

Do Shepherds Need a Shepherd?

A minister's look at the Twenty-third Psalm

David penned the twenty-third psalm as one who had spent time as a shepherd. He knew the ways of the sheep and he knew the shepherd's responsibility. Yet he depicted himself as one of the sheep, not the shepherd. At the time of this writing, he was probably already king of Israel. He had experienced leadership most of his life. He had been only a young boy when he defeated Goliath while the reigning king and the army of Israel cowered behind him. He was a renowned political and military leader, but at this writing David says,

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

As pastors, elders, deacons and ministers in the church, we often see ourselves as “in charge,” the leader. If we could exchange that image for one under the care of The Lord as our shepherd, we would find a new contentment that is sometimes elusive while carrying the heavy burden of leadership. As sheep, we are comforted that the Lord sees and takes care of all our needs. We are content in the place He has led us to, and confident in His leading us in the future. Discontent cannot be our state when we rest in the comfort that all that concerns us is really in the hands of the Lord.

Replace the image of yourself as the leader, and grasp the image of yourself as one of His sheep. See yourself following the Shepherd. As you follow His leadership, take note of the ways and times when He has been faithful to meet your needs. Walk along with Him and notice the beauty of His plan. Cultivate contentment in your life by being persistent in counting those blessings frequently.

Q: How freeing is it to think of God as your leader? Do you find the thought of taking off the mantle of leadership and placing it on His shoulders a liberating thought?

Q: When have you experienced the Lord's provision for your needs? Stop now and count your blessings.

In the presence of the Lord, there is contentment.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.”

There was a time in Jesus’ ministry when His advice to His disciples was exactly this. They had returned from a period of intense ministry in pairs. They were excited to tell Him all they had done and taught. But the crowds pressed them so much they did not even have time to eat. Indeed, the pastures were green. In their minds, it was time for action. Their ministry was growing. Yet Jesus’ words were: “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.”(Mark 6:31) Even in the middle of a growing and thriving ministry, we need to separate ourselves for a period of rest. Ministers work long hours. There is always some engagement pressing them. They are either planning some event or attending it. The shepherd knew the sheep needed rest even when the pastures were green. He knows His under shepherds need rest too, even when the church is growing and there are people pressing on all sides.

Come away to a secluded place and find rest. Examine your schedule. Make time for rest. Be careful to choose restful activities that include time with the Lord. Not all leisure activities are restful. Sometimes our frenzied lifestyle leads us to even more frenzied leisure activities.

Q: Make a list of your leisure activities. Next, highlight those that bring you rest. Is there something you need to eliminate from this list? Is there a new activity that would rest your mind, body and soul?

In the presence of the Lord, there is rest.

“He restores my soul.”

The rest afforded by the Good Shepherd restores our souls. It can be very fatiguing to minister and teach. We need quiet times alone with the Lord for our personal soul’s sake. This isn’t “a good night’s rest.” This rest of the soul arms us for the battle ahead. We are prepared in the inward man for action as directed by our Lord.

It is tempting to spend all our time preparing for that next sermon or teaching time. Make having a personal quiet time alone with the Lord a daily exercise. Get up a few minutes earlier than usual and spend those minutes with the Lord. Resist the impulse to think, "This would make a great sermon." Instead, think, "Lord, is this passage a personal Word from You to me for today?" A journal is a wonderful way to keep a record of how the Lord is speaking to you. True, it may yield teaching points for later use, but in the beginning it is likely God is preparing you for the day ahead. Pay attention.

Q: What is God telling you about the state of your soul today?

In the presence of the Lord, there is healing.

"He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Always, God leads us to live holy lives, not for the protection of our careers, but for the sake of His reputation. Moses said, "Let me know Your ways that I may know You." (Exodus 33: 13) God's character is reflected in the lives of His servants. That can only be done when our souls are restored to wholeness by intimate contact with Him. When we wander away from the Shepherd, we wander into dangerous territory. Fatigue causes us to take shortcuts in our ministry. We may not fully prepare our hearts before speaking God's Word. We may be tempted to rehash old thoughts or not fully engage in study as we should.

Q: Have you experienced the temptation to take a shortcut in your service to the Lord? Confess those times to Him now.

Sometimes, the anonymity we seek in the ministry causes us to be secretive and that leads to secret sin. We find our hearts and minds wandering away from the straight and narrow. Maybe we become secretly judgmental of the other sheep in the flock. This negativity spreads like a cancer and affects how we minister. Maybe we allow ourselves some indulgence that is unhealthy in mind or body.

Many well-respected ministers have fallen into immorality. When this becomes public, as it always will, the kingdom as a whole suffers. He leads us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Cultivate a group of friends who will hold you accountable to righteous living. Be transparent in your life with your spouse and with friends. Ask for prayer in specific areas of temptation. Remove all tempting materials from your life.

Q: How can you find the accountability you need to hold you to the standard of right living God expects of all of His flock? What trustworthy group or individual do you know that you could meet with regularly?

In the presence of the Lord, there is direction and instruction for living.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me;

This line could be translated “Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness, I fear no harm...” All ministers at some point walk through a period of deep darkness. All of us face those times of stress, discouragement and fatigue. Studies have shown that the ministry is one of the most dangerous professions. Many ministers suffer stress-related illnesses. Weight gain, high blood pressure, even depression are symptomatic of many ministers' lives. Sometimes God uses a backdrop of darkness to accentuate His presence. The things we learn about God in those dark times are often profound. We don't forget these truths gleaned out of our difficulties. When our grandson was born blind, I raged at God. I could not believe this could happen to our family. But out of that dark time, I learned, “All God's deeds are covered in mercy.” If I knew all the facts as only God knows them, I would always choose His way.

Q: Have you experienced a difficult time in your life from which the Lord taught you a profound truth? What aspect of God's character have you learned in the valley of deep darkness?

In the presence of the Lord, there is safety.

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

With the Shepherd leading us, we know He holds us securely in His arms. We cannot be harmed because God is with us. He protects us from the enemy with a mighty rod. He disciplines and leads us with His staff.

Leave the warfare in the Lord’s mighty hands. Be comforted when the Lord uses that staff to guide us or discipline us. There is comfort in knowing Someone smarter than ourselves is guiding our footsteps and controlling our behavior.

Q: Have you been tempted to lash out at a flock member? How can you step back and allow the Lord to discipline His flock apart from you?

In the presence of the Lord, there is security.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,”

The picture of provision in the midst of danger is very relevant to the ministry. Every servant of God faces danger from attacks by the enemy. Satan loves it when a minister fails so he targets the families of ministers. There are dangers lurking on all sides. Jesus said, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” (Matthew 10:16a) Some of us serve in some distant country where sharing Jesus Christ is illegal. The wolves seem to be at the door. Many of us serve in our own US where we expect to be loved and admired as ministers of the Gospel. Yet, even here Christian teaching and living is ridiculed in the popular press. Even in the church, there are those who resist the leadership of the Shepherd.

Feast at the table prepared for you by the Lord. Experience the abundance of His presence even when it is just the two of you. Be amazed that the God of the universe comes to your kitchen table and speaks directly to you. See how freely He meets your needs. Develop a fellowship with other likeminded believers. Relish the full realm by rejoicing in the growth of the kingdom worldwide. See His hand and

His actions around the world as part of your ministry too. Know you are part of something Big and Wonderful. Make His Word and His Ways your constant companion. Be armed against the attacks of the devil by hiding God’s Word in your heart.

Q. What Scripture best arms you against Satan’s attacks?

In the presence of the Lord, there is protection.

“You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

A shepherd pours oil over the heads of his sheep to protect them from insects and injury and then sends them out to the fields. We are anointed for service by the Lord Himself. Knowing it is the Lord who has called us to ministry gives us courage to move forward. We are called and equipped by God Himself. Examine your experience with the Lord and treasure it. Know that He has seen something in you worthy of service in His army. Place a marker in your life that reminds you of His calling. Then rest in the security of His leadership in your ministry.

Write out the experience of your call to ministry and rejoice in it. Confirm your call to His service.

In the ministry, despite the challenges we face, we find our cups overflowing with blessings. Some of the greatest blessings afforded to mankind come directly from dedicated service to our Maker. God chooses us, anoints us for service, equips us and then blesses us abundantly. Sometimes, our hearts leap for joy at the thought of our Savior. When we see our flocks growing in the knowledge and wisdom of our Lord, we rejoice. When we take the time to have those quiet, personal, intimate times with the Lord, our hearts thrill at His love. When we acknowledge that our ministry has eternal rewards, we are blessed!

Name some life you have impacted for Christ. Then see how that life has impacted others. Rejoice in the multiplication of the kingdom.

In the presence of the Lord, there is joy.

“Surely goodness and lovingkindness (mercy) will follow me all the days of my life,”

Another translation might read, “Only goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life” What beautiful assurance. We can be sure beyond any doubt that God showers our lives with goodness and mercy. He cannot help Himself. God’s nature is both good and merciful because we need both aspects of God. We are prone to sin; God’s goodness leads us away from sin and to righteousness. Though we strive to live sinless lives, we are helpless to do so. God’s mercy covers all. Our Savior doesn’t sit enthroned in the distant heavens. He is actively walking with us, shedding goodness and mercy all around. And in our wake, we leave behind these characteristics of our Shepherd. What a blessing to know we can be a blessing because of the Shepherd’s hand on our lives!

Make a point of being a blessing every day. Speak words of encouragement. You are not the only warrior in this battle. See where you can serve and not always be served. Beyond that, your ministry is not temporary. It lasts all the days of our lives! What seeds we plant here today are reaping eternal benefits.

Q: What other servant do you know that needs your words of encouragement? How can you minister healing and mercy in the life of another person?

In the presence of the Lord, there is goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Sometimes leading the sheep of our Lord brings us to discouragement. Like Moses, we want to say “Those people You have given me....” But nothing removes us from His presence. *Forever* is worth the temporary frustrations and difficulties of this life. Paul said, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18) We don’t have the full picture. We can’t imagine the glory of the house of the Lord. But we have this assurance: we will live there forever.

Q: Have you experienced the glory of the Lord here on earth in some worship service or your private quiet time? Try to put into words the thrill of knowing God Almighty was present with you.

Now multiply that over eternity and know there is no end to the glory of the presence of the Lord.