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May 15, 2011

The Good Shepherd
Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

Millions of people know it by heart,
even people who aren't very religious
I've seen it comfort the dying, and bring life to the eyes of those
whose minds are unable to understand hardly anything else.
I've seen those who can say nothing else,
somehow join in reciting these words.

It has become ingrained in so many hearts,
and ingrained in our history as God's people.
It speaks to something deep down within the soul,
making a connection to something far beyond ourselves.

For many people it goes like this:
"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will feel no evil for thou art with me.
thou rod and thou staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the
presence of thine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil.
My cups overfloweth. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

I memorized it in King James, but whatever version you may know it by,
It is one of the most the powerful poems in all our Bible.

This incredible 23rd psalm was written by King David,
over three thousand years ago.
It is the most famous of his psalms
and it remains a Biblical classic today.

The words are already powerful to us,
but even more so as we remember some
of the deeper meanings behind them.

Is any of this sounding familiar to you?

And the most calming thing to sheep?

Is to know their shepherd is in the field with them at all times.

We too need God to help us lie down in green pastures—

and we too need to be free from **fear** and **friction, pests** and **hunger**.

What are the **fears** that keep you from the green pastures?

And how can you make time, or turn your eyes to see Jesus,

The good shepherd leading and guiding you, with you all the time?

What about the friction?—For many of us I believe it starts from mere **hecticness**.

“How many of you rushed to get to church today?” If you said yes, ask yourself how many times you’ve rushed this week, this month. And why? For what?

Sheep distractions are dangerous—and so are our distractions.

I remember reading about what one pastor called

“Living in the Margins”

It means giving ourselves extra time and space to rest and recover,

to be the people God made us to be,

not just crazy people rushing from one thing to another

we need to get rid of distractions, the friction of life,

so we can lie down in green pastures....

And the crazy pests?

Well, you can fill in your own blanks there, but let me say this—

The pests do not bother the sheep when the tender care and ointments of the shepherd are carefully applied to the sheep.

How can we run to Jesus, to help deal with the pests in our lives?

And then lie down quietly in the lush green lawns to rest?

He leads me beside still waters

Sheep are completely reliant upon the shepherd for finding **clean water**.

Without the shepherd’s direction,

they will drink almost anything, no matter how dirty or harmful.

It goes without saying how this is just like us.

Think of how we hurt our own bodies and minds

unless we allow ourselves to be led and directed by
 God's Spirit, by our relationship with Jesus Christ.
 When was the last time you checked your tv or internet or
 reading choices with your faith standards?
 Are you allowing God to lead you to some still waters?

He restores my soul.

Notice that the first thing the shepherd does for us
 is that he makes us be quiet,
 in the green pastures and still waters—
 so that our souls, can be restored.

The sheep who need to be restored are easy to spot.
 Shepherds call them '**cast down**'—
 these are the ones who have laid down in a soft spot or rolled
 into a ditch and now are flat on their backs, unable to right
 themselves.
 A good shepherd gently turns them right side up,
 and massages their legs to restore the circulation,
 or they will quickly die.

How often are we cast down?
 Laid down in all the wrong ways and places,
 Suddenly stuck, needing the good Shepherd to get us
 set up right again.

Which brings us to our next promise.
He leads me in the paths of righteousness, for his name's sake.
 Now, here's where sheep get the rap of being dumb animals.
 But it's not that they are dumb,
 They take being creatures of habit to an extreme.

Phillip Keller says that sheep will literally
 "sheep the land to death" if left in the same spot for any length of
 time. They will eat the same spot of grass, then roots, then the dirt
 around the roots...you get the picture.
 In order to care for the sheep, the Shepherd has to keep them
 on the move—on the right path so to speak.

We too become creatures of habit, making some dumb choices

So Jesus urges us down a narrow path of right relationships.

Our Good shepherd says: “I can lead you on the paths of right relationships, right values, right choices.”

But the key is our following—Jesus said ‘**follow Me**’.

And to do that means we put Jesus first in our lives—
we look to Him, not anyone or anything else,
for the direction of our lives.

Even when we go through the inevitable valleys of life.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

The sheep are led through the valleys
because it is there that they find some of the **choicest meadows**,
some of the richest forage, but the good shepherd must be
careful to guide and protect them from predators.

Notice that word, “**through**.”

There is always an end to the sorrow and pain in life....life does not always feel that way. But the shepherd will not leave us in the valley.

There are in fact times when the shepherd makes us stronger than we ever imagined when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Sometimes the most valuable lessons, like the choicest meadows for the sheep, are found in the valleys of life.

Your rod and your staff they comfort me.

The shepherd’s rod is **discipline and protection** from predators.

He uses it to correct a stray sheep, and to scare away danger.

And the staff is used to lovingly **lead and guide** the sheep,
and carefully bring them back to the fold when they wander.

God’s **Word** is a lot like the Shepherd’s rod—

it offers a word of correction to our lives, showing us the way to live,
and offering us protection in a world that is often hostile to faith.

God’s **Spirit** is a lot like the Shepherd’s staff,
lovingly guiding and leading us from within our own
hearts, and carefully drawing us
back to the fold when we wander.

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

Shepherds know sheep need a mesa or plateau for grazing.

So they can keep watch for enemies on the prowl.

In the same way our Good Shepherd prepares good places for us,
 Even though we want to try everything,
 regardless of whether it's good for us or not,
 and we easily forget that there is an Enemy at work in the
 world, evil is rampant, and we need the Shepherd's
 protection and care.
 Let's let God prepare our table.

You anoint my head with oil.

Sheep are constantly annoyed by flies and pests,
 so much so that they will beat their heads against the ground or one
 another, unless the Shepherd anoints their heads with oil

We obviously have our own pesky problems that afflict us,
 and all too often we butt heads with one another.
 We need Jesus to anoint us with the Holy Spirit, allowing us to
 move beyond our annoyances and into God's grace.

My cup overflows.

Phillip Keller wrote that when he read this part of the psalm
 he remembered that when some of the sheep were overcome
 with cold, He gave them a few drops of brandy and water, to
 save them from death.

In the same way, we are reminded of communion,
 of how the bread and cup from Christ saves us from death.
 Our cup of life literally overflows.

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

Under the care of our Good Shepherd
 goodness and mercy do follow us....
 And one day friends, we will dwell in God's house forever.
 I for one, look forward to that day with joy.
 For today, we can lead new and abundant lives.
 May we have the courage to follow our good shepherd, Amen.