

Nasal Flies and Sheep Dogs

The Song, Part 3

Psalm 23:5-6

In the early 1900's a British expositor and pastor by the name of G. Campbell Morgan wrote, *The Book of Psalms is the book in which the emotions of the human soul find expression. Whatever your mood and I suppose you have changing moods as well as I do . . . you can find a Psalm to express it. Are you glad? You can find a Psalm to help you sing. Are you sad? You can find a Psalm that will suit that occasion too. The Psalms range over the whole gamut of human emotions [but] in every one of these songs, whether in a major or minor key, the singer is conscious of God.*ⁱ

Well said.

In fact, by the time you get through just the opening lyrics of *Psalm 23*, David has made it absolutely clear that without God, none of this Song works.

- Only the Lord is able to bring satisfaction to your heart;
- Only the Lord can make it possible for you to lie down;
- Only the Lord can turn barren wilderness into green pastures for your spirit;
- Only the Lord can provide calm water in the midst of stormy weather;
- Only the Lord can consistently see where you've fallen on your back and able to stand you back up on your feet;
- Only the Lord is capable of leading you in the wagon tracks – the ruts – of rightness;
- Only the Lord can protect you as you walk through the valley of dark, deep shadows;
- Only the Lord can protect you with His rod and hold your hand with His staff;

And that's just the first four verses.

Listen, you don't get the rewards of *Psalm 23* unless you have the relationship of *Psalm 23*.

If you can't start out by singing –

the Lord is – present tense
my (personally possessive)
Shepherd (Leader - guide)

then the rest of this Song is un-singable.

You can't even get past the opening line – ***The Lord is my shepherd I shall not – what? – want.***

Without the Lord that is absolutely impossible.

One author wrote, "Come with me to the most populated prison in the world. The facility has more inmates than bunks; more prisoners than plates, more residents than resources. No prison is so populated, no prison is so oppressive – just ask the inmates; they will tell you – they are overworked and underfed. The name of the prison? Four letters on the front gate spell it out – W - A - N - T – the Prison of Want.

You've seen her prisoners. They are always in want; they want something. They want something nicer, bigger, faster, thinner, better, newer, younger. They don't want it all now – just one more thing, mind you. Just one new couch; one new car; one new house; one new job; one more dollar; one more trip; one more toy; one more makeover; one more award; one more sale.

Then I'll be satisfied! David the Psalmist invites you to sit down; he looks across the coffee table at you and whispers, "I have a secret to tell you – I have found the pasture land where discontent dies – ***The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.***" There it is; what you have in God is greater than what you do not have in life!"ⁱⁱ

David is a young shepherd boy sitting out under some tree in the fields of Bethlehem, singing with a heart as full of gladness as it can hold.ⁱⁱⁱ

And there's a fifth stanza where David effectively sings, "Lord, there's something else I want to praise you for doing – ***verse 5 – You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***

Did you catch that? Sheep following the Lord can end up in a valley of deep shadows and he can also be surrounded by enemies.

And notice what happens. Instead of cowering in fear, you're eating a feast.

I find it fascinating that several translations of this phrase – particularly in Swahili and Spanish, the word "table" is mesa.^{iv}

This is more than likely the high summer range – a mesa – where the energetic shepherd has taken the

time and trouble to prepare it for the arrival of his flocks.^v

He isn't just going to take them up there and cut them loose.

Phillip Keller talked about taking his young children and making a game out of those long hours when they would pull poisonous weeds. He told how in one field in spring bloomed full of beautiful, attractive white camas flowers – attractive, but deadly to sheep. He wrote, “If lambs in particular, eat or even just nibble a few of the lily-like leaves emerging in the spring grasses, they will become paralyzed, stiffen up like blocks of wood and succumb to the toxic poisons from the plant and die.”^{vi}

And there are little lambs in the flock who are especially endangered – along with the older, more mature sheep as well – because it is our nature to taste whatever we are attracted to – we want to sample everything . . . it looks good!

No – it's toxic.

And the dangers just multiply. Not only are there dangerous things to eat, there are dangerous things that will eat *you*!

One author said, “A careful shepherd will inspect the field for vipers – small brown snakes that live under the ground – poisonous vipers that will nip the sheep on their noses, causing inflammation or even death.”^{vii}

Timothy Laniak wrote, While shepherds watch their flocks, so do the wolves. It's a nightly match of watching, waiting and outwitting. He wrote, “I've seen Middle eastern shepherds spend all night shouting, whistling, throwing stones in all directions with their slings – because wolves cause continual losses.”^{viii}

You see the problem is, we can't defend ourselves against the wolves. That requires a shepherd.

So do we panic?

No . . . we just make sure we're close to the Shepherd and we're eating what we're confident He's prepared.

And did you notice the utter calm of this phrase.

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

In other words – from their hiding places and in the shadows and canyon walls all they can do is watch.

And get this – the picture here is one of perfect peace. The Lord isn't panicking – “Here, eat this quickly and then we've got to run.”

So hurry!

Our future son in law is here from Chile – our daughter Candace met him in her church where she attended while serving on the mission field in Santiago; we've had a number of really funny moments at the table. Most of it related to the cultural approach to eating. His culture takes several hours to eat a meal . . . they take a bite and talk . . . take a bite and talk . . . nothing is rushed or hurried.

Here in the States, if you're not eating, you must be finished, right? We get out the stopwatch!

On Sundays, his entire family there in Santiago would gather for Sunday dinner after church and dinner would last all afternoon – hours.

He was absolutely shocked on his first Sunday here – Marsha had prepared a feast – kids, spouses, and grandson were all together. We ate and in less than an hour we were finished – we got up from the table . . . and in another hour we were saying goodbye.

He was shocked; he said, “Where's everybody going? Is something wrong? Yes, we've had enough of each other . . . leave the grandbaby and go.

That's the way we do it in North America.

I hate to admit it, but the Lord here in *verse 5* is acting more like a Chilean . . . He's taking His time.

Spurgeon commented, “The table cloth is carefully unfolded and the plates of the feast are displayed as on an ordinary occasion; nothing is hurried; there is no panic or disturbance . . . [nothing is rushed] . . . the enemy is at the door, but the Lord prepares the table and the Christian sits down and eats as if everything were in perfect peace.”^{ix}

What an incredible picture of the peace of God which passes all understanding – there are wolves out there – you're surrounded by trouble . . . and the Lord says, “Here . . . sit down . . . I've prepared what you need for nourishment . . . eat . . . and get this – take your time.

In the next phrase, David moves on to bring up yet another troublesome aspect of being a sheep that demands a caring Shepherd.

Notice again in *verse 5* where he writes, ***You anoint my head with oil.***

What does he mean?

One author wrote how sheep are especially troubled by nasal flies. These little flies buzz around the sheep's head, attempting to deposit their eggs on the damp nose of the sheep. If they are successful, the eggs hatch in a few days to form small, slender,

work-like larvae that work their way into the nasal passages.

For relief from the agonizing annoyance sheep will beat their heads against trees, posts or even rocks. In extreme cases, the sheep may fatally hurt themselves in a frenzied attempt to rid themselves of the aggravation. In other cases, advanced stages of infection from these flies will lead to blindness.

In the summer time, sheep are prone to something called the scab. Scabies – a microscopic parasite that proliferates in warm weather causing skin infections.

It's interesting that in the Old Testament, sacrificial lambs had to be without blemish – more than likely a reference to the scab.

It would effectively come to represent contamination and sin.

I remember, many years ago as a sophomore in college, working in the field of a fellow who owned a couple of acres. I needed to earn some money during Christmas break. So, I went to that field and began to pull all the vines out; picked up the rocks and dug out the stumps. By the time I finished it was time to head back to college.

A few days after returning from college, I noticed some red spots around my waist that really itched. I just knew that I had pulled up some poison ivy vines . . . that's all I needed!

I waited awhile, hoping it would just eventually go away, but it didn't. Besides, I was afraid he'd give me a shot and there's nothing that makes me feel like fainting more than a shot – I just can't stand needles.

So I waited . . . the poison ivy just began to spread up to my stomach . . . and did it ever itch.

So I finally gave in and went to see the campus doctor. He took one look at me and said, "You've got a case of poison ivy, son . . . what you need is a shot.

And that red rash began to expand . . . and spread . . . before long it was up to my chest and upper arms.

A couple weeks later I went back to the doctor . . . he said, "You've got one of the worst cases of poison ivy I've ever seen . . . what you need is another shot."

I am convinced that doctor flunked out of medical school. He probably wasn't a real doctor.

Because that rash now covered my back, stomach, and it had reached my neck.

By this time, spring had arrived and the weather there in Chattanooga Tennessee had gotten warm . . .

and humid. I was in a small Baptist college and we were required to wear neckties during our morning classes.

I itched so badly that I dreaded putting on that necktie . . . I kept the top button of my shirt loose . . . I had to walk a few blocks from my house dorm to classes . . . I can't begin to tell you what sweat did to that agonizing itching I now had nonstop.

My girlfriend was begging me to go and see a doctor off campus . . . a real doctor that actually graduated from medical school.

But they cost money . . . I didn't have insurance.

I finally moved out of my dorm and into the campus clinic because it was air conditioned. At night I would cover myself with Calamine lotion and try to sleep, but I couldn't . . . I began skipping classes. I couldn't concentrate on my studies and my grades began to fall. This had lasted nearly an entire semester.

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer . . . I took my girlfriend's advice and went to a doctor off campus.

I finally made it into his examining room and when he walked in, I said, "Doctor, I've got the worst case of poison ivy you've ever seen . . . I think it's from an alien planet." He sat down on his stool, told me to lift my shirt and he looked through his magnifying glass and said, "You don't have poison ivy . . . you picked up a microscopic parasite out in some field somewhere and it's been roaming around your body laying eggs and multiplying.

I know exactly what you need. And he gave me a shot!

He also gave me a prescription ointment and that night, for the first time in weeks, I slept.

And that girlfriend who gave me such good advice – I married her out of sheer gratitude . . . and a lot of love.

I would realize only later, that at that moment I was never more like a sheep – literally. And I could not solve my problem . . . what I needed was a close encounter with a good doctor.

A sheep that's plagued with scabies or nasal flies needs a close encounter with a good shepherd.

David knew what it meant to pull that sheep close to him and take out his flask. He'll have a homemade ointment of olive oil, sulphur and other spices and he'll rub it on the afflicted areas – especially around the ears and nose of the troubled sheep.

Even today where modern methods literally dip sheep in huge vats of parasite killing liquid, many

shepherds prefer to treat the head of the sheep by hand.

David is actually referring to this touching, caring, healing personal encounter with his good Shepherd where the contamination and sin in his life is dealt with . . . and forgiven.

Why carry the irritation and sleep robbing guilt of sin? Allow the Shepherd to pull you close in repentance and allow Him to apply His forgiving, cleansing touch.

And what a relief! David puts it this way – *you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.*

That’s another way of saying, “I’m satisfied and more.”

- *Exceedingly, abundantly, above all we could ask or think (Ephesians 3:20);*
- *He lavishes upon us His grace (Ephesians 1:8).*

David’s final stanza begins in *verse 6, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*

The Hebrew verb actually means that you are pursued by goodness and mercy.^x

I love this idea; you have the Shepherd in front of you and His two faithful sheepdogs following always behind you.

And what are their names?

- Goodness – that’s the Hebrew word for abundant care.
- Mercy – that’s the word for unbreakable promises.^{xi}

Look behind you beloved . . . what do you see? His care for you and His promises that will never leave you; the promise that His blood will continually cleanse us of sin.

And don’t you love the fact that David settled a question that every believer might wonder . . . is God’s goodness and mercy every other day? Every year or so? When I’m deserving of them?

NO – all the days of my life.

The good days . . . and the bad days;
The days of faithfulness . . . and the days of unfaithfulness;

The days of prosperity . . . the days of poverty;
The days of justice . . . the days of injustice;
The days when you are loved . . . the days when you are despised
The days of good health . . . the days when you’ve lost your health
The days of delight as well as the days of despair

Spurgeon would write, the dreary days of winter as well as the bright days of summer . . . goodness supplies our needs . . . mercy blots out our sins.^{xii}

And guess what . . . David sings, when I come to the end of my days . . . *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

I’m going to change locations . . . but I’m not going to change Shepherds.

In case we’ve forgotten, David begins the Psalm and ends the Psalm with a reference to his Lord . . . his creator God . . . his Shepherd.

Imagine the table He’s spread for us there . . . it’ll be free of temptation and trial and trouble - forever.

And did you notice the subtle shift from a pasture to a house – the glorious dwelling place of Yahweh.

With even more information than David, we can still only imagine the green pastures of a new earth surrounding our Lord’s palace of gold and never-ending glory.

What a pasture . . . what a palace . . . what a Shepherd.

Hey everybody, David sings;

The Lord is my Shepherd,

I shall not lack anything He wants me to have;

He makes it possible for me to lie down in green pastures

He leads my timid soul to quiet waters;

He restores my soul as He stands me back on my feet.

He leads me in the wagon tracks –the ruts – of rightness with God for His name sake

And even though I end up walking through valleys of deathly, dark shadows, I fear no evil, because You are with me;

Your rod protects me and your staff holds my hand;

You prepare a table before me right in the midst of my enemies;

*You anoint my head with cleansing, forgiving oil
My cup is simply overflowing with satisfaction;*

*And then, goodness and mercy pursue after me
Every day of my life*

And when my days are done, I shall trade a pasture for a palace and dwell in the house of the Lord – my Shepherd – my King forever.

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- i Quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, David: A Man of Passion & Destiny (Word Publishing, 1997), p. 33
- ii Adapted and expanded from Max Lucado, Traveling Light for Mothers (W Publishing Group, 2002), p. 27
- iii Adapted from, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, The Treasury of David: Volume 1 (Zondervan, 1977), p. 356
- iv Phillip Keller, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Zondervan, 1970), p. 104
- v Ibid, p. 105
- vi Keller, p. 105
- vii Swindoll, p. 77
- viii Tim Laniak, While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), p.
- ix Adapted from Spurgeon, p. 356
- x Peter C. Craigie, Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 19 (Word Books, 1983), p. 208
- xi Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 5, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Zondervan, 1991), p. 218
- xii Spurgeon, p. 356