

He Restores My Soul

Let's pray...

If you weren't with us, last Sunday we began into our summer series in Psalm 23 with a resonance among many of us that this psalm seems to be speaking to us – relevant to our lives in this season...

It's a psalm in which we find ourselves – names and addressed...

And I know for me, this psalm has felt so relevant **again** to my life this week – in both **frustrating** and **life-giving** ways.

But before we get into that, let's simply read the psalm again together.

Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness **for His name's sake.***

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley
I will 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 your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

This morning we're going to linger in **verse 2** (and the first part of three).

"He makes me lie down in green pastures,

*He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul."*

If there ever was a verse **not** to dwell on in the second week of summer while you are still at work, but everyone else (at least according to FB and Instagram) seems to be off on holidays – **this is the verse.**

Hence, my frustration with this passage this week.

Not that I'm bitter about my summer schedule. I had a long weekend away recently, and I've got some holiday weeks coming.

But this was one of those weeks - in the midst of one of those months – in the midst of one of those years – where the renewal and restfulness of green pastures and quiet waters – feels **so elusive, so needed and yet so far away** – at least from my current vantage point.

In truth, the way this psalm begins, it can, at times, actually feel very deflating – especially when you're not on holidays, and the weight of life feels heavy and unending.

Listen again to how the psalm begins – v.1

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Or as I shared last Sunday –

"The LORD is my Shepherd. That's all I want."

Amen. I'm with you.

As long as the LORD is my Shepherd, *I have all I want.*

And then, in the next breath, we read,

"He makes me lie down in green pastures,

*He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul."*

And many of us, instantly are pierced with **profound want**.

Isn't it bizarre that the very verse that follows the words, "**I shall not want**" – often fuels in us *an incredible amount of want?*

I mean, who wouldn't WANT **to lie down in green pastures, to be led by quiet waters – and have their soul restored?**

And doesn't this **want** often feel like a **need**?

And in this place of **deep wanting – soul craving** – the grace and peace of verse 1 slips from our vision and soul, and in its place, we find ourselves discontent, wanting, and maybe even discouraged.

Why? Because despite what the psalm says, we don't always, or often, find ourselves lying down in green pastures or led by quiet waters.

Rather than being renewed and restored, our soul, at times, maybe even right now, feels weary and wounded, distressed and downcast.

And in case, like me, the **word 'soul' sometimes** feels like a **flimsy**, irrelevant matter. When the Bible speaks of the soul, it's not referring to some **wispy** thing inside you. It's referring to **the core of who you are** and what guides you... To speak of the soul, is to speak of your essential self – your **very being**...

Which helps me relate with this idea and experience of our soul being alive and well, and at other times being weary and wounded, distressed and downcast.

Which, in a surprising way, should be an encouragement to every one of us.

Because sometimes we can slip into a mindset or feeling that if we are truly sheep of the Good Shepherd, then we'll never be **so** distressed that we need restoration. And if it happens to us, *something is obviously wrong with us. Maybe this is proof that we're not God's true sheep.*

If God really loved me and was with me... If the Shepherd was really my Shepherd – if this was real – then I wouldn't feel this way.

But David – the one who wrote Psalm 23 – David's life tells us otherwise. As does the life of Jesus himself. In the Garden of Gethsemene we find Jesus grappling with **a troubled soul**... They **both** knew moments and experiences that took a deep toll on their soul.

We need to take this to heart.

Because the witness and promise of this psalm is not that our soul will always be strong and vibrant, **OR** that our soul will never be distressed and downcast. But that, *in the grace of God, there is a Shepherd who can renew and restore our soul.*

Do you hear that?

Do you need this hope today?

In this season of your life and soul?

There is a Shepherd who can renew and restore your soul!

Ok, but what if the green pastures and quiet waters are a long way off?

Or, even worse, what if they are nowhere in sight?

Cause that's how some of us feel, don't we?

Some of us, *just this week*, whether because of this psalm or as just the outflow of our experience – have said – whether externally or internally, "***Oh, I just NEED some green pastures and quiet waters...***

Where are MY green pastures and quiet waters? When and where will MY soul be restored?"

And if you don't feel it right now, you will at some point. **That's just life, right?** Even this psalm itself describes days and seasons in our lives where green pastures and quiet waters are far from our current reality. Some days and seasons will find us in the darkest valley.

But here's ***the essential insight.***

Here's ***the good news*** of this part of the psalm.

And **I** needed to hear this - myself - this week.

Listen: Green pastures and quiet waters are **NOT** what restores your soul – or anyone's soul.

What restores your soul – and mine – **is the grace and presence and work of the Shepherd. Right?**

That's what the psalm tells us.

*"The **LORD** is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters.
HE restores my soul."*

The essential source of our **soul's renewal**... The one true and sure source of our **soul's restoration**... is **NOT** the experience of green pastures or the presence of quiet waters (though that could be lovely) – rather, **it is the grace and presence and work of the Shepherd... the work of the Shepherd who know where and how we need to be restored...**

Truth is, and many of us know this by experience, it is possible to find yourself plunked down in a green pasture, curled up beside quiet water – and yet utterly **unable to rest** *because of the condition of your soul... Because of something going on in your soul... something disturbing you, tormenting you...*

Truth is, we, who live in Victoria, live in something of a green pasture, by quiet waters – and yet many of our souls are desperate for restoration.

Well, thankfully, Jesus, the LORD, our Shepherd, knows this – and this is where the part about **green pastures and quiet waters comes** into play.

And again, it's not about the presence of green pastures or quiet waters, as much as it is about what the Shepherd does – what Jesus **IS DOING**... what Jesus is **actively seeking**, in love, to do in us and with us – **all the time** – that can allow us to **lie down** in green pastures and to **be nourished** by quiet waters.

In truth, this is where the psalmist **lets us in on** some of the work of **our Soul-Restorer**... Work that we all – at different points – need...

And maybe, if you and I had spent part of our lives shepherding sheep, we might notice and understand this on first reading. But the reality is that most of us have never shepherded sheep, or knowingly hung out with anyone who has – which means we have a lot to learn about shepherding.

So, let me simply **pass on** a few things I've learned about the vital work of a shepherd that makes a sheep to be able to **lie down** in green pastures and **be nourished** by quiet waters.

And I'll be drawing largely on the work of two wise Bible teachers who have some intimate understanding of shepherding – Kenneth Bailey and Philip Keller...

Kenneth Bailey – a professor of Middle Eastern New Testament Studies – who was born, raised and lived most of the first 50 years of his life in the Middle East (Egypt, Israel, Palestine) and observed and known many middle eastern shepherds – makes the simple introductory remark that,

"A dog can be trained to sit and to lie down. **Not so a sheep.** A well-known proverb affirms, 'You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.' In like manner, no one can *make* a sheep lie down. **Sheep will only lie down** when they have had plenty to eat, have quenched their thirst and are not threatened by any wild animal or disturbed by biting insects."

If you have ever read Philip Keller's great study [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](#), you'll know this.

No Shepherd can **make** his sheep lie down, but he can attend to a **number of crucial matters** that will **ALLOW** the sheep **to be at rest** in green pastures.

And it is **this vital work** of the Shepherd that **we** – God's sheep – must not ignore, dismiss or run from. Because **this is how God** – in grace – **restores us...** *This is how God – our Shepherd – in grace – **is seeking** to restore your soul and mine...*

Which means – we would be wise to stop looking desperately for green pastures and quiet waters, and instead be **alert, hungry and responsive** to the vital work of our Shepherd in our lives...

I'd love to spend more time on each of these, but we can't – so my intention is simply **name the doors that God may be knocking on in our lives...** To name the restoring works of the Shepherd – with trust that God will show us our respective places of needed restoration...

And I'm going to follow **Philip Keller's four** – which are virtually the same as Bailey's, just configured differently.

Simply put, no sheep will lie down in green pastures unless it is

1. free of **fear of attack,**
2. free of **conflict with others,**
3. free of **disturbing pests,**
4. free of **hunger and thirst.**

Once acknowledged, all of these are very self-evident – and the connections for us incredibly clear.

Because without this – without the gracious restoring work of the Shepherd – no sheep would or could ever lie down in green pastures and be nourished by quiet waters.

And it's the same for us – these are the very things that keep us up at time – that *trouble and distress our souls...*

So, first, for sheep to lie down in green pastures they must be **free of fear.**

Simply put, if sheep are afraid of attack... if something is lurking in the bushes or they are convinced something is – they won't and **can't** rest. They'll be up, on their feet, agitated, and maybe even on the run.

As Keller explains,

"Sheep are so timid and easily panicked that even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. When one startled sheep runs in fright a dozen others will bolt with it in blind fear, not waiting to see what frightened them."

And it's the same with us. If we are living in fear, we will not and cannot rest. Doesn't matter how nice **our** green pastures may be, we will not lay down in them. Our soul won't let us.

But, as any shepherd would tell us, there is nothing that calms fearful sheep like the presence of their Shepherd. **As Keller recalls,**

"Nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep as to see me in their field... keep watch over the flock by night."

Alert to the strong and loving presence of the Shepherd, sheep can lie down in green pastures – in the confidence that the Shepherd will keep them safe. (More on this later in the Psalm.)

Second, for sheep to lie down in green pastures they must be **free of conflict.**

Just like in the case of fear, if sheep are experiencing tension in the flock – rivalry, jealousy, competition – they cannot and will not be at rest.

Again to **quote Keller, "Always they** must stand up and defend their rights and contest the challenge of the intruder." (31)

And it's the same with us.

Few things can so disquiet **our** soul like **unaddressed conflict** with another – unnamed or unresolved conflict. And we all know this. This, for many of us, is what keeps us from rest – the trouble that torments our soul – the place where we need to seek and embrace God's restoring work.

And again, the presence and work of the Shepherd is the key.

As Keller learned,

"Whenever I came into view and my presence attracted their attention, the sheep quickly forgot their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting."

And then speaking to our conflicts, he says,

"In our human relationships when we become acutely aware of being in the presence of Christ, our foolish, selfish snobbery and rivalry will end. It is the humble heart walking quietly and contentedly in the close and intimate companionship of Jesus that is at rest..."

Empowered by Jesus to seek reconciliation and restoration.

Third, for sheep to lie down in green pastures they must be **free of Pests** – parasites, flies, etc.

Oddly enough, I know this firsthand – because **I've** been troubled by a couple of parasites since last summer. Not sure how I got them, but they are pests – and if ignored or left unattended, they could cause me a lot more trouble than their size should warrant.

And this is a regular challenge for sheep. Keller explains,

"Sheep, especially in the summer, can be driven to absolute distraction by nasal flies, bot flies, warble flies and ticks. When tormented by these pests it is literally impossible for them to lie down and rest. Instead they are up and on their feet, stamping their legs, shaking their heads, ready to rush off into the bush for relief from the pests."

Similarly, in our lives, we can find ourselves plagued or tormented by internal battles – festering sin, festering lies (about God, about the gospel, about us), hidden but welcomed temptation, distorted desires, pride,

jealousy, lust, selfish ambition – that, if ignored or unattended to can cause more damage that we'd ever expect.

I'm sure we all know this in some way.

And for sheep, this **requires** the caring, intimate, ruthless but loving work of the Shepherd – coming close to discover and name the issues and do what's needed to purge and clean out the infected area or festering pests... (**More on this later in the series...**)

Fourth, lastly, for sheep to lie down in green pastures they must be **free of hunger**.

This is the one factor that should be self-evident to us upon some basic reflection. **What do sheep normally do in grass?**

They eat it, right?

And yet the image here is of a sheep **lying down** in green pastures.

Which would only happen if a sheep **has already fed** – is nourished and satisfied...

And that's exactly the point. **As Keller explains,**

"A hungry ill-fed sheep is ever on its feet, on the move, searching for another scanty mouthful of forage to try and satisfy its gnawing hunger. Such sheep are not contented, they do not thrive, they are no use to themselves nor to their owners. They languish and lack vigor and vitality."

And again, in this place of hunger and thirst, sheep will eat and drink anything – including things that are harmful, or even dangerous for them.

Thankfully, here again we find the Shepherd at work here – **because green pastures don't just happen!** Especially, in the semi-arid climate of the middle east.

No! Green pastures **require** the hard, thoughtful ongoing labor of a shepherd that cares for his sheep - clearing rough, rocky land; tearing out brush and roots and stumps; seeking and planting special grains; irrigating with water... And more.

Green pastures don't just happen. It requires the Shepherd's loving and ongoing work – providing for the needs of his sheep – so the sheep can lie down in green pastures – **nourished and satisfied – and unafraid that there will be no food tomorrow – because the Shepherd has proven that He can be trusted...**

What a grace to be the sheep of a Good Shepherd!

But here's the challenge with any and all of this – and this is crucial: *sheep can ignore, dismiss, run from, and fight the Shepherd in his good and needed work.*

And that's the challenge **for us.**

That's where the invitation comes for each of us.

At times, maybe often, we can be so **eager**, so **desperate**, so **fixated** on our want or need for some green pastures and quiet waters, **and yet, all**

the while, unwilling **to seek and allow Jesus** – our Good Shepherd – to do His **needed restoring work** in us.

- *to address and be with us in our places of **fear**...*
- *to address and enter into our **conflicts** with others...*
- *to name and address the issues **within us** that continually plague and disturb us...*
- *and to feed us with the food and water we truly need...*

In the grace of God, our Shepherd WANTS to restore us – again and again. He wants to restore **you & me**.

That's the gospel for us today.

And He knows how to do it...

But the question is are we willing to turn to Him and invite and allow Him to have His way in us... **to do His restoring work in us...**

- *to address and be with us in our places of **fear**...*
- *to address and enter into our **conflicts** with others...*
- *to name and address the issues **within us** that continually plague and disturb us...*
- *and to feed us with the food and water we truly need...*

To let Him "**lead us beside quiet waters.**"

Again, notice the issue here isn't just that we need **quiet waters**, but that we – God's sheep – would be willing **to be led**... willing to **follow** the Voice of our shepherd – who does not **drive** us, but *who leads us with His*

Voice – in love – to the restoration we need... To the water that can and will nourish and satisfy us – and restore us.

This is how Jesus restores us.

This is how Jesus – our Shepherd – wants to renew and restore us... you... me...

Will we let Him? Will I? Will you?

Will we stop running off to plan our next trip to **Green Pastures** and **Quiet Waters** and, instead, turn and run to Jesus our Restorer – and *follow where His Voice is calling us? And has been calling us?*

Let's pray...