

THE GOOD SHEPHERD  
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Psalm 23

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 on the paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I 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 will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

**E**VER WONDER WHAT JESUS did for a living—what his actual job was? The fact is, we really don't know. Tradition tells us he learned his father's trade and became a carpenter, but you won't find that anywhere in the Bible. In the gospels, he's often referred to as "rabbi" or "teacher," but not necessarily in a professional sense.

About the only thing we can say with any certainty is that he probably never stood on a grassy hillside, staff in hand, watching over a flock of sheep, even though one of the most beloved images of Jesus is "the Good Shepherd." The Bible speaks of him that way, not because that's what was on his resumé, but because that's what he was to his followers. He was the one who provided everything they needed, not just to live, but to flourish.

Now, the relationship between sheep and shepherds seems simple enough. In the morning the shepherd leads the sheep out to pasture, keeps an eye on them all day, and at night brings them back to the safety of the sheepfold. Nothing to it. But dig a little deeper, and you realize it's actually more like a dance.

First of all, the shepherd has to be completely knowledgeable about sheep and their care. He has to know what their physical and nutritional requirements are. He has to understand their behavior. He has to know what kind of diseases they get and how to treat them. And on and on and on.

Second of all, the sheep must be able to identify the shepherd. Sheep aren't the brightest creatures in the world, and they often won't recognize danger even when it's staring them in the face. So they have to learn the sound of the shepherd's voice or else they'll end up getting lost or eaten.

And finally, the shepherd has to earn the trust of the sheep in order for them to follow him. He has to be consistent and reliable. He has to know the lay of the land and where all the best spots are for grazing. Because who wants to follow a shepherd who takes you places that are empty and barren?

So, it turns out there's actually a lot involved in shepherding—more than we might think. The relationship between sheep and shepherds is subtle and dynamic, and shepherds are always building and nurturing that relationship so their flocks can be happy and healthy, which is why the Bible uses the image of a shepherd to describe our relationship with Jesus—because it's very similar.

Jesus knows everything about us what we need because he was one of us; and we learn the sound of his voice by listening to his parables and teachings; and he earns our trust by consistently leading us to green pastures and still waters—places of nourishment and growth; places of rest and renewal; places of wisdom and understanding; places of quiet and connection. And the point of all this is the same: so we can be happy and healthy—or as Jesus puts it in the gospel reading, so we can have life, and have it abundantly.

But here's the thing. From a distance, before we reach any of the places where Jesus is leading us and actually experience them first-hand, they often don't look like places where anyone would want to go. They often don't look like places of life; they look like places of death. They often don't look like places of abundance; they look like places of loss.

Because in a sense, they are.

I don't know if you've ever noticed this in your own lives, but I've definitely noticed it in mine. The path to life often leads through death of one kind or

another, and that's certainly the case with the life Jesus wants us to have. He wants us to have a life of substance and meaning, a life grounded in a larger purpose, a life of goodness and grace and hope. That's what his teachings and parables are about. But to get there, we have to die to other ways of living that the world is constantly putting in front of us—ways of living that are wrapped up in themselves; ways of living that are turned inward; ways of living that are focused on individual gain and material success; ways of living that pit people against each other.

But dying to those ways of living is a tough choice to make because they promise so much. They promise comfort and security, status and respect, pleasure and fulfillment, power and privilege, and giving all that up that isn't easy. So what we need is someone to guide us.

We need someone to tell us the truth about all those promises. That they're empty. That they're nothing but thieves and bandits, and if we follow them, they won't give us the life of our dreams. They'll rob us blind and take anything we have of real and lasting value. And we need someone to remind us that we've been here before. God's people have often had to make this choice—to die to one kind of life so they could live to another. And every time they chose to die, it wasn't the end. It was a beginning.

Remember when Moses led Israel out of slavery, and after a few days in the wilderness, everyone wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt? They had to choose between a life of knowing where their next meal was coming from and a life of relying on God for their daily bread. They chose God, and God fed them with manna from heaven, brought them to a new home, and made them into a nation.

Remember when Isaiah told the exiles they'd soon be leaving Babylon and going back to Palestine, and they didn't want to hear it? They had to choose between a life of assimilating into another culture and a life of starting from scratch with God. They chose God, and God helped them rebuild the temple and reclaim their identity.

Remember when Jesus called the disciples to drop their nets and follow him, even though they had homes and families? They had to choose between a life of being rooted and settled and a life of wandering with Jesus. They chose Jesus, and he showed them things that opened their hearts and changed them forever.

Of course, that someone who guides us, who tells us the truth, who reminds us that God is always faithful, is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who I think at some point had his own choice to make—the choice between a life of being a regular person, with an actual job, and a life of being the Son of God. He chose God, and God raised him from death to life. And now he goes ahead of us and shows us the way as we make the same journey. Amen.