

What My Shepherd Does

Psalm 23 (NIV)

A psalm of David. ¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. 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. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 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.

It's comforting to have someone simply be with us, but the comfort never stops at just being there. It's Mother's Day today, and we appreciate our mothers not just because they were around but because they did things for us. Not only was she there, but she asked you about your day, made herself available for chats, played games with you, made sure you were fed, clothed. For me, it wasn't just that I could talk to my Mom pretty much about anything, but that she would occasionally plan a refreshing mental health sort of day by taking me out of school, getting our favorite food to eat, sitting by the lake, swinging on swings, just the two of us. We appreciate moms for being there AND for what they did.

The LORD being our Good Shepherd is one of the most comforting pictures of God. One piece of that comfort comes from the fact that he is with us. It's the climax of Psalm 23, the very middle of the psalm, the point we are meant to focus on, words that probably many of you can recite from memory: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." (verse 4) I will fear no evil *because you are with me*, present with me. God's presence is comforting.

But he is not the Good Shepherd simply by virtue of being there; the LORD is our Shepherd because of what he does. Building out from the climax of Psalm 23, we see that the presence of our Shepherd is accompanied with the promise of action. "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (verse 4) These two tools of a shepherd are meant to be used. The rod is used to beat back attackers and wolves. It was also used to count the sheep, making sure everyone is there and with him and the flock. The staff gets used to guide the sheep along the right path, the safe path. It was also used to pull down leafy branches for the sheep to feast on.

That's not all that the LORD as our Shepherd does. "He makes me lie down in green pastures." (verse 2) He brings me right to the place where there is food galore. Not only does he lead me to food, but he also makes me lie down; he makes me take a rest. So often we push and push and push to do more and more and more and yet the tasks are never done. God makes us lie down. He makes us rest, even when we would choose something else.

Our Good Shepherd also leads us "beside quiet waters." (verse 2) He does this to quench our thirst, but also to give us peace. The sound of running water has a calming effect on the mind. He takes us here beside quiet waters to bring some tranquility into our lives.

These pictures line up with what comes after the focal point of Psalm 23 and the Good Shepherd being with us: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." (verse 5) It's a picture of a feast, one before our enemies but also protected from them because our Shepherd is with us with his rod and staff. Everything is lavished on us for this feast by our Shepherd as we have been led to quiet waters and been made to lie down in green pastures. We run out of no good thing but have all these overflowing into our lives. All this so that our souls are refreshed.

But why does our Shepherd do all these things? In fact, why is he *my* Shepherd? Which also begs the question: "How are we like sheep?"

Part of me wishes that I had in my background in being a literal sheep herder because I started to research what are sheep like. Do you know what I found? Google "sheep are dumb," and half of the results on the first page give you stories of how sheep are dumb and the other half tell you how sheep are smart. There are stories where sheep lovingly care for their lambs and other stories where the mama sheep could care less for its lambs and leaves them to die. There was a story of how a flock of sheep ingeniously found a way to create their own feeding trough when a shepherd tried to reduce their feeding times to once a day and then there's another story about a sheep separated from its flock who just walked around in circles, never eating, until it died. So, which is it? Are sheep smart or dumb? Is it actually both?

Maybe it should be obvious that sheep are both smart and dumb, especially if we are relating them to people as God does, because we know people are both smart and dumb at the same time. In fact, don't we see that in ourselves? How many times did we know what the right thing to do is, because we are smart people, and yet did the very thing we know that we shouldn't do? How many times have we been led on the right path, been shown the wise and responsible decisions to make, and yet we went and picked something else, entirely to our detriment? How many times have we knowingly made a decision that was bad for our health, bad for a relationship, bad for our finances? We're smart people who make dumb decisions sometimes.

I mean, why even is the LORD our Shepherd? How many times have we ignored him and not listened the voice of our Shepherd? How many times has God led us on the right path according to his Word because he knows best and yet we stubbornly rejected and did things our way and then were mad at God when it didn't go well? God summed up our stubborn and disobedient nature relating it to sheep in this way: "*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way.*" (Isaiah 53:6)

But our Shepherd is not one who simply throws his hands in the air when we don't listen to his voice and instead make dumb decisions to our detriment. No, our Shepherd is a shepherd of action. He pursued us, went after each of us sheep - smart or dumb - as we wandered off in our direction. He came after us and rescued us from the mouth of the wolves, from the pits that we fell into.

Our Shepherd in action as he came after us, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin named Mary. Each day he pursued us as he always listened to the voice of the LORD, never once wandering or going astray. He followed the perfect path of righteousness that God had laid out for anyone to be with him. Then he gave his life for his sheep, and we were cleansed by his sacrifice. He made us his sheep, just as was pictured in our reading from Revelation chapter 7: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, 'they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 7:14-17) This is how the LORD became our shepherd. This is why each of us can call him as David did, "My Shepherd."

Our Shepherd continues to not just be with us but to act for us. He continues to make us lie down in green pastures and lead us beside quiet waters. He does that as he comes to us in his Word, where we hear the calming message all over again that Jesus, our God, gave his life for us so that we would belong to him, that by his life and his blood we were cleansed from all the times when we disobediently wandered from him. He gives us his body and blood in his Supper so that we are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, rescued from the wolves of false teaching who wish to devour our souls and from the pits of despair that our sins of wandering cause us to fall into. He keeps coming back to us time and time again to guide us along the right paths for his name's sake, so that we are his sheep. Our Shepherd pursues us with his goodness and his love all the days of our lives. And he gives us eternal life with him. No one can snatch us away from the hands of our Shepherd.

Because the LORD has become our Shepherd by what he did for us, we now want to listen to his voice and follow him, even when it's hard, even when we want to stubbornly refuse, think that we know better and made dumb decisions like sheep. But because the LORD is our Shepherd, we lack nothing, and we fear nothing. He is our Shepherd who is not just with us but acts for us. With the LORD shepherding us, may we dwell in his house all of our days and forever. Amen.

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