

The Heart of a Shepherd

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Maybe the most familiar phrase in all of scripture. David’s best known psalm paints for us a picture of the ideal relationship between God and man the relationship of a Shepherd and his sheep. Its not the only place David uses this picture: In Psalm 95:7 he writes, “Come let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” And in Psalm 28:7, “Save your people, and bless their inheritance, Be their shepherd and carry them forever.” David, as a young boy, a military warrior, a hunted fugitive and a king came to understand the heart of God as the heart of a shepherd. And one thing David knew about most shepherds. They loved their sheep.

But we shouldn’t romanticize the shepherd-sheep relationship. Sheep can be among the most frustrating animals. My mother grew up with sheep and I asked her once what she remembered about them. She did not hesitate with her answer. “They stink. And they are dumb.” Her answer was not unlike that of a young shepherd boy in math class. A first year teacher who had grown up in the city was teaching her first elementary class in a small school out in the country. She asked one of her young students, “Johnny, If you have 10 sheep and 1 wanders off, how many are left?” “None,” he answered. “Oh Johnny, you don’t know math.” The boy responded, “Mam,

I know math. You don't know sheep!"

The 23rd psalm sounds to us so peaceful and serene, but is that the message David is trying to convey? Or is he elaborating on the truth Isaiah observed when he said, "All we like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6). The life of sheep is anything but serene. The shepherd/sheep relationship is often a very trying one. Listen again to the words. "He *makes* me lie down." There's a reason sheep must be made to lie down, it is not their nature to do so, nor is it ours. Like sheep we resist rest and quietness; we are easily panicked. How often do you wake at night worried about the cares of the day.

"He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul." Sheep are afraid of rushing water and will not drink from it. The shepherd must find calm waters for his sheep if they are to drink. Sometimes the turbulent, rushing waters in our lives make it difficult to find a calm place where we can be still and drink deeply and be renewed. "He guides me in paths of righteous," we so easily even willfully wander off that path and into unrighteous places don't we. "He is with me," because quite frankly sometimes we feel all alone and afraid when life makes us walk through some pretty dark valleys.

"He comforts me with his rod (a big stick the shepherd used to protect the sheep) and his staff" (a little stick to nudge the sheep along), because

sometimes we need a nudge, and sometimes we need a good knock on the head. “He prepares a table for us” because we don’t know what lies ahead, we can’t control our future. “He anoints us” because we are often wounded by life. It is true that the shepherd does all these things. It is also true that the sheep desperately need all these things done! And so do we, because we like sheep so often go astray and turn to our own way and find ourselves in trouble and in need of the Shepherd to help us.

David was a man after God’s heart. The heart he was after, the heart he knew he needed was the heart of a shepherd. A Shepherd’s heart is patient, longsuffering and filled with love for his sheep. David knew he needed, and came to know he had in God, a shepherd’s heart he could depend on. Can’t you see the many pastoral scenes in David’s mind, the shepherd with his sheep over his shoulders, the shepherd leading the sheep from pasture to pasture. This was David’s picture of God, an unusually intimate picture for his time of Yahweh.

David understood from his own experience the shepherd/sheep relationship and his psalms reveal that he came to know his relationship with God in the same way. God loves us and doesn’t give up on us. That understanding of God was of great help to David; it enabled him to survive the troubles, the disappointments and the failures of his life. I’m not sure when David wrote this psalm, but it seems to me a psalm like this is not

likely written by a young 16 year old boy out in fields watching his sheep. These insights were born of many years experience with trouble, and unfortunately David had had plenty of those.

David's life didn't go quite as he planned it. None of our lives do, do they? How is yours turning out? In our youth we have dreams and expectations, big plans. Then time passes and we discover our dreams must be adjusted; we realize we're not going to reach all our goals. Not just ours, we may not live up to the expectations others have for us as well. Sometimes people get so discouraged they give up on all their goals, all the hopes and dreams that once motivated them.

David's life had breathtaking highs and heartbreaking lows. He starts out a lowly shepherd boy who is unexpectedly chosen by the prophet Samuel to be King of Israel. Soon after that he becomes a national hero defeating the giant Goliath. He marries the lovely Michael, daughter of King Saul. His best friend is Jonathan, the son of the King. He becomes a captain in Saul's army, a folk hero, a celebrity. Not bad for a shepherd boy!! What hopes he must have had for his future.

But life can change suddenly; for David it changes dramatically. King Saul turns against him and in a jealous rage tries to kill David. David must flee for his life and hide in the wilderness for over 10 years. He is branded a rebel, an insurgent out to overthrow the government. For awhile he appears

to actually negotiate a truce and align himself with Israel's greatest enemy, the Philistines. This is hardly the life one expects for a king elect. David struggles to understand who God is and why God would one day anoint him and the next abandon him.

Then his one time mentor Saul and his beloved friend Jonathan are both killed in battle. David weeps over the deaths of these two and expresses his anguish in one of the most heart breaking passages in scripture.

O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothes you in scarlet and fineary, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold. How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights. I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.

How the mighty have fallen! (2 Samuel 1:24-27).

If you think with Saul's and Jonathan's deaths, David's path to royalty would be simple you could not be more wrong. War breaks out between the house of Saul and the house of David. Saul and Jonathan may be dead, but the family of Saul is not about to let David's family become the royal house of Israel without a fight. One of Israel's great warriors, Abner, believed the kingdom should remain in Saul's house and Saul's last remaining son, Ishbosheth should be king. For the next seven years Israel was divided between the tribe of Judah, led by David and the rest of the northern tribes

led by Ishbosheth. David grieved over this civil war and when it was finally over, pledged to protect Saul's house. Rather than killing off all of Saul's male heirs, David invites Saul's only remaining heir, Jonathan's young son Mephibosheth, to live in the palace as his own son.

Finally the kingdom is united and for many years the kingdom is wildly successful; the borders of Israel's kingdom spread further than they ever would again. At the same time, David's personal life becomes a soap opera, a really bad soap opera. His failures are alarming. This man who was after God's heart breaks God's heart many times. He fails as a husband. His marriage with Michal goes bad. He is not satisfied with her and all his other wives and concubines, he steals Bathsheba from his loyal captain Uriah. Then when he can't cover up the affair, he has Uriah killed in battle so he can take Bathsheba as his wife. To the public it appears to be a noble and gracious act, but to God it was what it was, adultery, murder, hypocrisy, greed, arrogance and pride. God's judgment decreed that the baby born to this adulterous affair must die and David's heart is shattered.

David fails as a father. David's sons for the most part are a mess. His son Amnon rapes his half sister Tamar. David fails to discipline Amnon which enrages David's other son Absalom, Tamar's brother. So Absalom murders Amnon. The rift between father and son never heals. Absalom leads a revolt against his father. Like Saul, Absalom chases David into the

wilderness trying to kill him. Absalom himself is eventually killed even as he was in pursuit to kill his father. For the rest of his life David would wrestle with sorrow and regret. The Jewish people considered the kingdom of David as the pinnacle of Jewish history, but as David looked back at his life he would see at least as many heartbreaks as highpoints.

Through it all David responded to his trouble by writing his psalms and in his poetry there is revealed a growing understanding of the shepherd heart of God. David had felt the sting of the shepherd's rod when he sinned. After the prophet Nathan's stern rebuke of his adultery, and the devastating experiencing of losing his son, David wrote the 51st Psalm which includes passages like this:

Have mercy on me O God according to your unfailing love,
Wash away my sin, cleanse me with hyssop,
wash me and I will be whiter than snow
Let the bones you have crushed rejoice,
Do not cast me from your presence

He had also felt the gentle, soothing oil of the Shepherd's forgiveness pour over his wounds tenderly anointing them with mercy and grace. David often wrote of that grace, like this passage in Psalm 103. "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities For as high as the

heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. (103: 8-14).

David lost much in his life. Sometimes because of the wickedness of others, sometimes because of his own. The losses are overwhelming, any one of which would be enough for a lifetime. He lost the love of his wife love, twice! First when he flees into the wilderness, and then as she rejected him when he returned. He saw his daughter's innocence stolen from her. He saw three sons die, one an infant because of David's sin, the other two in the prime of their life because of their own sins. He lost his best friend and his beloved king in battle; his two loyal captains, Uriah and Abner are both murdered; he lost his dream to build a temple for God because he had too much blood on his hands to build a house of peace.

How much have you lost in your life? However much, David would understand. But there was one thing he never lost, his shepherd. Or, perhaps it should be said, his shepherd never lost him. Over and over again he heard the shepherd's voice; throughout his life he felt the rod and staff; whatever happened, wherever he was, his shepherd was always there making him lie down, restoring him, getting him back on the right path, comforting

him, disciplining him, healing his pain, walking with him in the shadowy valleys, always ahead of him preparing the way for his good, sustaining him with that steadfast love that endureth forever.

But it was not just the Shepherd who was always there for David; it was also David who, during the most difficult times, over and over would come back to his shepherd, seeking his help, seeking renewal. Some scholars think many of the psalms were written while fleeing from his son, Absalom. This must have been a heart shattering time for a father, a time when David must have felt alone, afraid and in desperate need. I wonder if the 23rd Psalm wasn't written at this time or even later, written as a sober reflection on his life and how his Shepherd had faithfully led him and kept him. I am convinced that what sustained David through his struggles was a growing understanding of the character of God's heart, a shepherd's heart. Without that understanding of the true nature of God's heart, life and all its disappointments, its tragedies, its failures can devastate us.

For some the heart of God is severe, eager to punish, rebuke and crush. To understand God this way, is to despair of ever being right with him. We would never run home to such a God. We would run away from him. Others mistake God's merciful heart as a lack of concern about our sin. They fail to understand or perhaps fail to even care just how deeply their sin wounds the divine heart. By indulging their sins they slowly and surely

erode their relationship with the heavenly father. They become more like Absalom than David.

David knew all of God's heart, its severity and its mercy; the rebuke of the rod, the sure guidance of the staff, the gentle anointing of its forgiveness. All of these experiences taught him about God's faithful and enduring love. A love that will do whatever it takes for however long it takes at whatever cost it may take to lead his sheep safely home.

Like David, the son of David, Jesus, also described God as a shepherd who loves his sheep, leaving the ninety and nine to go out and find the one lost sheep, his love like the love of the shepherd described in this conversation.

<i>Where are you going Shepherd?</i>	<i>To find my sheep.</i>
<i>How far will you go?</i>	<i>As far as my sheep.</i>
<i>How far may that be?</i>	<i>To the world's end.</i>
<i>How long will you seek it?</i>	<i>Until I find it.</i>
<i>When you find it, will it come to you?</i>	<i>No, it will probably run away from me.</i>
<i>Where will it go then?</i>	<i>To the docks and the sand.</i>
<i>When will it stop?</i>	<i>When it can run no more.</i>
<i>What will you do then?</i>	<i>I will carry it home.</i>

This is the heart of the God we worship, the shepherd who came to seek and to save his lost sheep, the good shepherd who knows his sheep and

whose sheep know him; the shepherd who laid his life down for his sheep.
He is the shepherd who calls us to come home when we wander away. Is he
calling you today? Have you wandered away? If you have, why not hear
his voice today and come home to your Shepherd.