

"4R: PSALM 23 FOR TODAY (#1): WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

(Psalm 23:1-2a, NRSV)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 8-14-22]

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1. **[11am ONLY...** Read as KJV PSALTER Reading Text: Psalm 23:1-2a (NRSV or KJV)
2. **[WATCH first 25 seconds of VIDEO: "*Be Still*"** (originally from [SermonSpice.com](https://www.sermonspice.com)]

A--Is there anyone here who has NOT that be their experience of life at some time or another...? hectic, busy, exhausting, tiring, crazy, stressful?

B--We've probably all experienced life like that sometimes. But what do we *do* about it when that happens? ...when life threatens to overwhelm us?

C--Well, over the next four weeks we'll be sharing a worship series which will unpack four spiritual practices found in a phrase-by-phrase exploration of Psalm 23, and how this beloved Psalm can help us to discover, claim, and then live in the peace and fulfillment that God wants for each of us in the midst of our crazy, hectic lives.

3. Now, even though this is one of the most well-known chapters in the whole Bible, Psalm 23's analogy of "sheep" and "shepherds" may seem foreign to *our* ears today.

A--So, it may help us first to remember that, in ancient times, sheep were a precious commodity of life, representing a primary source of wealth and livelihood.

B--They provided food to eat, milk to drink, wool for the making of cloth, and even skins for clothing and tent-coverings.

C--And because of their significance in daily life, they were often used both as a form of currency, and were a central part of many ancient religions.

D--By their very nature, sheep are affectionate, unaggressive, and relatively defenseless; but because of this, they're also in need of constant care and supervision.

E--Perhaps that's why the Bible contains more than 500 references to sheep, and nearly 100 references to shepherds (with Psalm 23 being perhaps the most famous).

4. Yet, despite this Psalm's use of rustic and seemingly antiquated metaphors, there's still a *timelessness* about its words that, I believe, can still speak to us today. <sup>1</sup>

A--So, each week I'll be introducing a different theme-word that starts the letter "R" that (I think) represents the spiritual practice from that week's scripture reading, and is meant to help us to understand and live into the peace and fulfillment God has for each of us.

B--Today's word is... **RECEIVE**, which is a reminder of the spiritual posture needed by US if we're to truly experience GOD'S peace in life. <sup>2</sup>

[**9am ONLY**... listen to the words of today's text in Verses 1-2a: "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures...*"]

--II--

5. So, let's begin with the first phrase of this reading: "**THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD....**"

A--Now, because one of the jobs of a shepherd was to be willing to give up one's own life for the sake of your flock, it's only natural that in many ancient cultures, shepherds became a metaphor for *sacrificial leadership*.

1--So much so that kings were often referred to as "*Shepherds*" of their people. <sup>3</sup>

2--Yet, in the ancient *Hebrew* culture, the Shepherd image was not only a metaphor for their *king*, but also for *GOD* and *His* relationship with Israel. <sup>4</sup>

B--In one sense, then, we could say that this first phrase summarizes the entire Psalm (like a topic sentence) -- because the rest of its phrases in some sense merely restate and "flesh out" this first one -- they give *examples* of *HOW* the Lord is like a "*Shepherd*":

1--For example, to be a good shepherd implies that one's sheep "*will not want*" for anything (Vs.1b).

2--...that the Shepherd will provide food ("*green pastures*"), drink ("*still waters*"), guidance ("*right paths*"), protection and comfort (the "*rod and staff*"), and other blessings described in the image of the banquet feast in Verses 5-6.

3--In other words, to say "*The Lord is my Shepherd*" implies that we're trusting God to take care of *all* our needs, no matter how big or how small they might appear.

C--As my wife and I were moving here to Newnan last month, we figured out that (over the course of the 33 years of my ministry and marriage) we have lived in 9 different cities, served 8 different churches, and moved 11 times -- that's a lot of change!

1--But in each of those changes, we have looked to God to lead and guide us in each location and setting.

2--And while each place has had its own set of challenges and frustrations, we know that because God was our "*Shepherd*", it would be okay.

D--So the first question is: ...Have you received God as the Shepherd of *YOUR* life? Are you trusting Him to look after you? He *wants* to be. And all you have to do is to ask and then to **RECEIVE** Him as such!

6. But the second half of Verse 1 is also important: **"...I SHALL NOT WANT."**

A--One Sunday after a lesson in Sunday School, a little girl was heard quoting the first verse of this Psalm. And though she didn't get the word quite right, she nevertheless had the right idea when she said it this way: *"The Lord is my Shepherd; I've got all I want."*

1--So, what is it that YOU want? Have you "got all you want" and are trusting God to take care of the rest? <sup>5</sup>

2--Or are you always looking for more... never satisfied with what you have? thinking you need that "one more cigarette"... "one more drink"... one more peek at something inappropriate on the internet... you have to share that one more bit of gossip... make one more bet... one more relationship to be complete...& so on.

B--You see, this writer was expressing his complete dependence on God for provision, just as sheep are completely dependent on their shepherd.

1--The Hebrew word for GOD in part of the book of Genesis is "*Jehovah-Jireh*": "*the Lord will provide.*" <sup>6</sup>

2--The problem for many of us in today's world, though, is that if we don't have a job, or some form of financial/material security,... we all tend to get worked up and worried about "*where will the money come from for this or that?*"

3--We worry, "*How will I ever get through this crisis?*" INSTEAD OF believing & trusting that "*the Lord will provide*" <sup>7</sup> -- and that all we have to is *RECEIVE!*

C--We forget Jesus' words in Matthew 6:25: "*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or drink, or wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ...Consider the birds of the air... [or] the lilies.... Are you not of more value. than they? And if God takes care of them, will he not also take care of you?*"

D--"*The Lord is my Shepherd; I've got all I want.*" Can you say that about YOUR life?

7. So that brings us to our last phrase for today, found in the first half of Verse 2: **"HE MAKES ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES"**.

A--In his book A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller wrote of the restlessness of sheep, and how they tend to be skittish and resistant to lying down in a pasture unless they *know* that they are safe.

1--He points out that we human beings are very much like this... we're restless & constantly moving from one place to the next; one project to another; we have things to do, people to see, kids to deliver, appointments to keep, and so on.

2--And he says that because of the stress of being constantly on the go, we find it difficult to sleep, hard to relax, and impossible to sit still ... does that sound familiar to anyone? (it certainly fits me sometimes in *my* life!)

B--Perhaps that's why the great Christian theologian Augustine once wrote: "*You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are RESTLESS until they rest in you.*" <sup>8</sup>

C--You see, today we need to better learn how to let go of our work and worry and give them to God, our Good Shepherd,...

1--...Because only when we rest in *Him* will we truly find the peace & contentment that our souls are seeking -- only *then* can we "*lie down in green pastures.*"

2--Now, this verse is clear that doing that is a *choice* -- the Hebrew word we translate as "*make*" doesn't mean "*force*," but "*to allow*" or "*enable*". <sup>9</sup>

3--So yes, God provides the "green pastures" (e.g., the things we *need* in life) -- but it's up to US to *choose* to "lie down" in them, instead of constantly looking for something and someone *else* to satisfy those needs.

--IV--

8. "*The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.*"

A--Is the Lord YOUR Shepherd today? If so, you don't need to worry about "*wanting*" for anything, because He can be trusted to take care of all our deepest needs.

B--And whatever cares and worries we *do* have, if we'll give them to God, then He'll give us peace of mind and heart that enable us to "*lie down in green pastures,*" because He is our Provider, who enables us to RECEIVE all that we need in life.

9. [PRAY: *God, I pray for those here today whose hearts are "restless" because they've never "rested" in you, and for those among us who've gotten up from our "resting" and need to lay down again. There are those among us who've tried to find "green pastures" on our own, and haven't been able to do it. So Lord, help us to invite you into our hearts, so that you can lead us to the true "green pastures" that only you can provide. Help us all to trust in you to meet ALL our needs in life and to RECEIVE all that we we need in life: spiritual, physical, financial, emotional, and relational -- and to know that you are always providing for us. In the name of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, we pray. Amen.*]

10. [Closing 11am hymn: UMH#130 "God Will Take Care of You"]]

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, it contains beautiful poetic language and pastoral scenery that speaks to our souls -- words and phrases of safety, security and comfort like "*green pastures,*" "*still waters,*" "*rod,*" "*staff,*" "*table,*" "*oil,*" and "*cup.*" On the other hand, the Psalm is starkly realistic in its portrayal of life, describing the struggles and pains that we *ALL* deal with in life: like the "*valley of the shadow of death,*" and the fact that we all have to face *evil*" and "*enemies*" from time to time. Perhaps that's why its words are so enduring --because in the midst of the harsh realities of life, this Psalm conveys the confident assurance that God IS with us and WILL help us *whatever* it is that we have to face.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars are not exactly sure *who* wrote Psalm 23, because despite the fact that it's called a "*Psalm of David,*" back then it was a common practice to use a famous person's name as a way to have your work more widely read, and that could have happened here. Some believe that the Psalm was written by the young David as he was on the run from King Saul, while others believe it was written for use by the people or the King of Israel in a time of national crisis. Still others believe it was written by or for someone who had been granted asylum in the Jerusalem Temple because of some accident, such as manslaughter or other unintentional violence. But *whoever* wrote it obviously wanted his readers to understand *God's power* to deliver people from enemies and other perils, which makes it quite appropriate even for us today as we are facing the "enemies" of our own lives.

<sup>3</sup> Read, for example, Ezekiel 34.

<sup>4</sup> You'll remember that later in the New Testament (John 10), Jesus--the SON of God--is also described as the "*GOOD Shepherd.*"

<sup>5</sup> I once heard the question phrased this way: "*Has Jesus been enough for you today or this week? Or are you thinking you need something else?*"

<sup>6</sup> Read Genesis 22:13-14.

<sup>7</sup> God is not here to necessarily meet all of our *wants*, but certainly all of our *needs*.

<sup>8</sup> From Saint Augustine's Confessions, Book 1 (Chapter 1).

<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word is "*sha-vAH*" (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Hebrew term #7737)