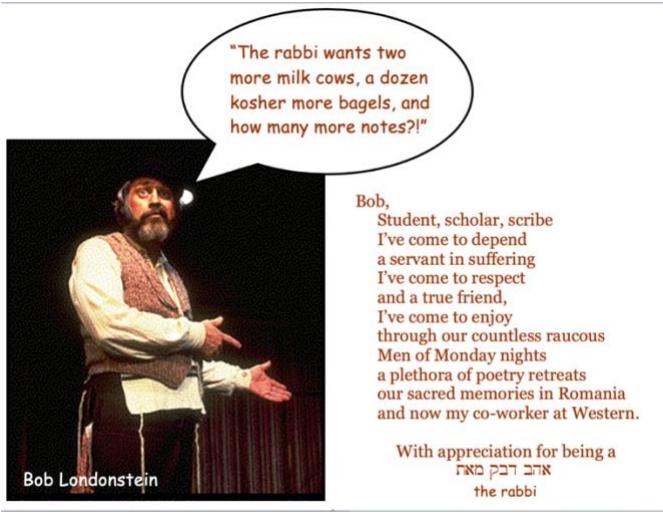


Shepherd, Guide, Protector and Friend Psalm 23

I had the pleasure of having Bob London as my friend and colleague for over forty years. Our friendship began and was sustained by our mutual love for the Scriptures. It didn't take me long to discover what a keen intellect and searching heart resided in his Jewish soul. His powers of observation and attention to detail were unmatched and he was always open to new ways of looking at the text, that would leave us speechless. For decades I benefited from Bob's gifts in every sphere of my ministry—Bob was a regular among the Men of Wednesday Morning bible studies, Men of Monday night disciple group, Hebrew translation, intern classes and Mission trips to Romania. When I was asked to teach Old Testament survey course at Western Seminary,



ng and organizing vast amounts of

Student, scholar, scribe
I've come to depend
a servant in suffering
I've come to respect
and a true friend
I've come to enjoy,
through our countless raucous
Men of Monday nights
a plethora of poetry retreats
our sacred memories in Romania
and now my co-worker at Western

My last visit with Bob was at Stanford Hospital where we discussed the glory of God revealed in one of David's psalms. Today, at the family's request I'm honored to share my reflections on Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 ESV

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
 He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
 He leads me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
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. A Shepherd who Provides (Ps 23:1-4)

Psalm 23 is David's song of trust in the Lord's comprehensive care for us as our Shepherd. Derek Kidner writes, "Death and strength underlie the simplicity of this psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency: there is a readiness to face deep darkness and imminent attack, and the climax reveals a love, which homes towards no material goal but to the Lord Himself."¹

Psalm 23 depicts a typical day in the life of a shepherd with his sheep and, by extension, the journey of our lives under the care of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the day progresses the geography moves from "outside" to "inside" and God's care becomes more direct, personal and intimate.

The psalm opens with a bold confession, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want," which establishes three essentials that form the bedrock of our faith. First, our relationship with God is supremely intimate—he is "my shepherd." "Shepherd is the

most comprehensive and intimate metaphor yet encountered in the Psalms.”² David, a shepherd in his youth, would know this better than anyone. I suspect this metaphor was particularly close to his heart, recalling his own care for his sheep and fighting off the wolves that threatened them, then imagining how his Father in heaven was even more present, faithful and protective of him.

Second, it depicts our **absolute dependence** upon God’s goodness and kindness to care for us. Without a shepherd, sheep would not survive, therefore the shepherd must provide everything for the flock—guiding , feeding , disciplining, healing and protecting.

And **third**, our relationship with God is based on loving trust, which is intensified when we are in a desolate wilderness. This is also often when heaven descends and God wraps us in holy comfort. David validates this truth by his experience, detailing the essential provisions the Shepherd provides of food and rest (v. 2), guidance (v. 3) and protection (v. 4).

A. Provides food and rest (v. 2)

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. (v. 2)

“The common practice of shepherds was to graze their flocks in rough pasture early in the morning, leading them to better grasses as the morning progressed, and then gently leading them to waters in a choice resting place where, after they are fully fed and sated, they lay down for a midday nap.

Dr. Timothy Laniak has studied the lives of shepherds in the Middle East since 1977. In his book *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, he explains that getting a sheep to actually rest is no small feat.

What makes the impression so memorable is the lack of motion and restlessness that is so common. Sheep are usually on the move as they graze. They are easily provoked by other sheep or goats and typically shuttle around, clustering in their cliques. They panic easily when an unknown

person is around. They seem overly sensitive to any changes in the environment. But when there is nothing and no one bothering them, and their stomachs are full, they just lie and ruminate in contented satisfaction.

The scene of satisfied sheep is ironic in a way. The desert is a place of desolation and depravation, where all life is drawn toward death. But good shepherds can provide life-sustaining gifts for their flocks in this kind of place. And when they do, we see a perfect picture of rejuvenating satisfaction. It was in precisely this kind of region that God chose to self-reveal as provider and sustainer. "For forty years," Moses reminded the Israelites, "you *lacked nothing*" (Deut 2:7).³

Augustine cried out, "What will make me take my rest in you...so I can forget my restlessness and take hold of you, the one good thing in my life?" **The compulsion begins with God.** "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters...God makes the first move: He takes the initiative—calling us, leading us to a place of rest." (DHR 56) While the world is panicked and closed in with fear with the corona virus, perhaps the Lord is gently leading us to green pastures and still waters to rest.

2. Provides guidance (v. 3)

He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake. (v. 3)

He restores (*shuv* - "to return") *my soul* acts as hinge between verses 2 and 3, uniting the themes of rest with ample provisions and guidance. On the one hand, "Restoration involves *returning* to a place of divine provision where comprehensive care is available and life is restored."⁴ On the other hand, the same verb is used of straying sheep being *brought back* (Isa 49:5) under the discipling hand of the shepherd. This requires a different kind of *leading* than "gently leading to waters of rest." The Hebrew word for "lead" (*nahag*) in verse 3 "suggests the kind of directive herding accomplished

best from the back of the flock, when the will of the shepherd has to be imposed.”⁵

Waltke notes that it “is commonly used in situations of leading one safely through snares and triumphantly to a desired and promised destiny.”⁶

“In the *paths* of righteousness” would be better translated, “cart tracks” or “wagon ruts.” “While the earth is soft, wagon wheels press the trails that others are obliged to follow after it dries and hardens.”⁷ The Shepherd leads his sheep in well worn “ruts of righteousness” that lead to ways of living that are beneficial to the community and us as well. The good Shepherd does this “*for the sake of his name*,” which is his reputation in the world.

When a shepherd isn’t good, things can go drastically wrong. A group of shepherds in Turkey learned this the hard way 15 years ago, when they neglected all the villagers’ sheep that had been entrusted to their care. Instead of staying with the sheep while they grazed, they left for a bit to eat breakfast, thinking they could keep an eye on the flock from a distance. But the sheep were grazing by a cliff edge, and one went over, perishing in a 15-meter fall. Then another, and another, then dozens, hundreds more until the whole flock, nearly 1500, leapt off that same cliff. About 450 died, crushed by the weight of those who landed on top of them. Because of the shepherds’ negligence, an entire village was devastated by the loss of its precious sheep.⁸

Sheep are consummate followers to the nth degree. It is the shepherd’s responsibility is to keep the flock on the right track in “ruts of righteousness” that lead us safely to pasture and then to our home again, lest we foolishly follow a leader off a cliff.

3. Provides protection (v. 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. (v. 4)

Along with providing food, rest and guidance, the shepherd must also guard his flock from danger from within and without. There are times when the flock has to negotiate steep and dark ravines that are extremely dangerous, which the poet calls "the valley of the shadow of death." But even in those perilous times, the sheep "fear no evil" because the shepherd is well equipped to ward off any dangers with his rod and staff.

The staff is the symbol of care...with it a shepherd provides **gentle assistance, direction, and encouragement at critical moments**. The crook is useful for pulling branches down for goats, recuing animals trapped just out of reach, and for nudging newborns to their mothers...[when sheep} get stuck in mud or worse, swept off by a flash flood, the staff becomes an extension of the shepherd's arm, reaching carefully around the isolated creature and pulling it back to safety...[it] can also guide sheep through a pass, lightly pointing the way with a shoulder tap. The staff gently separates sheep from each other when tension arises, and brings sheep together when they need to be. A simple stick becomes a tangible, tactile extension of the shepherd's voice, expressing his concerns or directions throughout the day.

The rod was a club "made from the root of a tree with a natural bulb on one end. The shepherd could tuck this versatile weapon in his belt and use it for defense against both animal and human predators...once in a while, a shepherd might 'remind' straying animals with this wooden missile that their behavior is unacceptable. This important disciplinary function of the rod ensure the flock's safety and well-being.⁹

Now the poet shifts metaphors from a shepherd who provides to a lavish host.

II. A Lavish Host who Embraces You (Ps 23:5)

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows. (v. 5)

The **second vignette** transforms the returned-to sheepfold into a **festive table**, heightening the notions of provision, restoration, intimacy and protection in God's royal tent. Center stage is the Host, who has set a lavish banquet laden with expensive goblets filled with choicest of wines and rich food.

In the Ancient Near East the host assumed ultimate responsibility for a guest's safety. As an honored guest in the house of God Almighty, one celebrates with absolute freedom and abandon, while enemies look on helplessly. "In the presence of my enemies" also suggests that God publicly endorses his blessing on you, to further silence your enemies. This is something Jesus often did before the Pharisees. The anointing of oil "signifies the pouring of olive oil on the guest's head, connoting the wealth, generosity and care of the host to promote the renewal, joy and healing of his weary and wounded guest."¹⁰

I'm struck with how significant meals and hospitality are in the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus wanted to share the deepest truths, he did it over a meal; when he wanted to lift up the poor, he did it at a meal; when he wanted to cross racial and cultural barriers, he did it at a meal; when he wanted teach his disciples what it meant to serve, he made them all be waiters at a meal; when he wanted to ordain a disciple as a pastor, he did it at a meal. There is no greater way to honor someone than to create a sacred space for them and serve them a meal.

We've come a long way from a fatigued and weary sheep that survived a threat to an honored guest in the King's tent—a King who donned an apron to become your Host, Top Chef and Waiter.

III. Coming Home (Ps 23:6)

Surely goodness and everlasting-love shall *follow* (lit. "pursue") me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. (v. 6)

One would think that after being the guest of honor in God's house and eating and drinking at his table, "It couldn't get any better than this!" But it does! As Kidner observes,

In the Old Testament world, to eat and drink at someone's table created a bond of mutual loyalty, and could be the culminating token of a covenant.

It was so in Exodus 24:8-12, when the elders of Israel 'beheld God, and ate and drank'; and it was so again at the Last Supper, when Jesus announced 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Cor 11:25)...So to be God's guest is to be more than an acquaintance invited for a day. It is to live with Him.¹¹

The psalmist suddenly realizes that what occurred at this meal has transformed his life. The verb "pursue" (*radaph*) "is a term from warfare, and is reserved for the victor pursuing his enemies; here it receives a creative twist: 'only goodness and loyal-love will pursue me.'"¹² Instead of being pursued by enemies, he is pursued by God's goodness and a loyal-love that will not let him escape until he is safely home. From a moment of crisis, the poet has returned to the Lord and permanent happiness.

The prophets Ezekiel (Ezek 38:24) and Micah (Mic 5:2, 4) predicted Messiah's role as a shepherd. Waltke notes, "In the New Testament, Jesus Christ as son of David

according to the flesh experiences the shepherding care of his Father in heaven, and as Son of God becomes the good shepherd, providing, restoring, guiding, and protecting his sheep.”¹³ Jesus is the “Good Shepherd,” who lays down his life for the sheep, gives them eternal life, and no one can snatch them from his hand (John 10:11, 28). He is the “Great Shepherd,” who equips us with everything good to do his will (Heb. 13:20-21), and he is the “Chief Shepherd” who will reward under-shepherds, who sacrificially serve the flock and lead by example, with an unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Today, my friend Bob London is home in “our Father’s house—where there is father who never dies, who makes a home for the lonely, who treats us like family; where real love awaits us; where we’re included—‘taken in.’”¹⁴

On that day we can exclaim, “It doesn’t get any better than this!”

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,

of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain

the covering that is cast over all peoples,

the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever;

and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,

and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,

for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

“Behold, this is our God;

we have waited for him, that he might save us.

This is the LORD; we have waited for him;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:6-9)

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 109.

² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 109-110.

³ Dr. Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Rediscovering Biblical Leadership* (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), 90-91.

⁴ Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 91.

⁵ Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 197.

⁶ See Exod 15:13; 32:34; Deut 32:12; Ps 5:8; cf. 78:14, 53; Isa 40:11; 49:10; Rev 7:17. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 439.

⁷ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 439.

⁸ Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 201.

⁹ Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 95-96, 157

¹⁰ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 442-443.

¹¹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 112.

¹² J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis, Volume 3: The Remaining 65 Psalms* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 40.

¹³ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 445.

¹⁴ David Roper, *Psalm 23: Through Your Darkest Valley God is With You* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1994), 143.