

1. The LORD is My Provider and Protector, for I Am a Weak Sheep

- a. The first thing to realize if we want to be comforted in our fear is that we are sheep
 - i. We are not leading, we’re following
 - ii. We are not secure, we are in danger
 - iii. We are not strong, we are weak
 - iv. We are not wise, we are foolish
 1. There are very good reasons that we are anxious, that we are fearful
 2. To the degree that we can grasp we are sheep, along with the other character in this Psalm, the LORD who is my shepherd, is the degree that we can deal with our weakness and fears in a healthy way, which does not either minimize nor maximize them
- b. The Scripture offends us in order to cure us
 - i. We don’t like the idea that we are sheep – we want to be shepherds
 - ii. Yet, healing and comfort begin with seeing what is true, even when it hurts
 1. A doctor gives a grievous diagnosis because it is necessary to know the truth in order to be healed
 - a. If I reject a cancer diagnosis as indigestion, it is not strength or wisdom – it is foolishness and death b/c of pride
 - b. In the same way, if I reject the Biblical diagnosis that I am a sheep, weak and foolish and endangered, then that does not make me strong – saying that I’m strong doesn’t make me strong – I am on a path of death
 2. The gospel begins with a clear and true diagnosis:
 - a. “Cheer up! You’re worse than you think you are!”
 - b. The good news, the comfort of the gospel, begins with the recognition of the reality that we are in much worse conditions than we think we are
 3. The gospel continues with a clear and true Cure:
 - a. “Cheer up! You are more loved than you ever dared to hope!”
 - b. This equally important, if not greater, is also necessary to know the comfort and rest in the face of our fears as well
 - iii. God doesn’t offend us to belittle us, but to tell us the truth about our soul in order to heal us!
- c. I am weak
 - i. The only thing standing between sheep and death is the shepherd
 1. There are real dangers in the world
 2. There are foods that poison and paths that lead to destruction
 3. The valleys of *deep darkness*, the possibility or actuality of *loss*, are everywhere!
 - a. Poe’s *Raven*, sitting on Athena’s head repeating “Nevermore! Nevermore! Nevermore!” of LOSS
 - b. Death is the great separator of loves, and we are terrified of it.
 - c. Not only physical death itself, but all the valleys of “deepest darkness” which preclude and foreshadow it
 - i. The loss of jobs (Nevermore!)
 - ii. Dissolution of marriages (Nevermore!)
 - iii. The slow pull downward of old age which sees its body and mind dissolve (Nevermore!)
 - ii. Why does this bother us?
 1. There is something inherent within us that knows eternity and longs for permanence, i.e. *righteousness*, the way things are supposed to be

2. We intrinsically know that we want to live forever, in communion with others, and for such loves to be meaningful and full and endless (think Eden)
3. We were not meant to say goodbye to loved ones!
 - a. The curse of the human soul is so bad because the beauty of the human soul is so dignified
 - b. To be human is to love, to desire and delight in others, it is the image of God in His trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – Wholly Loving the Other Rightly
 - i. But, the curse is that the greater that you love someone the greater the fear of losing them *because the valley of deep darkness exists*
 - c. The more that you desire something, the blessing is bound up with the curse
 - i. Thus, the goal becomes to find courage in the face of such fear
- iii. In the valleys of deepest darkness, when we cannot see, and the unknowns in the shadows have swarmed our thoughts and are running rampant through them like an invading horde, all we can sometimes see is that fear of loss
 1. David says, “He is with me” as a shepherd
 - a. Like a child clings to her father in the middle of the night because a nightmare has brought the deepest darkness of the closet’s shadowy unknowns to her mind and she cannot see the truth
 - b. She clings in her terror – and without something to cling to she will come undone – so we cling to a shepherd
- d. The LORD is *present with me for my good*
 - i. YHWH gave His name in the context of covenant salvation, of His promise to Abraham and his descendants, i.e. those of faith (cf. Galatians 3:7)
 1. He told Moses, “YHWH, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob is my covenant name forever”
 - ii. The very image of a shepherd is personal and a greater bond than other images used thus far in the Psalms
 1. Rock, King, etc. are useful and powerful, but do not have the intimacy of a shepherd
 2. Shepherds lived with their sheep, slept among them, ate their meals in their presence, etc.
 3. Do you see the Almighty like this?
 - a. Why not?
 - b. Is it because we know our lack, our foolishness, and our fearfulness?
 - c. Do we attribute these failures as *identifiers*, rather than attributing our identity to our shepherd?
 4. David’s identity is first and foremost described as “the LORD is *my* shepherd”, which could also be stated oppositely as “I am the LORD’s sheep”
 - a. Often, in the valleys of the deepest darkness – of despair, guilt, shame, grief, and anxiety – our fears move from possible, to probable, to certain in our minds and hearts
 - i. We cease to see the Master’s hand and the Master’s heart, and see only the fear itself
 - ii. “When confronted with suffering that won’t go away, or with even a minor problem, we instinctively focus on what is missing, not on the Master’s hand. Often when you think everything has gone wrong, it’s just that you’re in the middle of a story.” – Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*

- iii. It is the knowledge of the Shepherd's presence with us *for our good* that gives us comfort in the midst of the greatest fears
 - 1. When things get rough for David, he knows where to look: He looks to His shepherd because He is *there, He is powerful, He is good*
 - a. Aren't these the things which we doubt when we are overwhelmed by fear?
 - b. The shepherd is not there to beat the sheep into staying on the path, to cajole the sheep into the pen, or to get from the field to the pen as quickly as he can no matter how many sheep he loses.
 - i. HE LOVES THE SHEEP and will not lose a single one.
 - ii. You may be in a hurry in your sanctification, but the shepherd is not
- e. The LORD is with me to provide for my weakness
 - i. "I am lacking nothing"
 - 1. This doesn't mean that he has everything he *wants*, but rather everything that he *needs*, i.e. he is *right before God*
 - 2. Philippians 3:7-11
 - 3. The shepherd can be trusted to provide what we need, even when we cannot understand why he is taking us through such trials.
 - ii. "He causes me to stretch out"
 - 1. This is the posture of an animal that is well-fed and feels safe – pastured, laying on its stomach
 - 2. "in pastures of new fresh grass"
 - a. The Lord brings blessings of what my hungry soul actually needs in order to thrive
 - 3. How does the LORD do this?
 - a. He acts within history
 - b. He has given us His Holy Spirit
- f. The LORD is with me to protect me from real danger
 - i. The deepest darkness of my life – those terrors of *loss* emotionally, physically, soulishly
 - 1. When we doubt that God is near, that He is working, that He cares, and that all that exists is this deep suffering and that's the last chapter of our lives, God is still working patiently, lovingly, passionately for us to protect us
 - a. He fights for us!
 - b. We are sheep – He is the shepherd
 - ii. Because the LORD is with me, I do not need to fear the disaster that comes
 - 1. It's not that disasters won't come, but that they cannot destroy His story for me, which is very, very good
 - a. "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" (Lk. 12:4-5)
 - 2. If that terrifying one is your *shepherd*, then what have you to fear?
 - a. Trust His club
 - i. The "rod" was a club used to fight off attackers
 - b. Entrust yourself to his staff
 - i. The "staff" is his guiding stick used to prod or change the sheep's direction
 - ii. His Word of righteousness
 - c. These things comfort me
 - i. He will protect me from real danger
 - ii. He will guide me into real life

2. The LORD is My Guide and Helper, for I Am a Foolish Sheep

- a. I need guidance – I need to be “staffed”
 - i. The “staff” of the shepherd is the supportive stick that he would use to lean on and also to move sheep
 - ii. The LORD “causes me to lie down”
 1. Like a Father making his child be still in order to rest
 2. We are busy, fretting, wiggly in our self-determination and our FOMO
 3. “be still and know that I am God...” (repeat until asleep)
 - iii. and “guides” me to the waters of rest
 - iv. Until, literally, “my soul returns”
- b. Sheep are prone to wander
 - i. Sheep completely overestimate their ability to understand their world and make decisions that will bring them joy, life, and rest
 - ii. They are singularly stupid in the face of danger
 1. Sheep have been known to fall off of cliffs trying to reach a small bunch of grass
 2. I think people have been known to do the same thing
 - iii. Yet, this wandering is always soulish, not merely intellectual
 1. It is our souls that wander and must return
 2. Our souls wander from the source of life and of rest and must be returned by the Shepherd
 - a. “Be amazed at this, O heavens! Be shocked and utterly dumbfounded,” says the LORD. “Do so because my people have committed a double disaster: they have rejected me, the fountain of life-giving water, and they have dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns which cannot even hold water.” (Jer. 2:12-13)
 - b. Why would we do this?
 - i. Because we cannot see or understand the fountain’s source, so we are not sure that we can depend upon the water to be there tomorrow
 - ii. But a cistern can store water for tomorrow, so we carve one thinking that we can hold onto tomorrow’s good today *without having to trust the Lord*
 - c. The LORD calls this “dumbfounding!”
 - i. “The fool says in his heart, “There is no god.”” (Ps 14)
 - ii. Do we not often act as if this were true – as if the fountain of the water of LIFE is not trustworthy to keep flowing – that tomorrow may be dried up and parched and leave me choking in the dust?
 - c. The LORD “turns our souls back” by leading us in “ruts of righteousness”
 - i. Our souls find their rest and their life and their thriving in the ruts carved out by God’s righteousness – His paths of “the way things are supposed to be”
 1. It is upon these paths, these Words of God, the Scriptures, that we find the means of living fully, abundantly, humanely
 2. Like we saw last week
 - ii. These are “ruts”, tracks heavily treaded and entrenched on both sides to show us the way
 1. Easy to see, like ancient paths through the woods are easy to find
 2. Stick to the ancient paths for life, says the Shepherd
 - iii. He places us back on the road *for the sake of His own name*
 1. God will not fail to completely give you His righteousness any more than He will fail to honor and protect His own name

- d. As we entrust ourselves to the Shepherd's staff, to listen to His voice and follow the ruts of righteousness, we lack nothing, we find pastures of fresh green grass and waters of rest
 - i. This doesn't mean that we won't find ourselves walking through valleys of deep darkness, but that they lead somewhere glorious
 - ii. This doesn't mean that we won't encounter enemies with teeth on the way, but we have a Shepherd with a rod, a club of defense
 - iii. "I am lacking nothing"
 - 1. Why?
 - a. Because I have the LORD who is always present, capable, and good
 - 2. When we ignore the staff of the LORD, His guiding Word, our souls starve – sin and pride slowly kill us as we wander off the paths of life
 - a. Yet, because the LORD loves us, the Shepherd comes to get us with that disciplinary staff – for our life
 - 3. "Our souls are restless until they find their rest in you." – Augustine

3. The LORD is My Presenter and Pursuer, so I am a Loved Sheep

- a. I am loved
 - i. The truth that we are weak and foolish is not the truest truth about us if we belong to the LORD
 - ii. The primary purpose of this psalm is not about our weaknesses and failures, but about the LORD and of His merciful, patient, gracious, overwhelming love for His people
 - 1. Jesus told us that He leaves the 99 who are not lost to find the one who is
 - iii. When our fears and failures become so "loud" in the ears of our hearts and so "blinding" in the eyes our hearts, we often doubt that God truly loves us
 - iv. Yet, He loves us deeply – so deeply that He sent His Son – so we can trust Him when we cannot see the end of our story or the end of the valley of deepest darkness
- b. The LORD presents me to the world as His beloved and honored child
 - i. The LORD 'lays out a table before me'
 - 1. The LORD serves His people a feast
 - 2. To eat with someone in the ANE was a sign of belonging, either of family or allies
 - a. David speaks of both: the LORD is my ally and my ally is my Father
 - ii. The LORD does this 'in the view of my enemies'
 - 1. The LORD serves His people a feast of honor in the presence of our accusers
 - iii. The LORD presents me beautiful to those accusers
 - 1. "anoints my head with oil" is a phrase that means "makes presentable"
 - a. "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matt. 6:16-18)
 - b. In other words, the LORD beautifies His people and sets them up at a place of honor at His table *in the presence of our enemies*
 - 2. This is God boasting of His children! He is proud of His people, for His name's sake, to the praise of His glorious grace! He shows them off as evidences of His great character and of His deep and abiding love for them.
 - a. It is a defiant challenge to His enemies – These ones are mine and I love them and I declare them to be right before me!
 - b. "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light

for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 3:8-10)

- iv. The LORD satiates my joy
 - 1. Cup overflows
 - 2. The cup of joy is “satisfied” or “satiated”
- c. The LORD pursues me with goodness and mercy
 - i. “Goodness” is the settled intention of the LORD towards His people – to do them good
 - ii. “Mercy” is the “covenant love” of the LORD – His settled commitment to His promise to bring them to Himself, to dwell with them forever, to atone for their sin and to fashion them into His likeness
 - iii. These things “pursue” us, literally
 - 1. That is, it is not that these two things follow us around like Mary’s little lamb, but that God’s goodness and covenant love for us *hunt us down for our good*
 - 2. They are the shepherd going after his lost sheep, chasing the wayward one down, scooping her up, and bringing her home upon their shoulders
 - 3. It is an image of divine rescue, completely accomplished by the LORD, and irrespective of where I’ve wandered or to what I’ve wandered – His goodness and His love pursue me to catch me and to bring me *home*
- d. The LORD brings me *into His home*, His Temple, to *belong in His goodness* all my days
 - i. How do I know that God’s goodness and mercy hunts me down?
 - 1. At the center of His house is an altar
 - 2. I belong here because the Good Shepherd laid down His life for this sheep (John 10:7-14)
 - a. The Good Shepherd took the place of the wayward sheep
 - i. “for” the sheep literally means “in the place of”
 - ii. Jesus died “in our place” so that death would have no hold on us

Conclusion:

You are afraid. Maybe this is rightly so, because you are in danger, or because your loss has been great. Or, maybe you are afraid of what *might* be, but is not now, but your anxiety has surrounded you and all you see is the deepest darkness imaginable. You know it is just a maybe, but your heart screams out in its certainty that this is all that there is.

Where do you go? What can you do? Stop. Be still and know that God is your shepherd. Breathe. Turn and cling to Him in the darkness. He knows the way. He carries a big club to help you. He will give you just what you truly need and bring to the deeply trodden paths so you can follow them in the dark.

And look up. Lift your countenance to behold the goodness and mercy of God in the face of Jesus Christ. God knows everything. He is never surprised. And God is good. He has given His life for sheep. His sheep. His beloved sheep. Since He is never surprised, and since He is good, then you can trust Him with whatever story that He is writing, even with the chapters of deepest darkness and apparent doom, when all hope seems lost...that is when the Hero usually appears anyway.