

“Our Shepherd’s Provision”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Second in a series on Psalm 23

Psalm 23

May 3, 2020

Please read Psalm 23. If you’re reading this online,
you can see this Scripture selection [by clicking here](#).

The Lord is my shepherd. . . . The LORD is my shepherd.

Only God can be my shepherd, because of who the LORD is. Any other shepherd lets me down or leaves me lost. Including myself! I can’t count on myself to be my own shepherd.

And because of who the LORD is, God wants to be and chooses to be my shepherd, and your shepherd, and our shepherd together.

Because the LORD is our shepherd, God *“beds me down in green pastures, and gives me quiet pools of water to drink.”*

II

In biblical Israel, there were no fenced fields. Shepherds led sheep out each day to graze in the wild.

In that area, rains fall from November to February. So grass is green and lush for maybe three months of the year. The rest of the time, pastures are brown, dry, straw-like. Green pastures are treasures sheep crave.

Kenneth Bailey researched and taught the Bible for 30 years in the Middle East.¹ He wrote this about when he worked at a school near Bethlehem.

Each morning the gardener for the institute came to work riding his donkey, which he tethered to a tree just under my study window. Each year during December and January I had the special pleasure of watching the happy animal nibble the fresh green grass around his tree. For the following nine months of the year I felt sorry for him as he stood quietly each day, staring patiently off into the distance, enduring the heat with nothing but a few wisps of brown straw on which to chew.²

For a donkey or sheep, green grass is gold.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_E._Bailey

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A thousand-year journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 40.

III

After a delightful morning grazing in green pastures, it's time for a cool drink.

Look at this flock beside a lake. What are the sheep doing? . . . Not drinking! (As far as I can see.) The water is only a bit wavy, but that's enough to keep sheep thirsty.

Meshach Paul Kriorian was a Methodist pastor who grew up in Turkey. As a boy he herded a flock of more than a hundred sheep. He remembered this:

Within sound and sight of water they would all begin to run toward it, showing that they were very thirsty. Yet, at their arrival, as I watched them, only a few would be drinking, while the others were all walking along the edge of the water . . . [and continued passing each other up and down the stream] until every last one of them had found a quiet little pool between stones showing up above the ripples. . . . No turbid streams or ruffled rivulets will tempt them. . . . They wanted waters that moved quietly.³

Sheep won't drink from a flowing stream or wavy lake. They need "still waters."

IV

So sheep need their good shepherd.

The shepherd leads them, looking for natural pools.⁴ If there is a stream, the shepherd might dig out a pool to collect water. If the source is a well or cistern, the shepherd will need to dig a trough, draw water and fill it.⁵

The sheep drink. Then they can lie down.

The phrase "*makes me to lie down in green pastures*" might be a bit misleading. This is not about forcing a sheep to do anything. Maybe "*makes me want to lie down*" is better, or "*settles me down*."⁶ Sheep lie down when they've eaten well, have drunk their fill, and are not feeling threatened or disturbed.⁷

Kenneth Bailey tells of hiking on Jabbal Sannin, an 8500 foot mountain that rises over Beirut. Near the top, he met a shepherd with his large flock! The fellow "*described to me in fascinating detail the various options and the numerous decisions he was obliged to make each day as he sought forage and water for his more than one hundred sheep.*"⁸

³ Quoted in Bailey, 43.

⁴ Bailey has observed that in some places the shepherd drives the sheep with a stick, but in Israel a different approach is used. Bailey, 41.

⁵ Bailey, 42.

⁶ "Settles me down" is the phrase used in a 17th Arabic translation, cited in Bailey, 33.

⁷ Bailey, 40.

⁸ Ibid, 40f.

This line about “green pastures” and “still waters” gives us a picture of the good shepherd:

- who cares deeply for the sheep;
- who knows what the sheep need to flourish and delight;
- who makes the right decisions to find what they enjoy (like green pastures) and how to create it (like still waters);
- who brings the sheep where they need to be.

The sheep can then rest, fed and filled, free from fear, content and well.

V

How is it this resting content and well thing working for you?

This is hard stuff we are going through. Someone said to Barb, “We are not made to live this way.” They’re right! The good price we are paying to fight this pandemic is costly. For many of us, the cost of this is real and directly-felt. For others, it’s the slow drip-drip-drip of tough news, and frayed nerves, and simmering tension, with no idea how long this will go.

You don’t have to put on a positive face about this. The grass is dry, and the waters rushing by.

Samantha Beach is a writer and performer in Austin, Texas. She gave me permission to share this with you, called *Psalm 23 & Me*.⁹ As you’ll see, it’s her holding up sings with words on them. Because some of you are listening by phone, and so cannot see the words, Barb and I will say them. Barb’s reading the Psalm’s words, and I’m reading Samantha’s thoughts.

If you can, please take a moment to watch Samantha’s video here
www.youtube.com/watch?v=doh379tdawQ

⁹ *Psalm 23 & Me* Created by Samantha Beach Kiley for Austin New Church. Music by Caleb J. Murphy. Used with permission. www.youtube.com/watch?v=doh379tdawQ. Find out more about Samantha and her work here: www.samanthabeach.work.

VI

*“Please catch me.”*¹⁰

Your Good Shepherd has already found you, and knows exactly what you need. God gives you your place to lie down, a green pasture by still waters. God gives God’s own Self.

St. Augustine of Hippo wrote this to God:

*You have made us for Yourself,
and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in You.*¹¹

Augustine wrote in Latin, and the word translated as “for” has a sense of movement and direction. God makes us “toward” God. God is your goal, your purpose, your destiny, your identity, your meaning, your peace, your joy. We are like arrows, with God as our target. We are like homing pigeons, with God as our home.¹²

We are like sheep, with God our green pasture and still water.

Remember what that person said to Barb, “We are not made to live this way.” Of course not. The restlessness you feel is right to feel. You feel it because you are human, made as God makes you to be. So do not scorn your restlessness, and do not waste it.

Instead, may the brown, dry straw you’ve got to chew on give you a greater hunger for your Green Pasture. May the turbulent waters rushing by give you a greater thirst for your Quiet Pool, who is the LORD your Shepherd, who is for you, and toward whom you are created. Amen.

¹⁰ The last line in Samantha Beach Kiley’s piece.

¹¹ *Confessions*, 1.1.1

¹² Peter Kreeft, *I Burned for Your Peace: Augustine’s Confessions Unpacked* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 22.