

January 3, 2021 - Mark Minnella

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Preacher: Mark Minnella

[0:00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church, knowing Jesus, making Jesus known. Good morning everyone, happy new year.

Several years ago I read this book, it was titled The Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23 by Philip Keller. And ever since then, I've wanted to share some of the things that I learned from that book. And so today I hope to do some of that. I don't really have a story. Brad informed us last week that we were supposed to have a story. Boy, I shared your story last night with some friends. I waited until after dinner.

I waited until we were finished eating. But what a funny story. I will say this though, I was supposed to speak the first week of November. And then I got COVID. And then some other things happened. And then Thanksgiving. And then we had a trip. And then, and then. And so as I was looking this over again this past week, I thought, you know, this is very appropriate for the new year.

[1:15] So, you know, maybe God had a different idea. I don't know, not so much about the COVID. But I feel glad that I have participated. And hopefully I have some immunity for at least a little while going forward.

I told some of my friends that are still afraid after they had it. I said, well, if having it doesn't give you immunity for a little while, then the vaccine was a big waste of time and money. Because that's what a vaccine does. It gives you a little bit of it.

So, so far, we're immune. We hope that going forward. So, when we look at Psalm 23, this was written by David.

We know that David was a shepherd when he was called by God to lead Israel. And so as we look at this psalm that he wrote, we need to keep one thing in mind. And that is that even though David was acquainted with all the knowledge of being a shepherd, that he writes this psalm not from the perspective of a shepherd, but that of a sheep.

He's a sheep under the care of the great shepherd. A lot of what I'll be sharing with you today comes from this book by Philip Keller. And he grew up in East Africa, and he was a shepherd there when he was a young man.

[2:27] And this perspective, we'll see, gives him unique insights into just what David wrote here. I have often repeated something I heard as a young Christian, and that is that the Bible was not written in a cultural vacuum.

What that means is that even though many of the truths of the Scripture, many of the truths are timeless, the when and the where are very, very important. When things happened and where they happened must be understood within the time, the place, and the culture.

Let me say that again. When and where things happened are important, and we must understand things within the time, the place, and the culture. And so it is that 3,000 years after this was written, we would miss much of the meanings of these writings.

I don't know about you, but I've never been around sheep very much. I certainly haven't been a shepherd, and I wouldn't know how to take care of a sheep. But this guy does, and hopefully we can learn some stuff. Let's pray.

Father, this morning we're thankful for men like Philip Keller, who would write to give us insight into your word. We know your word is written for our edification, for our exhortation, and for the people of God to grow closer to you.

[3:47] And Lord, I pray that's what we could do today. Amen. Keller, though, with his primitive shepherding experience, he brings us back to the time and the place where David wrote these words.

And the benefit for us is the greater, richer understanding, I believe, of our good shepherd. And so the psalm begins, the Lord is my shepherd. David, as a former shepherd, understood all of that. And here, the language he uses, he's almost bragging. He says, the Lord, the creator of all things, he, he is my shepherd. He's my manager.

I belong to him. Jesus said in John 10, 11 through 14, I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and they know me. Keller says it's no accident here that God has chosen to call us sheep. He says that sheep, more than any other class of livestock, requires endless attention and meticulous care. See, sheep just do not take care of themselves.

[4:47] In the book, Keller recalls a time shortly after he purchased his first flock of sheep, and how he had so well he had cared for them, and that one day he saw another flock of sheep.

And they were operated by a tenant sheepman. The flock were always thin and weak and riddled with disease and parasites. And he said, this reminded him of this graphic picture of pathetic people in the world who haven't known what it belongs, what it's like to belong to the good shepherd, but instead suffer under sin and Satan.

They're in another family. And then it goes on to say, I lack nothing, or some translations say, I shall not be in want. And what a proud and positive and bold statement it is to make, to say that I lack nothing.

Only a sheep that was completely satisfied with its owner in every aspect of its life could make this statement, I lack nothing. Everything I need is being provided for me by my shepherd, by my owner. Now what does this mean? Does this mean, as some of the preachers we see on TV today would say, that God wants you to have every material thing in this world, God wants you to drive a Ferrari, I like to do it just once.

[6:05] I don't think I'd want to own it, but I like to drive it once. Just to drive it. There's a place in Miami where you can rent them by the hour. I told my wife, I said, if it wasn't \$500 an hour, I would do it.

They make you do it for two hours, so you have to give them \$1,000, and you get to drive up and down Ocean Drive in a Ferrari or a Lamborghini. But I didn't think it was worth \$1,000. No, David was well acquainted with the hardships of his lifetime.

And you know, some of these hardships for David, some of these were brought on by his enemies, and some of these by his own bad decisions. No, he's not talking about that. He's talking about a contentment, a peace that passes understanding, as it says in Philippians 4-7, a godliness with contentment, as it says in 1 Timothy 6-6, so that no matter my circumstances, I lack nothing.

That is, because I have a good shepherd who makes sure that I have everything I need, the best and most important things for me. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very makeup, it's almost impossible for them to be made to lie down. Four requirements are met, need to be met, for these sheep to be able to lie down.

[7:22] Because of their timid nature, they must be completely free from all fear before they'll lie down. They must be free from friction with other sheep. Third, they must be free from parasites and flies.

And fourth, the sheep will not lie down unless they are free from hunger and thirst. So fear, friction, bugs, and hunger are four things that will keep a sheep from lying down.

And the unique aspect of this picture is that it's only the shepherd himself who can provide release from all of these anxieties. It depends upon the diligence of the owner whether or not his flock will be free from these disturbing influences.

When we look at these four factors, we'll understand why the owner plays such a big part in the management of the sheep and that only he can make it so the sheep can lie down. A flock that is restless, discontented, and always agitated never does well.

And I would say the same is true of people. It's not generally known that sheep are so timid and easily panicked. But according to this book, even a stray rabbit jumping out from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock.

[8:37] He tells a story of a friend who had this little pug dog that didn't weigh about six pounds and it jumped out of the car and his whole flock went running down the hillside. See, even the slightest suspicion of danger from any predator, dogs or coyotes or cougars or bears or other

enemies, the sheep will stand up and they'll be ready to flee for their lives.

They have no means of self-defense. They're helpless, timid, feeble little creatures and their only recourse is to run. In the book, it tells a story where one morning he came out and he found nine of his choiceless ewes all ready to give birth and they were lying dead in the field.

Something had scared them the night before and they were literally frightened to death. He never saw the predator. But after this, he came to realize that nothing quieted and reassured his sheep more than to see him in the field day and night.

In the Christian's life, there's no substitute for the keen awareness that my shepherd is nearby. In peace, I'll lie down and sleep for you alone make me dwell in safety.

Psalm 4.8. The second source of fear which the shepherd delivers his sheep from is that of friction, rivalry, competition within the flock. In every animal society, there's an established order of dominance.

[10:02] I didn't know this. In a pen full of chickens, it's referred to as the pecking order. With cattle, it's called the horning order.

And the sheep, it's called the budding order. The most dominant old ewe will butt and push her way around, push around the smaller, lesser ones, so that she can have the best grazing places.

And then the rest of the flock falls in line, budding and budding their way for positions in order. If you care to read, we won't look at it for time this morning.

In Ezekiel 34, verses 15 to 22 is a perfect description of this. But Keller describes in detail how this goes on in every flock, and it can be very detrimental to the health of the sheep.

He says, however, that when he showed up, they would quit a lot of this foolishness once they saw him. The presence of the shepherd makes all the difference in the behavior of the sheep.

[11:02] And so it should be with us. Many people fight for positions in business and social status and even in the church. We see this with the people of God.

I think that if we all had our eyes on the great shepherd, that things may be different. Thirdly, it's impossible for sheep to lie down and rest if they're tormented by pests and parasites.

The book goes into great detail of the many types of insects, pests and parasites that attack the sheep, especially in the warm summer months. They can get so bad that the sheep will stomp their feet, run around, run their heads into rocks and bushes and do anything to try to get relief.

They cannot rest when these pests are threatening them. And only the diligent care of the owner, who keeps a constant lookout for these insects and pests, will keep them from annoying his flock.

The shepherd will apply oil and other repellents. He will remove the sheep to a place where the bugs aren't as plentiful. This is a constant job for the shepherd during the summer months.

[12:07] In God's word, the Holy Spirit is often symbolized by oil. That oil, when applied, brings healing and comfort and relief from the harsh aspects of life.

And then fourth, to produce the conditions necessary for a sheep to lie down, there must be freedom from the fear of hunger. This is clearly implied in the statement, He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Keller says that most areas where sheep are raised are dry and arid regions. The sheep do best in these regions because they have fewer health issues. There are less parasites where the climate is dry.

But in this region, it's not common to find green pastures. These green pastures seldom happen by chance. They're the result of careful planting and hard work.

Rocks and stumps and weeds and roots must be cleared. And then plowing and soil preparation and seeding and planting of special grains and plants. The ground must be irrigated and watered where there's no rain.

[13:11] The result is that the sheep will have a lush field to feast in. The secret, according to Keller, is that the sheep are able to eat their fill quickly and without traveling around.

And then they're free to lie down and rest and ruminate the remainder of the day. Sheep that are hungry and always on their feet, always looking for food, they will not thrive.

They will not produce good milk. And when it's time to feed their youngs, their offspring will not be healthy. In the scriptures, the picture portrayed of the promised land is that of a land flowing with milk and honey.

Have you ever wondered what that meant? Well, in the book, he says this is not just figurative language, but it's scientific terminology. In agricultural terms, he says, we speak of milk flow and honey flow.

And by that, we mean the peak season of spring and summer, when pastures are at their most productive stages. The livestock that feed on the forage and the bees that visit the blossoms are said to be producing a corresponding flow of milk and honey.

[14:20] And so a land flowing with milk and honey is a land of rich, green, luxuriant pastures. And when God spoke of this land for Israel, he saw an abundant life of joy and victory and contentment for his people.

For those of us who know God today, the picture of Israel moving from slavery in Egypt to the promised land, flowing with milk and honey, well, is the picture of a New Testament believer moving from a life of sin and selfishness to the abundant life of trusting and following the great shepherd. Hebrews 4.11 tells us, make every effort to enter that rest. Next, it says, he leads me beside quiet waters.

And here Keller points out that even though sheep do well in dry, desert-like climates, they do need water.

Their bodies, like ours, are about 70% water. And the sheep get very restless when they're thirsty. They'll set out searching for water. And when there's no good source of clean water, they'll end up drinking from the polluted potholes, where they pick up intestinal parasites and other diseases.

[15:35] Water for the sheep comes in three main sources. Dew on the grass, deep wells, or springs and streams. Most people who have not been around sheep are not aware that sheep can go months without water if there's heavy dew on the lush grass.

See, sheep by habit will rise just before dawn, and they'll start to feed. During these hours, sheep can get all the water they need from the dew on the grass.

Keller points out what a beautiful picture this is of the believer who rises early each morning to feed on the word of God and spend time with the great shepherd. He says that once these sheep are fully fed and hydrated, then they'll lie down, and they'll rest and ruminate the remainder of the day. This contributes to the health of the sheep. Verse 3, he refreshes my soul, or another translation says, he restores my soul. David had many times in his life when he needed the Lord's refreshing and restoration.

Psalms 42, 11, David asks, my soul, why are you downcast? Here the shepherd explains to us what a cast or a cast-down sheep actually is.

[16:49] He said that this term is used for a sheep that is stuck on their back and cannot right itself. Keller says this is a pathetic sight where the helpless animal will flail its legs and struggle to regain their footing, but most times they cannot do it on their own.

If the owner does not arrive in time, the sheep will die, either from exhaustion or possibly become prey for one of the many predators.

This is another reason why the shepherd needs to be in the field with his sheep. In the book he describes how he would see buzzards circling overhead, and he would leave the sheep to look for this cast-down sheep, hoping that he was in time to save it.

In Matthew chapter 18, verses 12 to 14, we have a beautiful story of a shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep to search for that missing one, and when he finds it, he rejoices.

Keller points out something further about these sheep that were cast down. He says that if they were down for any period of time, they needed special care.

[18:04] The gases would build up from the rumen inside them, and they had to be put on their side and massaged very carefully. And then he says that many times their legs would not support them when they were lifted up.

They would just fall right back down. They could not stand on their own. And so he would have to stand there and hold them up and massage their legs until the feeling came back so that they could

stand on their own.

All of this, he says, is wrapped up in the meaning of he restores my soul. Many people in the body of Christ today, they have this idea that when a child of God falls, when they're helpless and they're away from the shepherd and the other sheep, that God becomes angry and fed up with them.

This is not true. In the same way that the shepherd gently restored that sheep that was cast down, so does the great shepherd seek to restore those who've wandered away and fallen into sin.

We would do well to keep this in mind. Think of the father and the prodigal son. Listen to Psalm 56, 13.

[19:13] For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life. And then he guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become ruts.

They will graze the same hills until they turn into desert wastelands. They'll pollute the ground until it's corrupt with disease and parasites. Many of the finest sheep ranges have been ruined beyond repair by overgrazing, poor management, and ignorant sheep owners.

It's a commonly held misconception that sheep can just get along anywhere. The truth is quite the reverse. No other class of livestock requires more detailed direction than do sheep.

Keller tells us in the book about his experiences of seeing flocks of sheep that were not cared for, and how they would gnaw the grass down past the roots so that it would never grow back again, and how the sheep would keep returning to these same spots where they would become infested with parasites of all kinds.

[20:24] And in a short time, the sheep were thin and wasted-looking and sickly. The intelligent shepherd is aware of all this, not only for the welfare of his sheep and the health of his land, but for his own sake and reputation as a rancher.

He will take the safeguards necessary to make sure that his flock does not succumb to these traits. The greatest safeguard for a shepherd is to keep the flock on the move.

Sheep need to be shifted from pasture to pasture. This prevents things like overgrazing, the rutting of trails, the erosion of the land. He says that it also shuts down the reinfestation of the sheep with internal parasites, since the sheep move off the infested ground before the organisms have a chance to complete their life cycles.

This needs to be carefully planned ahead of time and executed with precision by the shepherd. His reputation depended on it. And just as sheep need to be led and not left to their own destructive habits, so it is with people.

Isaiah 53, verse 6, We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each one of us has turned to his own way. Proverbs 16, 25 says, There's a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death.

[21:45] Just like the sheep who follow the other sheep over the same rutted trails to worn out pastures and muddy, disease-filled watering holes to end up sick and starving, and so it is with many people who follow the wrong leaders and bad advice only to see their lives riddled with pain from poor decisions and failures.

If we follow the good shepherd, he will guide us along the right paths for his name's sake. Verse 4, Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

From the shepherd's point of view, this marks the halfway stage in this psalm. The pronouns will turn personal. He'll begin using I in you.

And Keller explains for us that this psalm describes a calendar year in the life of a sheep and a shepherd. A calendar year. And that with the winter season, they spend it on the home range.

Then as spring arrives, the sheep, they're moved to areas up near the home range. When summer arrives, then these long treks up into the high country begin.

[23:00] And during these long drives, the sheep moves to higher pastures so that by the end of the summer, they will many times be above the tree line. With the approach of autumn, the snow settles in on the highest ridges, forcing the flock down and closer back to the home range.

And finally, at the end of the year, the sheep are driven home to the ranch where they will spend the winter. It is this segment of the yearly operations that is described in the last half of this psalm. During this time, the flock is completely alone with the shepherd. They're in intimate contact with him under his most personal attention day and night. That is why these last verses are written in such an intimate first-person language.

Keller tells us it's important to remember that this is also a dangerous time where there are steep mountains, rushing rivers, and dangers all around.

The way up to the higher ground is through the valleys. The valleys were not easy, but they were well watered so that the sheep could be fed and watered as they climbed. The shepherd was very careful to keep the sheep on the right path, headed in the right direction to keep them safe.

[24:16] And as a good shepherd, he had been there before. So in these deep, dark valleys that could be frightening to the flock, he walks them through to the higher ground. Most believers I know want to move to the higher ground with the Lord.

I know many people who love to say that they love the mountaintop experiences with God. But how do you get those mountaintop experiences? Well, according to this, we must go through the deep, dark valley.

I would say when we find ourselves in the dark shadows of the valley, maybe we should be looking to where our shepherd is leading us.

And it might just be to a higher, better place with him. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. When the shepherd took his flock up into the high country, he could only take a minimum amount of equipment.

At this time in the Middle East, that meant a rod and a staff. These are the common and universal equipment of the shepherd of that day. And Keller then describes for us the young shepherd boys and how they would select a rod and they would whittle it till it fit their hand just right.

[25:31] And they would practice for hours throwing this rod till they became very accurate. When God called Moses from the desert and sent him to Pharaoh to deliver a message, it was his rod that was used to demonstrate his power.

It was always through Moses' rod that the miracles were done. Not only to convince Pharaoh, I think, but also to reassure the people of Israel. The rod speaks of the word of God, the power of God.

So just as the rod and the skillful hand of the shepherd was a comfort to the sheep, the word of God is that comfort, that protection to the children of God today. A second use of the rod was for correction and discipline.

The shepherd would throw it at a wayward animal to get it to fall back in line. And yet a third was used to examine individual sheep. When the wool is thick on the sheep, it's difficult to see if they have any skin problems.

And so the shepherd would use that rod to part the wool and look closely for any issues. Psalm 139, verse 23 says, Search me, God, and know my heart.

[26:44] If we will allow it, God will use his word to search us and hopefully change us to be more like Jesus. The staff, Keller says, more than any other item of his personal equipment, identifies the shepherd as a shepherd.

No other profession carries a shepherd's staff. It does not work for any other class of animal. As Keller says, the staff is a symbol of the concern and compassion the shepherd has for his sheep. Whereas the rod conveys the concept of authority, of power, of discipline, of defense against danger, the word staff speaks of all that is kind and long-suffering.

Three areas of sheep management in which the staff plays a significant role. One, the shepherd will use his staff to draw the sheep together. He said when the young ones would be separated from their mother, he would use the staff to pick this young one up and bring it back and this newborn lamb, if he were to touch it, the mother would smell that human scent and maybe reject this little one.

And so he would use this staff very carefully to put the baby lamb gently next to its mother. And the second way the staff is used is to catch individual sheep and draw them close to himself for examination.

[28:07] This is a picture of the Holy Spirit who draws the believer closer to Christ, our shepherd, for examination and fellowship. And the third way the staff is used is to guide the sheep.

Many times when the sheep want to choose a certain path, the shepherd will use his staff to guide the sheep in the direction that he wants them to go, which is always the best way for the sheep. John 16, 13, Jesus says, but when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own. He will speak only what he hears and he will tell you what is yet to come. There are many other uses for the staff, such as rescuing sheep that have become tangled in bushes or thorns and even ones that have strayed far from the path. And what a picture this is of our great shepherd who draws us back when we go astray.

I think of Jesus on the shore with Peter after his resurrection and how gently he restored Peter who had denied him. Verse 5, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

[29:20] Keller says about this statement that we must bear in mind that the sheep are now approaching the high areas of the summer ranges. these areas are often called mesas which is Spanish for tables.

What David is referring to here is the high summer range. The good shepherds would go out in spring even before the snow had melted and they would scout out and they would survey where the best places would be for the summer season.

Then when summer arrives the shepherd goes ahead of the sheep and prepares the table, the mesa, for them. He checks for poisonous weeds and in the book he describes how when his boys were old enough he would take the boys up there and they knew which weeds to pull out so that the sheep didn't eat the poisoned weeds.

He would scatter salt and other minerals over the spots and the range for the benefit of the sheep. And he likens this to the believer feeding on the healthy word of God and not the poison of worldly things.

In addition to this, the shepherd looks for signs of predators, enemies. He would hunt down or trap the ones he could before the sheep arrive. But he says predators are crafty.

[30:33] They hide and wait for the sheep to arrive. The devil is pictured as a roaring lion. And so the good shepherd keeps constant watch while the flock enjoys the grazing on the summer ranges on the table.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. At this point, Keller reminds us again that David is recounting the events in the full year of a sheep's life.

He takes us from the home ranch where everything is carefully supplied by the owner and then out into the green pastures along the still waters up through the mountain valleys to the table ends of summer and now where it would appear the sheep are in near perfect setting where the grass is tall and tender, the mountain streams are clear and clean, the enemies are kept at bay and there is close contact with the shepherd.

He says, here comes the fly and the ointment. In the terminology of the sheep man, summertime is fly time. This term is used to describe the hordes of insects that emerge when the weather turns warm.

To name a few that trouble the flock and make their lives miserable, there are warbler flies, bot flies, nasal flies, deer flies, black flies, mosquitoes, gnats, and many more.

[31:54] Keller says, the worst of these is the nose fly or the nasal fly. They buzz about the sheep's head and they attempt to deposit their eggs on the nose of the sheep.

If they're successful, the eggs will hatch in a few days and then these slender worm-like larvae will work their way up the nasal passages into the sheep's head and burrow into its head and set up an intense irritation and inflammation.

For relief from this agony, the sheep will beat their head against trees, rocks, and posts. They'll rub their heads in the ground and thrash about constantly. The infestation can lead to blindness and even death.

And he says, because of this, sheep will do anything to avoid these pests. They stomp their feet, they shake their heads up and down all day and they run constantly until exhaustion sets in.

Only the strictest attention by the shepherd can avoid these troubles. At the very beginning of fly season, the good shepherd applies an antidote to the heads of the sheep.

[33:01] Usually this is oil mixed with other compounds to ward off the parasites. Once this is done, the behavior of the flock changes and they can rest and feed comfortably.

This is a picture of the Holy Spirit applied to our lives. And just as Keller says that that oil needed to be applied to the sheep on a regular basis, so the Holy Spirit must be applied to our lives constantly.

As summer in the high country moves gradually into autumn, subtle changes occur in the sheep. The nights become cooler, the insects are less of a problem. There are changes in the flock as this is now the season of the rut of mating.

During this time, there are great battles between the rams for the possession of ewes. They crash their heads together and fight furiously through all hours of the day and night. The shepherd's nose, the good shepherd knows this is coming.

And so at the first sign of fighting, he uses a simple remedy. He applies oil or grease to the head and the nose of each ram. And this way, they would slip off each other with little or no damage done.

[34:15] It's also true that Christians can butt heads with each other and many times injure one another, even severely. When the oil of the Holy Spirit is applied to these situations, the damage could be minimized.

As the summer turns to autumn, the insects and pests have disappeared. The sheep are well fed, healthy and fit, strong. And at this time, David would say, my cup overflows.

The last verse of the psalm brings us to the end of the year. The shepherd leads the flock back to the home ranch. Throughout the study of this psalm, the emphasis has been put upon the care, exercise, by the loving and attentive shepherd.

And now, all of this is summed up by the psalmist in one statement. Surely, your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. No matter what, the sheep can reassure themselves that their shepherd has the remedy, the answer.

What a bold statement. And I ask you, can you say that today? Of course, it's easy to say, but can you live it? When things do not go your way, when troubles come, when the enemy annoys, and when other people annoy, what do you do?

[35:41] You know, as we look forward to 2021, can we say these words? Surely, your goodness and love, follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And can we believe them? And if so, I think this will be a good year for us. I took the liberty of buying a case of these books, books. So I hope that this would encourage you to grab one and read it and study it for yourself.

There's much more in there than what I was able to share today. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for this psalm. We thank you for the word of God that we have in our hands.

We thank you most of all for the good shepherd, the one who had laid on his life to take it back up again. And we thank you for the Holy Spirit who leads us and guides us.

And if we pay attention, would lead us into the place where we should be, those green pastures where we could rest with you. I just ask that we would look to our good shepherd.

[36:46] Amen. Amen.