

The Shepherd as Provider

Psalm 23

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Well, if we turn again, please, to Psalm 23. Psalm 23 and we're looking this morning at verse 2. We'll just read from verse 1.

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

Dear congregation, there was a young boy who was asked to memorize and then to recite Psalm 23 in front of the church. And he thought initially, "Well, that's easy enough." And he went away to try to do it but when the day came to say it in front of everybody, this is what the young boy said. He said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want and that's all I need to know." Now most of us, I'm sure, know what it's like to freeze under pressure and I'm sure that's what probably happened here, but is there not a sense in which what the little boy said was actually true? Remember, last time we said it's not enough to know the Psalm but you need to know the shepherd of the Psalm, and if you know the shepherd of the Psalm, then in a very real sense that's all you need to know.

I suppose you might think of a little child, let's say a one or two year old now, and you ask the question does this little girl know her mother? And you'd say, "Well, of course a one or two year old girl knows her mother." But you could ask this little two year old, say, girl, "Well, tell me about your mother. What's her favorite color? Where was she born? What's her parents' names? What does she like to do in her spare time?" And the two year old doesn't understand these questions yet and doesn't know the answers to these questions yet, but ask again the question does she know her mother and the answer is still absolutely yes. In fact, she knows her mother far far better than someone who could answer these kinds of questions. She knows her mother's voice. She feels safe in her mother's arms. She knows her mother and her mother knows her.

So return again now to the analogy of Christ as the shepherd of his little ones who are his sheep. "The LORD is my shepherd; I will not want." And ultimately that's all I need to know. That, at a basic level, is very true and the question comes to us again this morning do we know Christ? Do we hear his voice? Do we follow his voice? Are we fed by his word? Are you safe when in his arms? And yet we can also say something else. We can add to what this young boy in front of the church said. "The Lord is my shepherd, I'll not

want and that's all I need to know." But that's not all I want to know. You see, if you are truly one of Christ's sheep, you will want to know him and you will want to know him more and more and more. So you have one of Christ's sheep now an old man called Paul the apostle, and when he writes to the church in Philippi towards the end of his life, having preached Christ, having told others about him in most glorious descriptions and sermons, he says that this is now his desire, "That I would know him and the power of his resurrection." And the kinds of words he uses there are these, "I have not arrived. I have not attained. I'm not already perfect but I follow after. I strive. I press. I want to know the shepherd more. I want to hear more of his voice."

Yes, I want a child-like faith but, no, I don't want a childish faith and there's an important difference. The child-like faith is always saying, "That I may know him. That I would grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Savior." Rather we want to be like the man who when he was asked, I think it was a minister, he was asked who do you think wrote Psalm 23? Most people say it's David but there's been some discussion about that and this man answered, he said, "Man, I think I wrote it myself." And the person said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said, "Well, every time I read it, I feel as if I have to say, well, David said it before me but I was really going to say it myself." You see, here's a man who has entered into the Psalm and finds in the Psalm not only David's confession but his own and that's a wonderful thing.

Now we saw last time that verse 1 gave us this vital relationship, "The LORD is my shepherd," and then the unavoidable logic, "I shall not want." But the rest of the Psalm now elaborates and explains what this not wanting looks like and verse 2 here, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters," David is here saying, "The good shepherd provides spiritual rest for my soul. The good shepherd provides spiritual rest for my soul. I shall not lack rest for my soul." Now here simply we want to look at what the good shepherd provides and then, secondly, how the good shepherd provides for his sheep. The what and the how.

So firstly here then, what the good shepherd provides for his sheep. Now we've seen from last time, generally speaking the good shepherd does and provides everything for his sheep but here in this verse especially, the good shepherd provides satisfying rest. And you get that in this beautiful picture and it is a beautiful picture, is it not, of sheep on a warm summer day, you could well imagine this beautiful idyllic picture and there's the sheep and they're sitting there in some lush grass, and the sun is shining down and glistening on the grass in the fields, and there's this still water beside them maybe moving very slowly, and they're all there together, the sheep with the shepherd, and they are a picture of perfect contentment, a picture of perfect rest. That's what the word actually means; the still waters are the waters of rest. And what a picture, then, we have here of the places of satisfying rest that Christ brings his people to. That's the question for us: do we know these places of satisfying rest that Christ brings his people to? Do you know it?

But here there is green grass and there is still water, and what are these things? What is the green grass? What is the still water? What is the place of rest for the people of God? Well, I think we can say it is the word that is blessed by the Spirit. The word that is

blessed by the Spirit. When you have the word and the blessing of the Spirit coming together, you have the green pasture and you have the still water, you have the place of rest. Green grass has the idea of living grass, not grass that has been scorched by the sun and withered away. No, no, green grass, fresh grass, nutritious grass. The word of God and really all the means of grace are green grass, green pasture. Every time, children, you open the Bible, you have before you green pasture. Every time the house of God is open and the word is read and preached, you have green pasture. Every Lord's Day, every weekday when the word is being preached, there is green pasture. Every time the word is truly preached, green pasture.

Now we do say truly preached because in this, like we read in Ezekiel, there is a warning to preachers, to those who preach the word, to those who are called to feed the sheep. There is a warning to us that we don't come here and give you our own ideas and our own thoughts and our own suggestions. No, the sheep of Christ cannot feed on the opinion of men. "Timothy," Paul says, "preach the word," because it's the word that is the green grass for the sheep.

So Charles Spurgeon writing 150 years ago, or maybe more even, he says a time will come when instead of shepherds feeding sheep, the church will have clowns entertaining the goats. And how we need to look at ourselves and how I need to look at myself before we would ever look elsewhere, that we are people who are people who desire to be fed, not to be entertained because one of the marks of the church is they don't want entertainment. The sheep don't want something that helps them get through a service or a sermon. They don't want everything dumbed down. They want food. They want food for their soul. If they're Christ's sheep, they're hungry and they want the pure milk of the word, they want the green pasture of the word.

I do believe that God's people will put up with a lot of weaknesses in their minister, as you very graciously do, so long as he gives you something to eat. Back in the time of Spurgeon up in Scotland, there was an elder who, maybe it was before that time actually, but there was an elder who, he was listening to really a dry lecture from some moderate preacher and eventually he stood up and he hit the table and he said, "Man, give us something of our God! Feed us! Give us something of the word!" Well, that's the green pasture, you see. The sheep bleat when they're not fed with the green grass but the question follows, then, is where do you feed? It seems to me that there is a subtle difference but a real difference between eating and feeding. You can eat something without enjoying it but when you feed on something, it has the idea of delighting in this thing, of being filled and nourished and satisfied with this thing. And so where do you feed? What gives you satisfaction? What gives you delight? What gives you nourishment? What brings you to the place where you would sit down and say, "This is my rest. Here I will stay. I like this very well."

Are we feeding on the word of God? I don't mean do we get our eyes over it as a point of duty, I mean are we feeding on it? Do we get nourishment from it and in all the means of grace? Do we know what the Psalmist says when he says, "O taste and see that God is good"? There is feeding. Do we know what Jeremiah meant when he said, "Thy words,

they were found and I ate them and they words were to me the joy and the rejoicing of my heart"? You go to the Psalms, go to Psalm 119 and you'll find a man telling you what it means to feed on the word of God.

"How I love thy law, O Lord." There is someone feeding. There is someone being nourished.

"How I love Thy law, O Lord!
Daily joy its truths afford;
In its constant light I go,
Wise to conquer every foe.

Thy commandments in my heart
Truest wisdom can impart;
To my eyes Thy precepts show
Wisdom more than sages know."

Sweeter, there is feeding.

"Sweeter are Thy words to me
Than all other good can be."

Can you say that? Do you understand this? Can you follow this? Because if you're here and you're saying, "No, this isn't me. What satisfies me is something else. What I really love is something else. What's in my heart and has my heart is something else. What is sweetest to me is something else and I don't understand what you mean when you speak about loving and feasting on the word of God and it being sweet to my taste. It makes no sense." My dear friend, if that's you, listen, it means you're not a Christian and you must cry out to him and say, "Lord, give me this appetite. O great shepherd of the sheep, give me this appetite. Make me to taste and see what this preacher is speaking about."

But there's not only green pasture, there's also the still waters and we said you need both. That was MacMillan, the shepherd, who was a shepherd before becoming a preacher. He said that sheep simply will not drink from moving water. He wasn't totally sure why but he knew it as a fact. They won't drink from moving water. They can be parched, they can be thirsty, their tongues can be hanging out and there's this water that's moving and they will not drink of it. You had to go another half mile to get to a place of still water. And here the Psalmist says, David says, "Here are still waters." And sheep need that as well.

MacMillan has another account of when one of his sheep went over something of a rock face and he managed to get down the ledge. It can do that but it can't get back up. But it got down the ledge to get to some green grass and it was, he reckons, about 5-7 days before he realized the sheep was missing and a neighbor told him, and when he got to the sheep and rescued the sheep, the sheep had eaten up all the green grass that was on this ledge but it was stuck there and the sheep died within two days. Why? Well, they opened it up and they found inside the stomach of the sheep a big ball of grass, dry grass. The

sheep was totally dehydrated. It needs the water as well as the grass. The grass by itself could not benefit. And the application, I think, is clear and obvious. Christians need the word, they need the green pasture but they also need the blessing of the Holy Spirit. As precious as the word of God is, as living as the word of God is in itself, without the blessing of the Spirit it will simply be in your stomach like a ball of undigested dry grass. We need the Spirit to come like water and floods on thirsty ground.

Now it's true that there's a real sense and it's true, children, here and all of you here, that every time you have the Bible read to you, every time it's preached to you, you have green pasture, you have grass, you have food in front of you, and Christ is saying, "Follow me," and Christ is saying, "Eat and be full." But we need more. Another minister said, speaking of sermons, there may be a human power in a sermon but if that's all it is, nothing is gained. We need to be like Thessalonica where the word came with power and in the Holy Ghost and with much assurance, and when you have that, then everything is gained.

What do we want? What are you looking for? What am I looking for? A sermon with human power and eloquence or a sermon with divine power? And do you know the difference because I believe all of Christ's sheep know the difference. It's not how loud a minister is. It's not how emotional he gets. It's not how effective the presentation or how clever the presentation of the truth. That's not it at all. It's in an old word that we maybe don't hear so much anymore but it's an important word: unction. Uction. It has the idea of something being anointed but the effect is this: you hear the shepherd's voice, God is in this place and it's the most wonderful thing in the world.

A shepherd knows and the shepherd has provided these places of satisfying rest but I want to come here, secondly, to see how the good shepherd provides for his sheep. How the good shepherd provides for his sheep because you may be like the bride in the Song of Solomon. In chapter 1, verse 7, remember the bride says to Christ, "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?" She's saying and maybe that's what you're saying this morning, yes, you know Christ is a good shepherd, yes, you believe there are green pastures for his sheep in the word, and you long for that and you desire that and you've tasted something of it before, but you want it again. You can't deny you've tasted the Lord is gracious and you know when it's not there, you know when it's only human power or maybe not even that but there's no divine power, there's no feeding happening and you want it again. And you realize like all sheep will do, that this resting in the word is not automatic. It doesn't just happen. It's not automatic and it's not easy but listen again to the confession here in verse 2, "He maketh me to lie down. He leadeth me beside the still waters." David's confession is not, "I lie down in green pastures. I walk beside still waters." His confession is what he is doing.

Now again to go back to MacMillan, he tells us in his book that one of the hardest things for a shepherd to do is to get the sheep to lie down. It's very hard, he says, to get sheep to lie down. It's very hard to get sheep to rest. And he says that there are four things that stop a sheep from lying down. The first is fear. You can easily frighten a sheep and if a

sheep is afraid, it will not lie down. It might be the noise of a car. It might be the sight of a dog or something like that, but if a sheep is afraid, it will not lie down. Fear.

The second thing is antagonism. He speaks about a bully sheep. He says there's this bully sheep and most flocks have them and they're basically the big number one of the place, and they push the other sheep around and whenever there's antagonism, there's never a settling, there's never a lying down. And he says the shepherd has a certain whistle for that kind of sheep, the bully sheep, to whistle to it and to tell it to settle down.

So fear and antagonism but also annoyance and here he's speaking about little things, things like flies and insects. If flies get into the wool of the sheep, it can be devastating for the sheep, it can even lead to the death of the sheep. Flies and insects, little things and, well, we're not so different. I mean, how many of us would settle down or go down to rest or sleep in the dark especially if we hear something like a fly in the room. But something small that annoys and then there's no resting.

So fear, antagonism, annoyance, and fourthly, hunger. A hungry sheep will not sit down. Sheep don't sit to eat. They stand to eat and it's only after they are filled that they lie down.

And I think from this you see for Christ's sheep the same thing, do you not? What is it that stops God's people from resting and being satisfied in the word? Is it not fear? Remember Adam right at the beginning, "I heard thy voice in the garden," he said, "and I was afraid. I couldn't rest." Sin. Sin has caused fear. But then also Christ's sheep, you think of the prophet Habakkuk. He says, "I heard thy voice," speaking of the voice of judgment in the land, "I heard thy voice and I was afraid." And there's no resting there. And even in our world today, the things we hear about in the news, the situation in our country, in the church, and this virus, and these things can give us fear in such a way that we stop resting and feeding upon the word.

And antagonism, friction that leads to tension, that leads to frustration, that leads to a simmering against a brother and sister, and a restlessness, and a not being able to sit down in the word.

And annoyance, usually little things again, little details, like a little insect that gets under your skin and causes a lot of harm, worry and anxiety about what's going to happen here or there or when this happens or this doesn't happen. Annoyance and anxiety and the effect is you can't rest in the word.

And hunger. Christ's sheep too, if they have backslidden and they have not been drinking from the milk of the word, they've not been finding his words and eating them, where else do they get food that will satisfy? And maybe they've drifted away from the word and from reading and praying over it and from the means of grace, and you find yourself drifting and straying away. And when eventually, as it were, you come to your senses this is what you find, "I'm hungry. I'm lacking. I'm without. I need." And certainly you find no resting away from the word.

And what we have to do with all these things and whatever else causes a lack of rest, fear, antagonism, annoyance, hunger, is bring them to the shepherd. Bring them to the shepherd because the shepherd is the one who provides a place of satisfying rest. The shepherd also knows how to make you lie down. Isn't that a wonderful thing, child of God? The shepherd knows how to make you lie down in green pasture. You say, "There's so much happening, there's so much in my mind, there's so much anxiety, annoyance, fear, hunger. There are so many things I can't lie down." The shepherd can make you to lie down in the midst of all these things and to find a place of satisfying rest.

The good shepherd knows the sheep and he knows the sheep better than the sheep know the shepherd. Excuse me, they know, the shepherd knows the sheep better than the sheep know themselves. Isn't that true? The shepherd knows the sheep better than the sheep know themselves. Again, MacMillan speaks of another shepherd who sold about 200 sheep to some market and after some weeks or months and they'd fattened them up and they had taken all the marks off the sheep, and of course, lots of other people did the same thing, and this shepherd came a few months later to see this market and there were thousands of sheep here but the shepherd said, "I saw my sheep. I knew my sheep in this crowd of sheep. I recognized my 200," as it were. And he said there's no way I would have asked him, "Well, how do you know?" Of course, a shepherd knows his sheep just like you would recognize your children in a crowd. The shepherd recognizes the sheep in a crowd. To us, sheep all look the same but not to the shepherd. The shepherd knows them. The shepherd has studied them and it's such a wonderful and such a comforting thing to know the shepherd knows me. He knows who I am and that's what he's saying.

And that knowledge is not simply face recognition, it's also he knows who you are at your deepest level. He says, "I know the fears you have. I know what keeps you up at night. I know what you weep over. I know the fears you have for your own soul. I know the fears you have for the souls of your children. I know the fears you have about the good of the church. I know the fears you have. I know the antagonism you face." Remember the churches in Asia, we heard of one of them yesterday, that there is the other one, Pergamos, and Jesus says, "I know your works." And he says, "I know where you dwell. I know where you live. I know the environment. I know Satan's seat is here. I know this. I'm conscious of this. I'm absolutely aware of this. I know the antagonism you face there at Pergamos. I know the things that annoy you," he says to you here this morning. "I know the things that get under the skin, as it were. I know that. And though it seems so little to other people, I know the things that stop you from receiving a blessing in your own soul. And I know your hunger. I know the deepest longing. I know the deepest desires of your soul. I see what you hunger for. I know what you hunger for. I know what you thirst after. I know what you are saying when in the depths of your heart you say, 'My soul for God, the living God.' The thirst. I hear that cry. I know that cry. I recognize that cry in my sheep. I know it. I am the good shepherd and I know my sheep."

Then he says he knows how to bring you to settle down beside the still water. "I have that special whistle, as it were, for that bully sheep." Christ knows how to lead his people to the place of satisfying rest. He does it by his voice, by his whistle, as it were. And

sometimes it's a rebuke and sometimes it's a gentle word but he says, the Psalmist says, "He leadeth me." That means, "I listen. I follow. I trust. I obey. I depend. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Peter says, "You were like sheep going astray." That's what we do but what does he do? He leads me.

And we have to learn all our life to say, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters." It brings you to the confession that every good you receive, every spiritual blessing you receive from the word, from sermons, from all the means of grace, "It's God who did it. It's the voice of the shepherd that I heard. It's all coming from him."

And I think there's something here in this leading that speaks of the varied life of the believer. They're not always in one place. They're moving. They're moving around from one pasture to the next, from one sermon to the next, from one fellowship to the next, from one prayer meeting to the next, from one means of grace to the next, and one verse to the next, and one chapter to the next. They're always moving around. They're always following the lead of the good shepherd.

Sometimes it's green pasture, other times it's still water. Sometimes it feels very dry but with the shepherd leading, there's more pasture coming, with the shepherd leading, there's more blessing coming. Sometimes you're in the valley of the shadow of death but even there he leads and guides and you learn the whole life long, "I cannot live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Every word. Hanging on every word. Needing and feeding on every word.

And again, there's this gentleness here, isn't there? "He maketh me to lie down. He leadeth me." We said there's a mixture of firmness and gentleness in the good shepherd but here's a lesson: Christ does not force-feed his sheep. He doesn't force-feed. He says to his sheep, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." And you say, "But how do I do that? How do I open my mouth wide?" Well, it's telling us that we have a duty to be ready. We have a duty to be in a position to receive the food. "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it."

So the sheep even though the shepherd is leading, the sheep are not completely passive. They open their mouths wide. They chew. They follow the shepherd. But this tells us that when we come to the word whether in our homes, beside our bed, reading it, or in family worship, or here on the Lord's Day, or the prayer meeting, or whenever we come to the word of God, we are to open our mouth in this way, we are to prepare to hear it. We're not to come to it like we're coming to something ordinary. We're to come to it coming to the very word of life, the good shepherd. Listen to the Larger Catechism on the duty that this required from those who hear the word. It is required of those that hear the word preached that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation and prayer. So we come to the word always in a prayerful spirit, diligently, expectantly. Examine what you hear by the scripture. So don't take my word for it. If it doesn't align with scripture, you reject it. But if it does, receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, readiness of mind, your mind

is ready. You've done everything you can to have your mind ready to hear the word of God. Meditate on it. Speak about it with others. Hide it in your heart and bring forth the fruit of it in your lives. "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it."

And just one last thing here. When we speak of Christ leading, when he leads his sheep, he makes them see that the greatest need you have is for Christ himself. The greatest need you have is for Christ himself. Christ crucified, to feed on him, that's where life is. There's no satisfaction anywhere else, and if you're here this morning and you're agitated, you're frustrated and perhaps even, I hope not but maybe you've tuned out, listen now. Listen now. The church father Augustine said these words so long ago and it's so true. "God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee," in God. You will not find rest, you will not find satisfaction, you will not find what fills and satisfies the deepest longings of your heart in the world. It will not happen. But you come to the good shepherd, you come and you follow him and you feast on him, the one who says, "By me if any man enter in, he will be saved and will go in and out and will," what? "Find pasture," find real satisfaction.

And there is plenty in Christ for you, my dear friend. When Christ fed the 5,000 on that hill, there were 12 baskets left over. Why? Why? Why tell us that except to tell us that there is a fullness in Jesus Christ, to tell us that when you have fed to the full of Christ, there is still an abundance in him, that there is more bread and to spare for sheep, that there are other sheep who are not of this fold who Christ will still bring. There is always more in him and if you come to him, you will know endless blessing. You will have someone who will love you, and care for you, and know you, and lead you, and bring you to places of wonderful rest and satisfaction. You will have someone who will never disappoint you. You will have joy and peace and soul-satisfaction that the world cannot give you and that the world cannot take from you.

How wonderful this provision of the good shepherd. How thankful we should be for it. And dear friends, let us remember, let us never forget what it cost the good shepherd to provide the green pasture and the still water. I remember hearing an old man, of an old man who said that he never drank a glass of water without thinking of the words of Jesus on the cross, "I thirst." Before there could ever be green pastures of Psalm 23 for you, there had to be the sufferings of Psalm 22 for him. Before there were ever the still waters of Psalm 23 for you, the good shepherd had to say, "I thirst." He had to say, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death." That's Psalm 22.

On the cross, Christ went to the place where there is not a drop of water to cool the tongue. That's the place you and I deserve to go but the good shepherd gave his life for the sheep. He took the iniquity of the sheep on him. But what was he fed with when he was hungry? What did we, as it were, give him when he was thirsty? "They gave me bitter gall for food and taunting words they spake. They gave me vinegar to drink, my burning thirst to slake."

My dear friends, do not think lightly, do not treat with indifference the green pasture and the still waters that the good shepherd has provided. He provided it at an enormous cost. One of the soldiers with a spear, we read in John, pierced his side and forthwith there came out blood and water. The smitten shepherd said, "I thirst," so that this morning he would stand before you all and say, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." The good shepherd said, "I thirst," so that he would provide spiritual rest for your soul. The good shepherd said, "I thirst," so his sheep can say, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters." How wonderfully true. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." Amen.

Let us pray.