path, simply stress and shock. These aren't creatures domesticated for rugged heartiness. All threats, to a sheep, are death threats. All threats are death threats.

It's the presence of the shepherd that makes the sheep feel secure. The sheep know when the shepherd is missing; the knuckleheads mill around like the dust that pops up when you slap the back of your sofa.

And we identify with the threatening nature of this valley generally, if not particularly. We know what it is to be threatened in some way, to feel fear for--maybe not our lives, as David often did, pursued by wicked king Saul--but fear for our way of life, our habits, our comforts, our relationships.

We know what it is to be threatened, which is why the image that rolls off our tongues, with its foreboding,

threatening power, is so poetically powerful. To translate this “darkest valley,” or “shadowy valley” is fine, but they miss the point that in those shadows and in the dark is the threat of death, and that’s what the sheep fear: But the shepherd, walking down the paths he knows, doesn’t fear it. God, leading God’s People behind him, has been this way, and the dark is not as dark to him.

We may not be afraid of the dark anymore, but there are a thousand things that threaten us. We’ve learned, we grown ups, to hide these things, minimize them, stuff them until they come out late at night, in ways we don’t expect. But the idea that we are not alone, but are in the presence of one who has been ahead of us, who knows the paths through this tight, threatening, anxious place, can keep us moving, can keep us going.

We are not sheep in a narrow valley full of shadow, every threat a death threat, but most of us are threatened by one fear or another, something like death.

And maybe, right now, we're connected with this image in a way we haven't been before. Our world is narrowing, our options narrowing, our concerns and work and trouble narrowing. We're focusing on our fear, our possible troubles, the death that seems to lurk out and about unseen. We're in a season in which

every path we take seems to be one that has a monster just around the corner—not a lion, or a trip over a path's edge, but a disease that might get us, and we can feel powerless to protect ourselves against it, and even our instinctual urge to huddle together is a danger.

Does the presence of God with us grant us any comfort?

### ***Psalm 23: v4: Rod & Staff***

But David not only declares his shepherd's presence with him; he explicitly says it's the rod and staff that the shepherd carry that bring him comfort.

The word for rod here is the same word that is often translated "staff" in the scene where David fights the Philistine Giant. It means stick or club. Shepherds carried them as protection. Staff is just that; a staff. Not a shepherd's crook, but a walking stick. It's a shepherd's multi-tool, you know? A club to hit a bear away, a walking stick to lean on.

Too often we've seen these things as signs of discipline. Christians love being disciplined; weirdos. But we've read these as things God the Shepherd uses to get back in line the sheep who are muddling about like dopes.

It's just as reasonable, more really, to see these as

things that bring not discipline to the sheep, but comfort...like the way every single translation puts it.

The word means to be consoled. And scared sheep need their anxiety consoled, need calmed down, need to know that the shepherd is with them and the darkness holds no threat, because the shepherd is well prepared against anything.

David was a shepherd, remember. In 1 Sam. he boasts to Saul about how he's chased after lions and bears who took his lambs, hit them and gotten his sheep out their mouths. He knows what you can do with a rod and a staff; he's done it.

### ***Psalm 23: v5 & 6***

Finally, at verse 5, David leaves the metaphor behind. There's no more sheep talk. It's important that we realize this has come now. David's mined the metaphor for all he can.

Most of our language about God is metaphor language; over and over in the New Testament Jesus describes himself and is described by metaphors. But now it's time for David, having started with metaphor, to talk about about his real life for a moment. He's ready to talk about his relationship with God.

I wonder, as we talk to God, what it is we use as a way into the conversation, a way into our straightforward

speech--our praise, our thanks, our prayers. How do we ease ourselves into the conversation? Some of us are great at it; we turn to the Lord and our hearts open up. Others of us can barely tell our spouses or children we love them, much less God, and we need the metaphors more than most.

But David's arrived; he's done with metaphors.

***5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.***

There's vindication in this. The enemies are around, but can't touch him. He's feasting; God is on his side, not theirs, and they can't touch him. For any of us who have had enemies, this is good.

***You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.***

If we open our Bibles much at all we're familiar with oil and wine. As a pair, they're shorthand for God's providence, appearing all over the Bible, but especially in the prophetic books. And David is declaring that he knows he has oil and wine--that's the cup, in these lines. He has it, man. He's got God's Providence, he has God's care. It's a declaration of certainty! God is for him, who can be against him!

And David ends on this:

***6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.***

He has been thinking of the way he, like a sheep follows a shepherd, has been following God. Now love and goodness, he knows, follow after him.

House or Household, Temple or part of God's People, this should remind us of the same thing the herd does. No one went to the Temple alone, and God's household doesn't only include me. Just as sheep are found in a herd, we dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives with others, not alone (see McCann 1996, 768).

What matters is that he is a part of God's protected and provided for household, and will be until the day he dies. David will have all the access to God that God has provided His People with. Love and goodness follow him, just as he follows God, and there is a certainty, a resolve in this, that we so often live without.

The end of this, when David leaves the metaphor behind and talks about his real life, is one that communicates over and over and over this deep sense that God will not leave him, will care for him in every

single way that matters. He is not alone. God is with him, and so is the herd.

***Conclusion:***

Sheep are fluffy. You count them going to sleep. You buy sheep-y things for newborns. We read this Psalm as a soothing, calming, prayer for ourselves alone. But we need to make the same move from the metaphor into real life that David made.

I think what David is giving voice to here, when he moves from metaphor to himself, is a deep, strong trust in this God he follows. It's an anchor point in his gut, a certainty that overrides and blocks all the difficulties that come his way. Love and goodness chase after him. He is protected for, he is provided for, and God will not abandon him anymore than he himself ever abandoned the sheep in his care.

Psalm 23 can be many things to us, but we should at least remember what it was for David: It was his expression of a deeply personal truth that kept him centered and safe, filled him with resolve and helped him hold up his head, walk in strength, no matter what situation he faced. It was a reminder that he was not alone; God was with him. And I think, too, that it's a reminder that even though they are absent from him, he is a part of a herd, he is a part of a household, a people who gather at the Temple together to worship God.

When we read this Psalm, recite it to ourselves or together, we're saying we're like sheep, and God is like a shepherd with a spotless reputation he will not tarnish by losing us. It's a psalm of humble trust: we humbly trust God to lead us, to be with us, to provide for us--food, drink, moments of catching our breath, protection against enemies. It reminds us that we're not alone, but in this with others. And these ideas, this sheep image, it jumps the track into David's real life and it should do the same in ours, too.

We can live with resolve that sees us through all enemies, all times of want, all fear. We can, right now, resist the panic that can come as our world and our options narrow, and things feel dark. We will look for the goodness and love that follow us. We can believe that God's resources are used for our protection. We are members of God's household, brought into this family by the Good Shepherd we follow who laid down his life for his sheep. We are God's People, and we have nothing to fear.

What do you hear when you hear this Psalm? David was able to move past the metaphor he started with, and end with deep, humble certainty that God would always be with and for him. I hope we can arrive at the same place, and be chased down by goodness and love wherever we go after we log off today.