

Friday: Anointing

Read: Psalm 24:5 ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Reflect:

If the summer high range grass is in mind here, then involved in this table preparation would be the removal (by the shepherd) of poisonous plants that would kill the sheep. As we have noted, sheep are kind of dumb; they will eat many plants out of curiosity or because they “look good”...

The anointing in this verse refers to the shepherd taking great care to rid the sheep of parasites and pests. Nose flies can be quite a nuisance as their eggs hatch, burrow up the sheep’s nose and into their flesh causing great pain. Some sheep beat their heads against rocks seeking relief from the larvae, others run around to the point of exhaustion...even death.

During mating season male lambs compete for the females. In fact, a more dominant male may even kill a weaker male by butting them repeatedly and mercilessly. To ward this off, many shepherds place oil on the heads of male lambs. Their once thunderous head butts turn into glancing blows, leaving both of them looking not only foolish...but puzzled.

Pray: Pray for *Emporia Christian School & Shiloh Home of Hope* – missions New Life supports. Confess to God the things of this world that look good to you – ask His perception on them. Pray for more of the Holy Spirit and for your willingness to submit to Him to increase.

Respond:

What parallels do you see in your life and what is to the left (e.g., sampling what looks good...)?

The Holy Spirit is often represented symbolically with oil in the Bible, in light of this...

What about the “pests” in life (whatever they are) – do you try and handle them on your own or do you seek the mind of Christ (through the Holy Spirit) for not merely relief but resolution?

What about “competition” with others – how does the presence of the Holy Spirit curtail this?

Saturday: Blessing

Read: Psalm 24:6 ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Reflect:

More often than not the verb for “follow me” is translated as “pursue” in Scripture. What a beautiful picture, the goodness and “mercy” (i.e., *hesed* – covenant faithfulness of God) pursuing us. God is not only a Good Shepherd...He is a relentless one.

By extension, if we are being “pursued” (followed) by goodness and mercy...it ought to impact our life (and those around us; cf. Wednesday). Take a moment to reflect on what you leave “behind you” as you travel through life. What do people think when they hear your name – peace or turmoil? In your past are there healthy relationships or ones broken and scared by conflict? Are you viewed as trustworthy? Are you...

Dwelling in the house of YHWH is a marvelous thought is it not? And here we are back to verse one – of how YHWH is my shepherd. In addition to all of the helps by the shepherd in this psalm (e.g., rod for defense and correction; oil for removal of parasites and protection) the number one influence on the well being of the sheep is...the presence of the shepherd. When sheep see their shepherd they are at ease. In fact the shepherd’s presence even stops fights like those mentioned in yesterday’s reading. Oh may we continually gaze upon the Good Shepherd.

Pray: Pray for *Strong Tower Ministries* and *LCREF* – missions New Life supports. Pray the Holy Spirit will help you to continually focus on Jesus (e.g., Heb12:1-2). Ask God’s blessing on our time of worship tomorrow at the church building.

Respond:

How is God relentlessly pursuing you?

What are your honest answers to the questions at the left? Would you like any to be different? How can they be?

How can living as if Jesus is truly with you (because He is – i.e., the Holy Spirit) impact your life today? How will it bring you peace?

The LORD is my Shepherd...

June 27 – July 3

Jesus said it is impossible to serve two masters (cf. Lk16:13); I often wish He was kidding when making such a bold statement. Yet the truth is there are only two masters in life – God & Satan. Likewise, there are only two kingdoms – the Kingdom of God & the kingdom of darkness. Scripture is also clear that God is a shepherd (e.g., Ps23); yet within Scripture there are pictures of bad shepherds...

- ¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel...Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You... clothe yourselves with the wool...⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered...⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD...¹⁰ ... Behold, I am against the shepherds ...¹¹ “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture...¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice...²⁰ “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will rescue my flock...²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them... [Ezekiel 34]
- ⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed...⁸ Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones...¹² These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves...¹³ wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever. [Jude 4-13]

Those are some bad shepherds...fortunately Jesus is “the Good Shepherd” (cf. Jn10:11). Yet do we truly know Him? Are we really content with His rule? I.e., since He is a Shepherd, and we are sheep, that means He owns us.

(Oh so much to say...) It is “easy” to praise God when things are good (I say “easy” because sadly and all too often God is forgotten when things are good for many), but often “hard” when things are bad (again “hard” because this is when many turn to Him). Oh if we would only develop consistency...

The reality is this. God desires good for us (i.e., sanctification), but life in a fallen world happens. What will see us through these times?

Monday: Context

Read: Psalm 23:1 ¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Reflect:

Psalm 23 is perhaps among the most loved psalms in the Psalter (a word often used when referring to the book of Psalms). It seems it is most often read at funerals or as loved ones near death. This is good because God's Word is powerful, nurturing, and authoritative at all times. Yet are we missing something? I.e., can we allow the power of God's Word to minister to our daily lives if we internalize the beauty in this psalm?

An initial observation begs to be made; we must understand the author of this psalm was David – as in King David of Israel. We know David was a shepherd (e.g., 1Sam16:11), so he knew about sheep. We also know David experienced many hardships in his life (e.g., Saul and even his own son, Absalom, tried to kill him). Therefore reading this psalm as a magic formula for nothing but blessing and bliss misses the mark.

The picture in this psalm is that of a content sheep. It is not longingly gazing at the grass on the other side of the fence; it does not long for a different shepherd. Indeed the sheep is content because of a relationship with its Owner. [Note: some of the following background during this week was taken from *A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller.]

Respond:

Do you have a favorite psalm? What is it and why? Will you share it with someone? I would be glad to hear (brentm@nlccoe.com).

What images come to your mind when you think of YHWH as your shepherd?

When was the last time you thought the grass looked greener on the other side of the fence? What did you do about it?

Pray: Pray for Ryan Nelson and 33 Church in Olathe, KS (who is supported by the CEA, a mission New Life supports). Pray you will be content with and seek out what God's ownership of your life (e.g., "shepherd") really means. Be honest with God about your wants; ask Him for them – but also pray for a heart that desires what He wants more.

Tuesday: Rest

Read: Psalm 23:2 ² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

Reflect:

It is important to understand the care of the sheep in this psalm is not done in a western "cattle-drive" style. The care is oriental (i.e., Ancient Near East) in that the shepherd goes in front and leads the flock. In other words, this is not only labor and time intensive for the shepherd, but also an act of love.

For sheep to lie down they need to be free from **a)** fear, **b)** conflict with other sheep, **c)** pests and parasites, and **d)** hunger. It is quite an extensive list. It is rather easy to see not only parallels with God and His great care for us, but also how we need relief from the same things in order to "lie down". Who likes to live in fear, continually face conflict and annoyances, or be hungry?

The still waters are important. If you know much about Palestine you know it is rather dry – so water is not as abundant as it is here. Therefore still waters (and green pastures) may imply purposeful irrigation by the shepherd. It also takes into account flash flooding in valleys during the rainy season (which are not still waters). Indeed, raging waters would almost certainly spell death for sheep if the shepherd did not protect them.

Respond:

What strikes you as a better picture of God – driving you where He wants you (western) or leading and going before you (oriental)? Why?

Are you at odds with someone at New Life? How is that impacting your ability to "lie down"?

Left to themselves sheep will drink from polluted water. This means parasites ("c") will plague them. What are some of the "polluted waters" of the world from which you are prone to drink if left to yourself?

Pray: Pray for LCS, MCC, and OCC – missions New Life supports. Pray Brent McCrory – the Preaching Minister of New Life – is content with YHWH as his shepherd. Confess to God your fears, conflicts, annoyances, and hungers – He cares. Praise God for the time of Unity this past Saturday while praising God at Hope Community Church.

Wednesday: Whose Sake?

Read: Psalm 23:3 ³ He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Reflect:

If left to themselves sheep will ruin a pasture. They will walk on the same path day after day until massive amounts of erosion take place. They will contaminate their own drinking water with their own bodily waste. What one sheep does, another does (they are kind of "dumb" are they not?). The destruction they can (and do) bring is quite circular.

Interestingly, the care YHWH brings for His sheep is circular as well. He cares for the sheep and similarly He does want good for us because ultimately His reputation is on the line. When God blesses us we are to in turn be a blessing to others (cf. Gen12:1-3). Something is wrong in the equation if God blesses us and it "stops" with us... Another point to ponder, do we know what His paths of righteousness entail?

We are to love God first, which is shown by loving others (cf. Mt22:34-40) – we are not in that list. This means we must be willing to give up our own rights in deference to others. When hard times come we should seek to grow through them (e.g., Jas1:2-4ff). We might be amazed at what we can learn if we seek God's perspective on an issue instead of merely complaining to Him about it.

Respond:

What parallels between sheep and humans do you see to the left?

What do you think of this line of thought, "If God blesses you and you do not in turn bless others...then what you have been blessed with is really a curse."? Feel free to let me know.

When you are "suffering" what types of questions do you ask? What is the content of your prayers?

Pray: Pray Bob Griffin & Larry Hayes – elders of NLCC – will ask the right questions of God. Pray for *King Solomon Christian Service Camp* – a mission New Life supports. Confess to God your struggles...but also ask His perspective – and be quiet.

Thursday: "Hard" Times

Read: Psalm 23:4 ⁴ 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.

Reflect:

If the warmer months of grazing in the highlands are in view here, then the valley of the shadow of death is a natural path to get "up there". In other words, the way to the top of mountains is typically through valleys (and shadows). Similarly, it seems to get to the "next level" in our relationship with God we often need to be "broken" further so we can be conformed to His will. Since this involves dying to the things of the world it is not always an easy process...

The shepherd's rod was used for the welfare of the sheep – both through discipline and inspection. The discipline happened if a sheep was either straying too far from the flock or approaching danger. The welfare took place as the dense wool was parted by the rod in order to inspect for wounds and parasites. In addition to those, the rod was also used for defense by fending off wild animals. The "rod" literally never left a shepherd's hand – it was too important to leave behind.

The shepherd's staff is unique to this occupation. It is used to help guide the sheep, get them unstuck from bushes and thorns (which often happens due to their wool), as well as to lift newborn lambs to their mother without touching them and thus getting human scent on the young (and risk the mother rejecting her lamb because of the scent).

Respond:

How do you sense God is desiring to further refine you at this point in your life?

Some equate the "rod" to the Word of God. How has the Bible corrected your path lately?

Some see the staff as symbolic of the Holy Spirit. How are you submissive to His leading?

Pray: Pray for *Cookson Hills* – a mission New Life supports. Pray Ed Asbury, Keith Krause, & Mike Haag – deacons of New Life – will be led by God's Spirit. Confess to God any fears you have – ask for His perception on them.