

“Our Benevolent Shepherd and Bountiful Host” Psalm 23

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Morning Worship Service

In 2005, there was a very interesting story in the news involving a flock of Turkish sheep numbering 1,500.

Each villager on average owned about 20 of these sheep, and they had evidently combined all of their sheep into one massive flock with multiple shepherds overseeing the flock.

On this particular morning, this large flock of sheep seemed to be content and happy eating their morning meal on a large pasture.

So the multiple shepherds in charge of these sheep decided to take a break to eat breakfast. After all, there was no threat of predators, no threat of escape, they had the flock positioned strategically on a large grazing ground so that these shepherds could eat breakfast and keep one eye on the flock at the same time.

Well, as soon as the shepherds left the immediate area, witnesses watched in disbelief as one of the sheep decided to walk off of a nearby cliff, plunging to its certain death.

This would have been bad enough because as a shepherd you never want to lose even one of your sheep, but unfortunately this was only the beginning of the catastrophe that day.

Because after seeing the first one go over the cliff, sure enough, the other 1,499 sheep followed.

The fall was about a 50 foot drop so only 450 sheep died that day. The others were spared because by the time it was their turn to walk off the cliff there was a pile of dead sheep cushioning their fall at the bottom.

In the Scriptures, it took a legion of demons to cause a bunch of pigs to run themselves off of a cliff, but sheep on the other hand, they'll walk off of a cliff just because it seems like a good idea.

The more you know about sheep the more you recognize that when we, as God's people, are referred to as sheep, it's not exactly the most flattering term.

And yet we are not referred to as sheep in a derogatory sense, but rather in a *realistic* sense. Like sheep we are vulnerable, we need protection, we need provision, we need guidance and care. Like sheep we are prone to wander, prone to destroy ourselves if left to ourselves.

In fact, sheep require, really more than any other class of livestock, special and unique care. They are *entirely dependent* on the shepherd for their wellbeing.

So, the better the shepherd, the better it goes for the sheep. To the degree that the sheep responds and follows the shepherd, is the degree that it will go well for the sheep. To the degree that the sheep disregards the shepherd is the degree to which the sheep will face calamity.

This morning we're going to look at Psalm 23 and see this shepherd and sheep motif applied to the Lord and His people.

Specifically, we're going to see 2 illustrations of God's gracious care for us that demand our absolute trust:

The first illustration is God as benevolent shepherd in verses 1-4.

So, notice first in verse 1, "The Lord is my shepherd." So it begins with David's theology. Who is God, what is His relationship to me and my relationship to Him?

In this particular text, God is Lord, and He is not merely Lord in a general sense, but also in a very specific sense.

As your version has probably indicated, Lord in this verse is spelled out in all CAPS which is the way our English versions attempt to recognize the proper name of God יהוה.

Yahweh is a derivative of the verbal phrase "I am who I am." This emphasizes God's *eternity* and *immutability*.

In other words, God was, He is, and will always be what He is.

And there are also covenantal implications in this name. Listen to Exodus 3:15, "God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations."

So, David acknowledges here in verse 1 that this eternal, immutable, covenant-keeping God is my shepherd. A shepherd is an overseer, a protector, a provider, a guide to his sheep.

Now, imagine for a moment, from a sheep's perspective, what it would mean to have Yahweh as my shepherd.

He is eternal. So as a sheep I don't have to worry about him ceasing to be. He's dependent on no one and nothing. So this shepherd gives me permanence and stability.

He is immutable. As a sheep, I don't have to worry about catching him on a bad day, or him changing his attitude or disposition toward me. So this shepherd gives me consistency.

And He is covenant keeping, He is faithful, He's loyal. As a sheep, I can trust this shepherd because He always keeps his promises, he is unable to lie.

And notice that this shepherd Yahweh, is not merely a shepherd of all the sheep, though that is true and remarkable as well. But He is more than that. He is *my shepherd*.

The Lord's gracious and benevolent care for his people is *personal*. This is not a community psalm. It would have been sung in community, but it is applied individualistically.

If I am truly one of his sheep, I will know the Lord personally. He is *my* shepherd.

Now, notice the logical inference of this statement in **the second half of verse 1, "I shall not want."**

In other words, if the beginning of verse 1 is true, "the Lord is my shepherd," then everything else in this Psalm is automatic.

For instance, as we mentioned, the shepherd, not the sheep, is the responsible for the wellbeing of the sheep. The Shepherd is the subject of the main verbs:

Verse 2, "He makes me lie down... He leads me besides quiet waters.

Verse 3, "He restores my soul... He guides me in the paths of righteousness

In verse 4 it becomes more intimate: I fear no evil for you are with me. your rod and your staff they comfort me

Verse 5, "You prepare a table... You have anointed my head with oil.

If Yahweh is my shepherd, *He* will ensure everything that follows is true.

Now, that little phrase, "I shall not want" can be a little misleading. It's really more the idea of "I shall have no lack."

In fact, listen to Psalm 34:10 where David uses this same word: "the young lions suffer want and hunger, but they who seek the Lord *lack no good thing.*"

Now, to be sure, sheep certainly can think and feel like they lack things that would be good for them. But for that to be true, there's really only two possibilities that are true when that happens.

One, maybe Yahweh isn't your shepherd. Or, more commonly, we are defining "lack" differently than He does.

Often times, we define "lacking something good" as our shepherd being unwilling to give us relief from difficulty, whatever form they may be.

But we don't even need to go outside of this Psalm to recognize what David is talking about has nothing to do with relief from trials and difficulty.

For instance, verse 4 talks about walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Some sheep simply can't be content in that shadow. We think, "I have to come out of this shadow, I need to come out of this shadow. My shepherd doesn't know what He's doing."

But that is not evidence that you are indeed lacking something that is good for you, it's rather evidence that, as a sheep, you are elevating your own wisdom above your shepherd.

That is why it can be helpful for us to remember who we are without our shepherd. A sheep's wisdom without the nearby shepherd will cause it to think that walking off a cliff after watching 1,499 others is still a good idea.

So, the shepherd informs us of what true lacking is, not the sheep.

You remember the testimony of Israel in the wilderness and there is a theme that comes up over and over and over again: Complaining, grumbling.

Were those complaints warranted, did Israel have rational grounds to complain? Listen to Deuteronomy 2:7, "For the LORD your God has blessed you in all that you have done; He has known your wanderings through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; *you have not lacked a thing.*"

Oh, they certainly *thought* they lacked things at times. Just like you and I think we lack at times.

But articulating to God or others that we lack is nothing more than shouting at our shepherd with a megaphone that He doesn't know what he is doing, and he has made a mistake.

Complaining is the fruit of allowing your experience to become your authority, so that your experience informs and corrects the Word of God.

Instead of the Word of God informing and correcting your view of your experience.

So, if my experience *seems* to not line up with the Word of God, I need to walk by faith and trust the Lord instead of my subjective interpretation of my circumstances.

The divine testimony on your life is this: If the Lord is your shepherd, you lack nothing that is good for you. Any resistance to that idea is simply prideful unbelief.

Now, what's going to be described in the following verses is the ideal experience for a sheep in the ancient context. It's the practical outworking of "I shall not lack" in the life of a sheep.

Notice verse 2 as we continue to see the benevolent shepherd's gracious care for his sheep. **Verse 2, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters."**

A shepherd's task in the wilderness is to find pastures for the flock. Oftentimes sheep would be led in the wilderness through various parts of land that receives too little rainfall to support a settled population, but just enough rainfall to support a flock of sheep for a quick feeding, before they move on.

So with scanty pasturage available a shepherd and his sheep spend most of their time moving from one spot where a bit of nice pasturage is available to another.

But here in verse 2 the emphasis is not on mere provision of scanty pasturage able to keep the sheep alive but anxiously on the move in search for more.

No, these are "grassy" or "green" pastures, emphasizing *ample provision*. This shepherd doesn't lead his sheep through areas where they can just be pacified, no, this shepherd causes his flock to *lie down* in these pastures.

Not “lie down” as in “he forces me to lie down against my will” but rather, he meets the necessary conditions and creates the appropriate environment so I will naturally lie down because I am satisfied and content.

Author Phillip Keller, who spent many years in agricultural research, including owning and tending to sheep, he wrote a book on Psalm 23 and talked about his own experiences as a shepherd.

And he says that there are 4 things that must be true before a sheep will lie down: free of all fear, free from friction with other sheep, free from pests and parasites, and free from hunger.

So, as a sheep who is comfortable enough to lie down, that means my shepherd has provided everything I need to be free from fear, tension, aggravations, and hunger. He removes any rational reason for me to be discontent.

Notice the second half of verse 2, “he leads me besides quiet waters.”

Now, that word for “quiet” or “still” is overwhelmingly used in the Old Testament to refer to “restfulness.” So I think “waters of rest” gets more at the idea here.

Sheep, like all animals, require water. And sheep have no ability to discern when they come to a water source if it is pure or polluted.

If they aren’t led to pure water sources they will in desperation inevitably settle and drink from polluted sources, thus leading to significant and life-threatening issues.

So, the water source must not only be pure it also must be plentiful, otherwise, the sheep will frantically drink up what little supply is there without actually being satisfied.

So the phrase, “waters of rest” tells us that this shepherd not only leads them to the best water source, but also a water source so plentiful that they can drink, lie down and rest, knowing that they can get up at any time to have another drink.

Again, we can see the emphasis on the benevolent and gracious care of this shepherd. The supply of this shepherd *never runs out*.

If Yahweh is your shepherd, you should be content and satisfied. He doesn’t just give you enough to pacify you, he doesn’t just give you what is good, *he gives you what is best*.

Now, let’s pause here and insert a realistic objection in of verse 2. Do we not at times feel like irritated sheep, restless sheep, discontent, do we not at times have conflict with other sheep, are we not at times fearful in difficulty?

Are there not times when verse 2 is the last metaphor we would use to describe our experience as Christians? Fully satisfied, resting content, no friction with others, no irritations, just sweet satisfaction, contentment, and peace?

If we’re honest, we would have to admit that’s true at times. And the first thing we know is that there is nothing wrong with the shepherd. So what might be the problem?

Well, perhaps you're not letting the shepherd lead you. In other words, your frustration, your discontentment, your lack of satisfaction, is *self-inflicted*.

Charles Spurgeon is helpful here, he said, "When God hides his face from his people, it is almost always behind clouds of dust which *they have made themselves*."

You see in every flock there are stubborn sheep, in every flock there are sheep who really aren't too satisfied with their shepherd, there are problem sheep, there are black sheep, and there are those sheep who on occasion become "cast."

A cast sheep is particularly interesting. This is a sheep that has rolled over onto its back and often cannot get up without the assistance of the shepherd.

And there are several ways this happens:

Often times, a sheep would become cast because it was trying to get a little too comfortable. Maybe they rolled on the ground to scratch an itch.

Maybe they were napping in a really comfortable spot and after plunging into their preferred spot they were unable to get up.

Even a sheep with an excessive amount of wool would be prone to this as well. Its center of gravity is unbalanced due to its long and heavy fleece, and various things in it like mud and moisture would cling to it.

Another way for a sheep to become cast is through fighting with another sheep.

But no matter the cause, a "cast sheep" is a pretty pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, flailing away and struggling to get up. It's in a state of frightened frustration, and it provides a very fitting metaphor for the Christian who has acted foolishly.

Before attempting to blame the shepherd or even blame other sheep, you must first ask yourself this question: Are you prone to being a cast sheep? Is this the reason you don't experience the peace, satisfaction, joy and contentment of verse 2?

The rest of the flock is experiencing verse 2, content with their shepherd's care, responding appropriately to his leadership, but you decided to try to do your own thing.

Maybe you stopped praying, or stopped getting in the Word on a regular basis, or stopped meeting with God's people, or rejected godly counsel, and now there you are off to the side, away from the flock, vulnerable because you didn't follow the shepherd's instructions.

You tried to go eat somewhere else, tried to find a better path, better water, and there you are, spiritually upside down on the ground, flailing in fearful frustration, even attempting to blame the shepherd for this predicament when in fact it was your foolishness which put you there.

Well, of course verse 2 will be far from your experience if you are a habitually stubborn sheep, if you wander off and became cast often.

But even if this is the case, all hope is not lost. Because what is a good shepherd's response to a wayward sheep, a cast sheep?

Well, a cast sheep will perish if not helped in a timely manner so it is an extremely serious situation for a shepherd.

And this is where the shepherd's grace and love is magnified. Because a shepherd's response to a cast sheep is not one of disdain, laughter, or mockery.

It's one of pity. It's a pathetic sight to see a cast sheep. It evokes compassion from a shepherd. The shepherd just wants you to get you back up and respond to his leadership.

This is why the next verse is so precious because when we become cast, when we fall, when we wander, or maybe when we simply need encouragement and refreshment, the shepherd turns us back and revives us.

Verse 3, "He restores my soul. Soul can and often is translated "life." He restores my life in what sense?

Well, the word for "restore" is actually one of the main words in the Hebrew Scriptures for repentance, even conversion on some occasions.

But it can also refer to restoring in the sense of reviving, providing relief and refreshment, *bringing back to ideal condition* (Holiday). I believe that's the sense here.

What does a shepherd do when a sheep goes missing? He leaves the flock to go after the one who strayed.

Again, I turn to Philipp Keller as he recounts his experience as a shepherd restoring cast sheep, sometimes searching for hours, even days for the sheep.

"as soon as I reached the cast sheep my very first impulse was to pick it up. Tenderly I would roll the sheep over on its side. This would release the pressure of all of the gases that had built up in her as a result of laying upside down."

"if she had been down for long I would have to lift her up onto her feet. Then straddling the sheep with my legs I would hold her upright, rubbing her limbs to restore circulation to her legs. This often took quite some time."

"When the sheep started to walk again she often just stumbled, staggered, and collapsed in a heap once more. All the time I worked on the cast sheep I would talk to it gently, "when are you going to learn to stand on your own feet? I'm so glad I found you in time, you rascal."

"and so the conversation would go. Always couched in language that combined tenderness and rebuke, compassion and correction."

“little by little the sheep would regain its equilibrium. It would start to walk steadily and surely. By and by it would dash away to rejoin the others, set free from its fears and frustrations, given another chance to live a little longer.”

David says, my shepherd restores me, when I’m stubborn, wandering, cast, or even just discouraged and weak, he brings me back to the ideal condition.

Not only does this Benevolent Shepherd restore the sheep, notice the middle of verse 3, “He guides me in the paths of righteousness.”

Now, in the context these paths must be something that literal sheep can be guided on so I don’t prefer the translation “paths of righteousness” because I think that bypasses the metaphor David is using and immediately tries to spiritualize it.

For instance, everything he’s talking about in verses 1-4 is true of literal sheep. So I actually prefer the NIV rendering here: “He guides me along the *right paths* for his name’s sake.”

What are these right paths that sheep need to be guided on?

Well, sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves they will follow the same trails and go to the same fields and hills, over and over and over, until those hills and pastures become wastelands, polluted with disease and parasites, good for nothing.

If the sheep are not meticulously guided, they will simply destroy the ground by over-grazing it. This means that sheep cannot stay in one place very long. They have to be on the move.

And because sheep are prone to wander aimlessly, there must be a predetermined plan of action, a deliberate, planned rotation from one grazing ground to another.

Therefore, any good shepherd knows the right path to the right place at the right pace. David says, “he guides me in the right paths.”

In other words, there are no plan B’s with this shepherd. There are no mistakes. His predetermined plan is always perfect.

How can you cultivate gratitude and contentment and joy in your life as a sheep? Trust that the Lord always leads you on the best possible path, to the best possible place, at the best possible pace.

Why does a shepherd take such great pains to ensure the welfare of his sheep? Why does a shepherd care so deeply for the sheep?

Because his glory, his reputation is on the line, notice the middle of verse 3 again, “He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.”

In the ancient context, someone’s name is the equivalent of character or reputation, so this little phrase, “for his name’s sake” means, “he does all this because he has a reputation which must be cautiously upheld.”

Perhaps this can be illustrated by thinking back to the story in the introduction this morning. When those sheep wandered off the cliff one by one to their demise, whose reputation did that tarnish the most?

Certainly not the sheep, why? We didn't find out anything about sheep that we already didn't know.

Sheep left to themselves will destroy themselves, they cannot survive on their own. Granted, the sheep were responsible for their actions that day, but at the same time we can easily recognize that *negligent shepherding* played a factor.

It was the shepherds, not the sheep, who ultimately looked bad that day. They were the ones in trouble with the sheep-owners. They were the ones who would lose their jobs and have a hard time finding another one in that area.

It is the *shepherd's reputation* that is directly tied to the welfare of the sheep. If he is negligent in his care for the sheep, he not only damages the sheep, he damages himself because his livelihood is on the line.

Likewise, when it comes to the Lord, He does what he does for his people out of real and genuine love for us. But at the center of the target of his purposes is his own glory, his name's sake.

This means that our wellbeing as God's sheep is directly tied to his commitment to Himself.

But this poses a problem in our minds because we know that it is the epitome of arrogance to do things to magnify our own reputation. To do something so I can look good, that's sinful. But for God it's a virtue, for God it's ok?

Well, this is only a problem when we are processing it from the perspective of a sinful human being.

Indeed, if we worship ourselves we are committing idolatry. But if God worships anything other than himself, *He is committing idolatry*.

Furthermore, if God wasn't devoted to the praise of His name then he is not worthy to be worshipped because that means there is someone or something in existence more valuable, more holy, more worthy to be worshipped than God.

So in order to be loving, in order to not sin Himself, He must worship himself and do all things to the glory of his name.

And by the way, this is really good news for people like you and me.

How so? Well, do you really want your eternal wellbeing resting on your ability to keep yourself lovable to God, do you really want your faithfulness to God to be the determining factor?

Or do you want your eternal wellbeing resting on God's commitment to himself, in such a way that what happens to you reflects upon the glory of his reputation?

That's why this is really good news for us. *Our good and God's glory are inseparably linked.* This means that our Benevolent Shepherd will never do anything that lessens or tarnishes his glory, and therefore, he is unable to do any wrong to us.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. My security and well-being is inseparably linked to my shepherd's reputation. A reputation that he passionately guards above all things.

Now, up until this point we've seen that our Benevolent Shepherd is more than sufficient for the good times in life. The pleasant pastures, the waters of rest.

But can this shepherd really be sufficient for me in the dark times? In times of trial and tragedy?

This is the direction we now turn: Notice verse 4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Now, here is where our sentimental reading of this Psalm can hinder our understanding. In fact the world has hijacked this Psalm from us and has made it a Psalm about death.

That's why you typically hear this Psalm read at funerals or environments where death is imminent.

But this Psalm is not really about death. First of all, the phrase "shadow of death" is probably better rendered "Valley of deepest darkness."

Again, I'm not advocating the NIV over other translations but for whatever reason it is pretty good with Psalm 23. Here it says, "even though I walk through the *darkest valley.*"

And notice another indicator that this Psalm is not about death: the text says, "I walk *through* the valley" not "I get to the valley *and die.*"

So verse 4, although not excluding death, really isn't emphasizing death. It's rather emphasizing terror, fear, extreme danger. "Even though I go through the deepest, darkest valley, I fear no evil."

And oh by the way, based on verse 3, this guidance and leading into the deepest darkness is not a wrong turn, not a mistake.

The shepherd didn't get careless, he didn't lose sight of me as I wandered off into the valley, no, this was the *intention* of the shepherd to go this direction and end up in this place.

Why? Why would a literal shepherd take his sheep into danger? Likewise, why does the Lord take his people into precarious circumstances?

Because sometimes the best food, best rest, best place, is at the bottom of a deep valley, and getting there is dangerous.

Deep ravines, sharp cliffs, shadows and darkness prevail because the sun's rays cannot penetrate there.

This would mean vulnerability to predators who were lurking in the darkness, poor visibility, unstable footing as the rocks crumble beneath them.

If you think about it, deepest, darkest valley is the most frightening context imaginable for a sheep. But David says, "I fear no evil." Why? What is the source of courage?

Notice middle of verse 4, "For you are with me." The source of comfort and courage is the recognition that however bad it gets, the shepherd is with me.

In fact, you'll notice there's an interesting shift here in the text. In verses 1-3, David refers to Yahweh in the 3rd person, "He." He makes me lie down, He leads me, He restores me, He guides me..."

But now in verses 4 he switches to the more personal and intimate 2nd person, "you." So he's been speaking *about* the Lord, now he speaks *to* the Lord.

It is interesting that this more personal address doesn't occur in the pleasant and abundant provision in verses 2-3, but in the terrifying circumstances of verse 4.

A sheep knows that although my shepherd is never absent from me no matter where I am, it is in times of deepest darkness where he draws near to me and I to him in a uniquely intimate way.

Up in the plains, when the sun is shining, and footing is sure, and there is no danger of predators, the shepherd is still there right with his sheep. But he might be walking casually up in front of the flock, or casually behind the flock.

But what does a good shepherd do when those securities are taken away? He *himself* becomes the security.

Let me illustrate this with a Father/Son relationship. We have a 2-year-old son Walker. At home, when everything is at it should be in his mind, he is content and satisfied to play with toys, flip through some books, move about freely from room to room, because he feels secure.

He might not even be able to see Mommy or Daddy at the moment, but he knows we are home, he knows we are near, close by if he needs something.

But what happens when we take Walker to an airport, or a very busy shopping center? And there he finds himself in an familiar environment, very noisy, with hundreds of strangers, much bigger than him, walking hurriedly in every direction?

His sense of security is removed. He starts to get anxious, fearful, skittish, all of his natural desires, like hunger, thirst, sleep get choked out by a greater, all consuming desire. I need Daddy.

Now, I'm already right there with him, in fact, I could have been with him all day up until that point, and he's currently one foot away from me. But the more frightening the environment gets, the closer he wants to be.

So he will raise up his hands, and start tugging at my pants until I pick him up. Being in the same room, even standing next to me is no longer good enough. It's not until I pick him up that he breathes a sigh of relief and is no longer fearing.

But this desire for nearness is not just one-sided. Because the more dangerous and unpredictable the environment becomes, the more I myself want to draw near to him and pick him up in order to protect him.

That's what I think David is saying here: The darker and more tumultuous it gets, the sheep draw nearer to the shepherd, and the shepherd draws nearer to the sheep.

You are with me in the darkness in a nearer and more intimate way.

You can imagine the mixed emotions and desires of the sheep when they come out of the darkness, when they pass on from this dangerous valley and life gets back to normal.

On the one hand the sheep are probably relieved that the trial is over, the darkness has turned to light.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which they want to go back into the valley of deep darkness because it was there that they experienced an intimacy with their shepherd that they don't get as often during the good times.

As God's people we experience this principle: the darker it gets, the more intimacy with Christ we get.

And notice here in verse 4, it is not merely the shepherd's more intimate presence that distills the fear, but also something the shepherd possesses: Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

The rod was a wooden club about 2 feet in length. It was basically an extension of the owner's right arm and served as his defensive weapon.

It was not only used to strike the head of a predator but he could also hurl it over the flock at a predator in an attempt to ward it off.

So the rod became a source of comfort for a sheep, especially for a sheep that had literally been in the jaws of a predator and freed because the shepherd came and killed the predator with his rod.

The shepherd's staff on the other hand was primarily used to control and help the sheep. The staff was a much longer and thinner piece of wood with a hook at one end.

It could be used to pry a sheep loose from a thicket, pull a wandering sheep from a hole, even rescue a sheep from the edge of a steep cliff. It's also used for guiding as the shepherd places it gently on the sheep to guide it onto the right path.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me, the text says.

Your rod will protect me, it will ensure that nothing can enter my life that doesn't pass through your protective hand.

And your staff will keep me, whether it be through the gentle nudging's or in firm discipline, it will keep me from wandering off into destruction. It will pick me up when I have fallen.

The point is clear: there is no environment imaginable where my shepherd will not be fully sufficient to guard and protect me. I can entrust not only my physical well-being to this shepherd, but also my eternal well-being.

This is the first illustration of God's gracious care for us which demands our absolute trust. God as our benevolent shepherd.

The second illustration of God's gracious care for us which demands our absolute trust is God as Bountiful Host:

And you'll notice that the metaphor or illustration now takes a different turn. We are no longer sheep, but human beings, guests at a dinner party. And the Lord is no longer a shepherd but rather the gracious host of this dinner party.

Notice verse 5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.

In the ancient context, the hosting of a guest was a matter of supreme effort, supreme hospitality.

To eat and drink at someone's table forged a bond of loyalty and love, and often sealed a covenant between the parties involved.

And it was no small event, lasting all day at a minimum. It would have meant fresh food would be prepared. Something like a goat would be killed and cooked.

It would be similar to how we handle thanksgiving dinner when we have guests over. But you can think of more like an *impromptu* thanksgiving, with no heads up that anyone was coming, with no refrigerator or microwave or oven, and everything you were going to eat and cook you had to go out and kill first.

So when David speaks of "you prepare a table before me" he is communicating generous hospitality, significant sacrifice, abundance and lavish provision, and also intimacy and fellowship.

And all of this, notice, "in the presence of my enemies." His enemies are not guests, but are present in some sense. Perhaps forced to watch, it could even be that they are present as captives at a victory celebration.

In either case, the sense is that my enemies might be present, they might be threatening me, but they are powerless, they can't touch my fellowship with the Lord.

This wasn't eating with one eye on the food and one eye on the enemy, wondering when they would make their move. No, this was eating and fellowshiping in a relaxed and enjoyable state, while present enemies watch, powerless to do anything.

So it's not only a picture of abundance, but also assurance and security. The assurance that, in New Testament language, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

There is nothing in all of creation that take away my relationship and right-standing with the Lord.

There are two other actions this bountiful host performs. Notice first in verse 5, “you have anointed my head with oil.”

It was customary before entering the banquet hall for the host to anoint the guest with oil. This would serve a few functions.

First, dry skin would have been common and remember, no shampoo or showering, at least how we think of showering, so the best way to make your hair look good was to add oil, not subtract it.

Also, oil was used to eliminate lice by “smearing the hair with oil; this treatment prevented oxygen from penetrating the head and caused the lice to suffocate.

Apart from these practical uses it was a sign of blessing and hospitality.

David also adds at the end of verse 5, “my cup overflows.” Again, the picture is one of lavish generosity. Exceedingly gracious.

An illustration of God Himself waiting on His people, serving His people.

This also communicates to us that this bountiful host is not reluctant in giving his people things. And he is not stingy.

He gives his people an infinite supply of what they need.

Now, obviously God does not literally prepare a table for us, anoint us with oil, and cause our cup to overflow. This is a metaphor of a greater reality.

A reality that finds its fullest expression in the words of Jesus himself in John 6:35, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will not hunger, he who believes in me will never thirst.”

This Bountiful Host is able to lavishly satisfy you for all of eternity.

Now the conclusion in verse 6 as both illustrations, that of benevolent shepherd and bountiful host, are expressed by way of principle:

Verse 6, “Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life.”

Now, a couple of words to highlight here: Surely can also be translated “only” or “nothing but.”

Nothing but goodness, that is, divine blessing, and lovingkindness, that is, the strongest Hebrew word to depict God’s covenant-keeping loyal love and faithfulness.

Nothing but these will follow me all the days of my life. And at first read maybe that word “follow” doesn’t sound too impressive.

After all is it really that comforting of an idea? I get into trouble, tragedy, a trial, but don’t worry, eventually God’s kindness to bless me and his faithful love will catch up, they will come along and

rescue, because after all, they have been following me, just sort of lagging behind me, keeping a watchful eye on everything.

No, actually the NLT gets at the idea: "Surely your goodness and unfailing love will *pursue* me all the days of my life."

That is to say, they will persistently, energetically, actively, and aggressively hunt me down like a fierce predator hunts his prey.

It's speaking of a fierce and aggressive commitment of the Lord to always and only bless His people.

In fact, this is the exact word used over and over to refer to Pharaoh and the Egyptians pursuing Israel.

That is the intensity and persistence of this benevolent shepherd and bountiful host.

And David knew, when Yahweh, my God has these intentions toward me, I can have no doubt that he will ever lose me. I am safe and secure.

Notice the end of verse 6, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Literally, "I will keep returning to the house of the Lord (the place of corporate worship) for length of days."

And David doesn't anticipate this and long for this because he's just really impressed with the tabernacle.

No, it's because God was there. The house of the Lord represented God's presence. God is the host, and I'm a *permanent* invitee.

Just a few Psalms later in Psalm 27:4, "One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in His temple."

David says, I'm not in it for what the Lord can do for me, I'm in it for the Lord himself. Everything else is a bonus.

This shepherd, this host is infinitely satisfying. He fulfills and meets my earthly and temporary needs and he fulfills and meets my spiritual and eternal needs.

And because I know him and his intentions towards me, I'm confident that I will return again and again and again to worship the one who persistently pursues me with lovingkindness, to such a degree that if he is truly my shepherd and my host, I cannot be lacking in anything that He determines is good for me.

Now, as we begin to draw to a close, you're probably all aware, that there are so many allusions to this shepherd and sheep motif in both the Old and New Testaments.

One common theme, highlighted in passages like Ezekiel 34, Zechariah 10 and 11, is that of the dissatisfaction of the Lord with the human under shepherds he has placed over the flock of Israel.

These so called shepherds have repeatedly failed to properly care for and protect the sheep. The shepherds were in it for themselves, consuming the sheep for their good.

So it's as if the Lord says, enough is enough, I'm going to ensure my sheep have the shepherd they need.

Listen to Micah 5:2-4, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." Verse 4, "And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the Lord, In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God..."

It is no coincidence that Jesus uses this very language to refer to himself when he emphatically declares in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd."

An unmistakable reference to deity. Jesus is Yahweh, He is the divine shepherd of Psalm 23:1.

Except there were a couple of things unique about this shepherd because this shepherd would do things for his sheep that would be atypical.

You see, sheep are not domesticated pets. A shepherd does not have sheep for his own leisure, for his own personal enjoyment. No, sheep are raised to be slaughtered. Their wool and meat represent economic gain for the shepherd and owner of the sheep.

The sheep, traditionally then, lay down their life for the shepherd. He gains from their death.

But this is not the case with the good shepherd. He is not a shepherd who watches over his sheep just so he can prosper from them when they are sold and slaughtered.

No, this divine shepherd takes their place in the slaughterhouse. Notice verse 11 again, "I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

A good shepherd must meet the greatest and most pressing needs of the sheep. And as human sheep, our greatest need is forgiveness and reconciliation with a Holy God.

So, Christ, as our good shepherd, had to meet and fulfill our greatest need. He had to become a sheep, doomed to slaughter.

Isaiah 53:6-7, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth."

Our good shepherd took our place in the slaughterhouse of God's wrath. Because in order to secure all of the benefits of Psalm 23 for sinners like us, God's wrath must be propitiated.

Everything in Psalm 23: Provision, contentment, satisfaction, restoration, guidance, companionship, courage, comfort, joy, abundance, security.

In order for a holy God to give sinners like us this type of favor means that his anger and wrath toward us must first be satisfied.

Everything outside of hell, any good thing you have or experience, was bought for you by your good shepherd when he layed down his life for you.

But there is something else this good shepherd does that is unique. You see even the best human shepherds lose a sheep from time to time, whether it be through disease, or a predator, or the sheep irrationally walking off a cliff.

But this good shepherd has a *flawless record* when it comes to losing sheep.

Look over at John 10:27-29, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand."

To say that a true sheep of God can at one time be a sheep and then eventually be lost not only implies a misunderstanding of the substitutionary death of the shepherd on behalf of his sheep, but it also implies something pretty treacherous about the shepherd himself.

It implies either the *negligence or inability* of the shepherd to keep all who belong to him. Remember, ultimately it is the shepherd who is responsible for the well-being of the sheep.

And based on the verses we just read in John 10 we can all be assured of one thing: The only way you can be lost if you are a true sheep of God is if you are stronger than the Trinity.

Is this shepherd and host not worthy of our absolute trust? Are you convinced yet that he is on your side if you are one of his sheep?

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