

THE GOOD SHEPHERD
A SERIES ON THE 23RD PSALM
(3) THE SHEPHERD'S PURPOSE

Psalm 23:3b

Jeffrey S. Carlson

October 14, 2018

PROLOGUE

A little girl was sitting on her grandfather's lap as he read her a story. From time to time, she would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch his wrinkled cheek. She was alternately stroking her own cheek, then his again. Finally she spoke, "Grandpa, did God make you?" "Yes, sweetheart," he answered, "God made me a long time ago." "Oh," she said and then "Grandpa, did God make me, too?" Yes, indeed," he answered." God made you just a little while ago." Feeling their respective faces again, she observed, "God's getting better at it, isn't he?"

SCRIPTURE

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long (Psalm 23 NRSV).

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 fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever (Psalm 23 KJV).

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23 is one of the great treasures of the Bible. It has been a source of strength and inspiration for millions of people of faith. It reminds us of the goodness of the Lord toward his people. We are like sheep under the care and guidance of the Divine Shepherd.

Just as an earthly shepherd gives direction to a flock, our Divine Shepherd gives us direction in life. If we want to find and fulfill our purpose we need to follow the Shepherd. As the text says:

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake (Psalm 23:3b NRSV).

1. THE SHEPHERD'S PURPOSE IS REAL

Unlike sheep ranchers of today, shepherds of the ancient Near East *led* their flocks from pasture to pasture. It is this image of leadership that is emphasized throughout Psalm 23. It is because of this leadership that we know the Shepherd's purpose for us is real. He does not expect the sheep to take a path that he himself has not trodden. He does not drive us toward a theoretical purpose but leads us by example through a way that is real and practical.

Lynn Anderson, in his book, *They Smell Like Sheep*, writes of an experience while they were traveling in the Middle East that helps us appreciate this point:

My wife and I were listening to a tour guide. . . describe the ancient shepherd/sheep relationship. The shepherd, he explained, doesn't need to drive the sheep. He can lead them. That is because he feeds and gently cares for them, causing them to respond to his voice.

He then told how, while giving the same spiel on a previous tour, he suddenly realized he'd lost his audience. They were staring out the bus windows at a guy chasing a "herd" of sheep—throwing rocks at them, whacking them with a stick, and siccing the sheep dog on them.

The guide told us he was so agitated about having his enchanting narrative torpedoed that he jumped off the bus, ran into the field, and accosted the man, "You've just done me in! I was telling these tourists about the gentle ways of shepherds, and here you are hounding and assaulting these sheep! What gives?"

The sheep-chaser's bewildered expression turned to comprehension. "Man, you've got me all wrong," he blurted out. "I'm not a shepherd. I'm [the] butcher!"

We are led by a Shepherd who loves us, not driven by a butcher who seeks our destruction. The prophet Jeremiah confirms this:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer 29:11 NRSV).

Our Shepherd has a purpose for us that is not only good but it is one that he himself has lived out. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it:

Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing,

experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help (Heb 4:14-16 MSG).

Jesus, the Great Shepherd, understands our reality. He says in the Revelation to John, "I know your affliction...I know your poverty...I know your slander. I know...I know...I know..." (Rev 2:9). Christ knows our sufferings. As the prophet says:

"He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3).

It is in the suffering of Jesus that we see suffering in a whole new light. Jesus never promised anyone a trouble-free life. He spoke plainly about affliction, hardship even persecution. He also spoke plainly about forgiveness, friendship with God and eternal life. The Shepherd's purpose is real.

2. THE SHEPHERD'S PURPOSE MAKES SENSE

The Shepherd's purpose also makes sense. This is the meaning behind "right paths." Older translations say something like:

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake (23:3).

There is nothing wrong with this translation but over time the English word "righteousness" has taken on a lot of religious and moral "baggage." The basic meaning has to do with following the right purpose. When applied to people it refers to healthy relationships and when applied to behavior it means actions that make sense.

Sheep have a tendency to over graze. They are creatures of habit and will keep on doing what they have always done even when it no longer makes sense to do so. (Sound familiar?) So the shepherd has to lead them to another pasture. He chooses the right paths that will take them to their new destination.

Sheep do not like change. But if they do not change they will perish. So they trust the shepherd to take them to a new place that is right for them. Once they enter the new, they become excited. According to Phillip Keller, even the older sheep become thrilled once they realize what has been gained. Makes you wonder why they resisted in the first place?

American Christians are so much like sheep. We keep on doing what we have always done even when it no longer makes sense to do so. The 1950s and 60s were the golden years of American Church life. With relatively little effort, pews were filled and Sunday Schools were bursting at the seams. But the American landscape has changed and today, according to The American Church Research Project only 17.3% of the population actually attends a church (Michigan is slightly higher at 19.5%).

If we want to reach that 82.7% of the population outside the Church we need to engage in the purpose of the church in ways that make sense for today. We need to trust the Shepherd to

take us to a new place that is right for us. This is scary, but not as scary as the alternative.

We require a change of attitude. Lost sheep matter to the Great Shepherd. They need to matter to us. After all, it is not called the “Suggested Commission” or even the “Moderately Important Commission” but the “Great Commission.” Jesus said, “Go and make disciples” (from Matthew 28:18-20). We need to make a conscious effort to reach the 82.7% of the population outside the Church.

3. THE SHEPHERD’S PURPOSE BRINGS HONOR

Thirdly, we need to remember that the Shepherd’s purpose is meant to bring honor to the Shepherd. We need to follow “for his name’s sake.”

"Name" in the Bible refers to a person's revealed character. The name of God refers to the character of God as he has been made known to us. We honor God when we reflect his character. The Bible says:

“You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created everything, and it is for your pleasure that they exist and were created” (Rev 4:11 NLT).

God made you to enjoy you. God takes delight in your existence. He created the universe and placed you in it to be the object of his love. But there is something that God does not have unless you give it to him and that is your love for God. We honor God when we live life as a response to God’s love for us. Or to put it in historical terms, our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.1.).

Christians are divided as to how specific God’s calling is upon our lives. On the one hand, I knew of a pastor who whenever he drove into a parking lot would ask God to show him the exact spot he was to park his car. It makes me wonder what he would have done if he found someone else in the spot he believed God wanted him to have!

Two people were vying for the same parking space near the entrance to a shopping mall, a young man in a small sports car and an elderly lady in a Cadillac. The woman was in front of the space first but before she could turn her wheels the man zipped in ahead of her. When he got out he smiled and said, “Oh, to be young and fast!” Several minutes later he returned to find his sports car nearly demolished by repeated bashes from the woman in the Cadillac. She looked at him and smiled, “Oh, to be old and rich!”

On the other hand, there are those who completely dismiss the idea that God would ever direct someone to a specific parking space. They regard this as an affront to the dignity of God and a denial of human freedom.

Now I believe that God can and does at times lead us in specific ways. We see this for

example, in the missionary work of Paul as recorded in Acts. But I think the general thrust of the New Testament is toward freedom – we are free to follow our heart’s desires, provided such freedom is not a license to do wrong. We have been set free from sin so we can be free for service (Gal 5:1,13). Too many Christians spend too much time fretting needlessly over details, that they miss out on what is most important — the love of God and neighbor.

So let’s say you pull into a parking lot that has 27 open parking spaces and you ask, “Where does God want me to park?” This is what I would tell you:

First of all, God loves you no matter where you park.

Second, if you have the opportunity to show some kindness to another, you know, love your neighbor as yourself, then do so.

And Third, stay away from the lady in the Cadillac!

CONCLUSION

The Divine Shepherd has a purpose for our lives. But if we want to experience this purpose we need to be willing to follow him. It is then we discover that his plans for us are real, make sense and bring honor back to the Shepherd.