

Psalm 23 – Part One: Shepherds

June 4, 2017

Luke Knight

Introduction to the Psalms

- The Psalms are vehicles for raw expression. They're a compilation of everything we can throw at God: all our anger, fear, disappointment, anxiety, praise, happiness, joy, exuberance, sorrow, the highs and the lows.
- But as important as expression is, the Psalms are not just about expression. If so they might become dangerously wild tangents that take us places that, when all is said and done, aren't good for us, like seven year old who runs away from home in a huff, never to return.
- So the Psalms are not just about our honest expression, they are also about God's truth.
- The Psalms are tethered to God's presence and character, always bringing us back to reality because, as we know, solely defining reality by how we feel is dangerous business.
- So the Psalms are where honesty and truth converge. They're where we pour out all we have towards God, knowing he is the safe place and sorter-outer of the tangled feelings and worrying situations.
- The Psalms are where we bring every inconsistency of life into the presence of a consistent God.
- And no Psalm, it could be argued, does this more creatively and succinctly than Psalm 23.

Introduction to Psalm 23

- Psalm 23 is a poem or a song, and any song worth it's salt is born of heartfelt experience. Poets write what they know, and David wrote Psalm 23. And David, the shepherd boy turned king, knew sheep and shepherding.
- Rulers in the ANE were sometimes portrayed as shepherds, since it was such a constant image in agricultural life, but the Israelites saw God as a very different kind of shepherd. So the image emerges in the Psalms from time to time, and notably in Isaiah later on.
- It is such a consistent and important image for Israel that when Jesus arrives on the scene he is depicted as Israel's Good Shepherd in the flesh, living amongst and eventually laying his life down for his flock. In Luke's gospel we're even told that shepherds visit the manger the night Jesus' is born, something of a wink to the reader.

- David begins Psalm 23 with, “The Lord is my shepherd...”

The Lord is my shepherd...

- This opening line is probably the most famous poetic phrase of all time and yet it remains lucid and potent.
- “The Lord is my shepherd” - For ancient people images would flood the mind: A shepherd took responsibility for, protected, guided, owned, lived full time amongst, and smelled like the sheep.
- Praying, “The Lord is my shepherd” is both a comfort and an affront.
- For some of us it’s a great comfort as we remember that God is in our corner, not fighting against us. That he brings guidance and protection and provision.
- For others of us, it’s perhaps an affront or a challenge. It reminds us that we don’t own our lives, we are not meant to be totally autonomous beings, designed to make our own way and do it ourselves. We need a shepherd, and were never meant to try and shepherd ourselves.
- And so when we pray, “The Lord is my shepherd” we are both welcoming the comfort of God and submitting to the good authority of God. We are saying, effect: “Thank God, I am not my own shepherd.”

The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need...

- Having spent the fall in Genesis 1-3 we talked a lot about the goodness and abundance of God. The first thing we learn about God is that he is creative and he is a giver.
- This is expressed by David ever so briefly in this first line, but it’s also seen elsewhere in places like Psalm 95.
- When we pray like that we remember who God is in amongst seasons of lack. Praying like that broadens our thinking and reminds us that if God is our shepherd we can trust he has the cosmos in his charge.
- This is the same kind of encouragement that Jesus brought his disciples when he said, “I will not abandon you as orphans – I will come to you.” (John 14:18).
- There is a lot we could say about God’s provision, how to trust him and just what we can expect if we pray “I have all I need.” And our material needs are of great concern to God, as we learned in praying the Lord’s prayer. Asking for bread is the right thing for children to ask a father, and sheep can expect the shepherd will lead them to grass.
- But today, perhaps we can draw into something deeper.

Pentecost

- Today is Pentecost Sunday, which is the day when the global church celebrates the arrival of God's Spirit in fullness, as told in the book of Acts.
- On that day, Jesus' fulfilled his promise to his first followers. His promise was that he wouldn't leave them, but with them, all of them, through his Holy Spirit. That promise continues to extend to us now.
- The Holy Spirit is our comforter, our guide, our source of strength, and empowerment to live how we were made to live.
- And so when we pray, "The Lord is my shepherd, I have all that I need..." we can pray that as an invitation to be full of God's Spirit. We can pray that with the expectation that he is still amongst us, comforting, healing and empowering us. We can pray that in the confidence that he has not left us to our own devices and he is at the ready to provide.
- And so before we enjoy God's further physical provision, we can begin at the source. We can welcome and enjoy the presence of God, the gift of the Shepherding Spirit himself. This is what we are in most need of.
- "Lord, let us not just name you but know you as the good shepherd.

Discussion Questions:

- What are your experiences with Psalm 23? How have you interacted with it in the past?
- How have you experienced God as shepherd in the past?
- How does this Psalm, or even the beginning of it, comfort or challenge you?