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GPS IS NOT ENOUGH Psalm 23:1-3

I recently read *Miracle On The Hudson*, a book about the US Air flight that landed in the Hudson River in 2009. It made me realize there is a parallel between airline flights and church. Many people in church just hear “blah, blah, blah, Jesus, blah, blah” during the sermon. When the flight attendants deliver their pre-flight speech I mostly hear “blah, blah, blah, exits, blah, blah.” I know if the cabin depressurizes oxygen masks will drop down from the overhead bins. I know there are emergency exits, and usually pay attention to where they are located. But as I thought about it I realized I only have a vague idea where the life vests are. I know how to put them on. I know you wait until you’re out of the aircraft to inflate them and you do that by pulling on the red tabs at the bottom, but I wasn't sure where they are. Same with the life rafts. The point is, I’ve heard the talk 1000 times, but I don’t really listen. That's not good because in a dire emergency most people’s brains don't work very well. You need to be able to act instinctively without thinking. In the case of that US Air flight most of the passengers left the plane without their life vest even though the plane was in the water.

Today we are going to look at some words from the pen of David, the great king and psalmist, that are some of the most familiar in the Bible. People quote the 23rd Psalm at funerals and during frightening moments in life. But this is a beautiful and powerful poem about how to live. The problem is, I’ve heard it a thousand times, but often without really listening.

It is a daunting task to endeavor to take on perhaps the most beloved passage in the Bible. But God didn’t put it there for us to just recite it when we’re scared. He wants us to learn from it and live as a result of it. Let’s look at Psalm 23:1-3.

WE ARE SHEEP

As we bring our study of the life of David to a close I felt it would not be complete without looking at a Psalm that is representative of his writing. How could we consider our study of him to be thorough without a look at a Psalm since his most enduring impact is from his many Psalms? Of all that he wrote Psalm 23 is obviously the most well known. This Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer are surely the two most familiar of all Scriptures.

In these familiar words David started by saying, “The Lord is my shepherd.” What did that make David? Obviously he was one of the sheep whom the Great Shepherd watched over. We are members of that same flock, thus also sheep. This is common imagery in the Bible. Psalm 95:7 says, “He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.” Isaiah 40:11 says of God, “Like a shepherd he will tend his flock.”

There are some things about sheep you likely know and some you may not know. You know that they are vulnerable. They are susceptible to many parasites and toxins. Seemingly innocuous plants and foods like oaks, acorns, cherries, tomatoes and potatoes are all toxic to them. And, of course, they are terribly vulnerable to predators. They don’t have a fight or flight instinct, they just have a flight instinct. More than a third of all deaths of sheep in America are due to attack by predators.

This makes them quite timid and easily spooked. In fact, they panic at the slightest provocation. They don’t like shadows or dark places. They have rather poor depth perception and as a result they will often balk at shadows or even a dip in the ground. They like to congregate in flocks and will become stressed when they are separated from their flock. They like to follow a leader, which is why they like shepherds. But they are so prone to follow a leader if one sheep starts to move in a direction the rest will tend to follow.

It is likely their helplessness, timidity and penchant for following any leader that causes them to often be regarded as dumb. However, they are not as dumb as they are sometimes depicted. They have excellent hearing and sense of smell. They are able to recognize the faces of humans and other sheep and remember them for years. They can even differentiate emotional states through observing facial expressions.

We must not make the mistake of trying to apply all of those qualities of sheep to us. The shepherd and sheep analogy is an illustration and is not intended to be pressed at every point. However, there are two aspects of sheep we know we are intended to see in ourselves because David highlights them in this Psalm. One is that we are vulnerable like sheep. That will become a focus in the second half of the Psalm.

The other trait of sheep that appears in this Psalm is the need for a leader. We need a shepherd who will show us where to go, who will care for us enough to take us to safe places where there is food and water. In the first half of this Psalm the

shepherd takes the sheep to grassy pastures, he leads them and guides them. These are all about leading and guiding the sheep.

This Psalm implicitly makes an assertion that throughout much of human history was almost a given, but that in our culture is widely rejected and is highly controversial. The assertion is that because we are sheep we need a shepherd who will lead us. Every now and then these days you might hear the colloquial question, “Who’s your daddy?” This Psalm asks, “Who’s your shepherd?” David was a shepherd in his younger days and he knew very well what happened to sheep without a shepherd. They would get lost, be unable to find food, would get sick, and would fall victim to vicious predators. Their life expectancy was short indeed.

David knew that this is the fate of human sheep who lack a shepherd. Life is daunting and confusing. Verse 3 says the Shepherd “guides me along the right paths.” What happens to sheep who are on their own? They take wrong paths.

How are we to know what life is all about? What is the point of it? How are we to understand who we are? What is right and what is wrong? What matters in life? How are we to treat other people? How are we to deal with all of the hardship and pain life dishes out to everyone of us? Where do we get the wisdom and strength to handle all of the reversals of life? How are we to deal with death? What brings true fulfillment? All of those questions come down to what are the right paths to take? Unfortunately we sheep don’t know, and left to our own devices as sheep invariably do we will take the wrong paths. This is why we need a shepherd.

In the far north of Canada there is an island called Igloolik that is home to a small Inuit community. The waters around the island are covered in arctic ice and the terrain nearby is barren, featureless and covered by snow and ice. The temperature in winter hovers around 20 degrees below zero. For many centuries hunters from this community have ranged across many miles of ice and tundra in the search for food. Their ability to navigate through vast stretches of a terrain where there are few landmarks, where ice formations are in constant flux, where trails disappear overnight have amazed explorers and scientists for centuries. Their extraordinary navigation ability comes from a profound understanding of winds, snowdrift patterns, stars, tides and even animal behavior that is handed down from generation to generation. But their culture is changing. GPS navigation has arrived at Igloolik. Particularly among the younger people GPS makes the traditional techniques seem archaic. It is so much easier and more efficient. However, this marvelous new technology has led to some problems. Serious incidents have occurred when a GPS device fails and the hunter no longer has the traditional knowledge to help him find

his way home. GPS can plot a direct route, but it can't detect thin ice or other hazards of the arctic that the hunter with ancient knowledge would observe and avoid. Sadly that unique talent is quickly disappearing and may be gone in a generation.

That little story reminds us that we all face the question of how we are to find our way through life? What shepherd will guide us through life? Our culture insists that each of us can and should be our own shepherd. Remember the history of western culture. There was period called the Age of Enlightenment. In what way were people enlightened? What could they see that previously people didn't perceive? The root of the idea was that we don't need to rely on some divine revelation, some truth from outside ourselves, in order to understand the world and life. We can use purely human reason to determine what is true and right. Prior to the Enlightenment people's view of the world was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrine and their lives were ruled by absolute monarchs. It was called the Dark Ages. People just accepted the supposed revealed truth without questioning it. But then the lights came on and humans realized that using purely human knowledge and reason we can understand the world and life. Using only human reason we can find the right paths. In other words, each of us becomes our own shepherd, no outside help needed. Our culture loves the message of William Henley's poem *Invictus*. "I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul. In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud, under the bludgeoning of chance my head is bloodied but unbowed...It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

This enlightenment, it was believed, would lead to an astounding evolution in the human race. It would usher in tremendous progress in every field of endeavor and make possible at last a world of peace, freedom and fulfillment for all. This thinking is at the very heart of our society. All of our thinking is rooted in it. It is so pervasive that we are not even aware of it. It is a given, as necessary to our mental environment as water is necessary and normal to a fish.

What happens if the Scriptures, for instance, claiming to be revelation from God, address the right ways to deal with our sexuality, how it should and should not be expressed? But then that supposed divine truth comes into conflict with current cultural doctrine on the matter? How do we decide the right path? In our culture the nearly irresistible path is, "I do whatever I think is right. What does my reason tell me is the way it should be?" I am the captain of my soul. I decide what is best. We are our own shepherd. To us anything else seems inconceivable.

Sadly the Enlightenment has not quite lived up to its billing. There has been fabulous progress in so very many fields. The Enlightenment made way for the scientific method, and no one can deny the astounding advances in science and medicine. The ideas of the enlightenment gave rise to the democratic ideals that are the underpinning of the United States and its government. There is no question that people in our nation today are more free than people have ever been. They can live by almost any moral code they choose.

But notice the first statement in verse 3. It says of the Great Shepherd, “he refreshes my soul.” Can we say the same of this idea that each of us should be our own shepherd? It certainly has not produced an epic era of peace. Instead it made possible two world wars that were more lethal and violent than anything history had ever seen. It brought about the ever present possibility of nuclear annihilation. Our own nation is deeply divided and filled with anger, despite prosperity on a level never experienced before.

Are people’s souls being refreshed? Our society is known for anxiety and depression. It is awash in medicines, counselors and therapies that seek to address what is basically an epidemic of unhappiness, confusion and inexplicable sadness. Experts are concerned about skyrocketing rates of usage of those medicines. Does that sound to you like people’s souls are being refreshed?

Brilliant sociologist and cultural critic Philip Rieff (not a follower of Jesus) in his book, *My Life Among The Deathworks*, said that as a result of our “enlightened” approach to finding the right paths, our society is mounting a suicidal attack on the family, which is the very basis of security and mental and emotional health in all humans. Does that sound like a soul refreshing right path to you? He maintains that the obvious ills of modern society are, in fact, directly caused by its attempt to abolish the sacred. In other words, to get rid of revelation and have each person be his own shepherd. That idea is not giving us peace and setting us free. Rieff says it is destroying us. It has created a soulless world without inner constraint, a society peopled by sophisticated animals dominated by the need for survival, the desire for pleasure and the dark urge to dominate. Our efforts to individually be our own shepherds are resulting in people being grievously injured, lost, and on the wrong paths. He asserts that the cultural elites who are leading the crusade for this idea “are better understood as terrorists” than true experts, because of the horrific damage they are causing to people and society.

There are some obvious problems with this idea of us being our own shepherds. First, we are far more powerfully influenced by our culture than we either realize or like to admit. Often when we think we are shepherding ourselves we in fact are being shepherded by our dominant culture. On top of that we are irrational shepherds. We like to think we make wise and reasoned decisions about our lives, but we don't. Dan Ariely is a psychology professor at Duke University. In 2008 he wrote a book entitled *Predictably Irrational*. The premise is we don't make decisions the way we like to think we do. We are not at all rational about the process. One of his big points is we are dominated by our cravings and desires, so we let them drive our decisions, then we invent justifications for them after the fact. He gives lots of evidence for this, but uses himself as an example. When he turned 30 he decided he needed to sell his motorcycle and buy a car. But what kind of car? He came across one of those tests on the Internet that ask you a bunch of questions and then tell you based on your answers what kind of car is best for you. He took the test and back came the answer: he should buy a Ford Taurus. He went back through the test deciding he must not have been accurate with his answers. He changed a number of answers and this time the test said he should buy a Mazda Miata sports car. So he did, confident that he had followed the wise advice of the Internet. He did just what he wanted to do all along, but convinced himself that he was making a good, reasoned decision. That's consistent continually with us, and that's not very good shepherding.

Here's another aspect of the problem with being our own shepherds. Humans, like sheep, are prone to choose wrong paths that end up harmful. I am going to annoy my wife with this one, because I am going to talk about the movie *La La Land*. Many love this movie. Laurie liked it but regrets having me see it because I've been harping on it ever since we saw it. If you liked it I will probably irritate you too. There were some things about it that I appreciated. It was creative. It was kind of retro, harking back to the golden age of musicals. It wasn't a sequel or derived from a comic book, so kudos for that. It was well acted and executed and had wonderful cinematography. However, it had a message that exemplifies the problem I am talking about. Spoiler alert, if you haven't seen it I'm about to ruin it for you, so close your ears. The story is totally focused on two characters, Sebastian, a fervent jazz musician, and Mia, an aspiring actress who is frustrated by her lack of success. Their initial encounters are humorously negative. Right from the beginning there is conflict. In one early scene as random chance has thrown them together they look over the lights of LA. During this chance encounter because of the initially negative energy between them Sebastian sings, "We've stumbled on a view that's tailor made for two. What a shame those two are you and me. Some other girl and guy would love this swirling sky, but there's only

you and I, and we've got no shot. This could never be, you're not the type for me. There's not a spark in sight. What a waste of a lovely night." Mia agrees, singing, "I'd never fall for you at all, maybe this appeals to someone not in heels or to any girl who feels there's some chance for romance. But, frankly, I'm feeling nothing. Or it could be less than nothing." They end the song agreeing together, "what a waste of a lovely night." But even in those encounters there is undeniable chemistry between them. A blind man could see it. Even as they deny it in their song the sparks of attraction are flying between them. The story is all about their relationship as it develops through ups and downs into genuine love for each other, and a viewer can't help but anticipate a happy ending as they spend life together. But they are dedicated to their chosen careers. He wants to have his own jazz night club where he could play pure jazz. She wants to become a star in Hollywood. They pursue those dreams above all else. Their dreams pull them in different directions and sadly, eventually they are torn apart, however reluctantly. They sacrifice love for the dream. Each of them finds the big success they wanted so badly. He gets his jazz club, which is a roaring success, and she becomes a famous star. You hope that somehow life will bring them back together. In a sense it does, but not the way you hoped. In the final scene 5 years later they encounter each other when she happens into his club. There is a montage of the life they could have had together, but then it fades, they acknowledge each other with a brief, wistful smile, then they part and go their separate ways forever.

The message is to have the success they longed for you have to make compromises and sacrifices. But nothing can stand in the way of their careers, not even love. The dream is by far what is most important. At its core that message is that what we need most of all in life is success and fame. You have to pursue your dream above all else and real joy and life come from fulfilling that dream. That's where life is found, and if you have to forego love and people to get your dream, than that's what you must do. Though we are thankful for them, people and relationships are disposable. That message is pervasive in Hollywood. In fact it is also widespread in our culture as a whole. The problem with it is that it is a total lie. We were created not for the dream but for relationship, for loving and being loved. At one point as she is singing about the pursuit of stardom Mia even sings that they do all of it to find love. Somewhere inside she knows love is the bigger goal, but then she ignores that. If you distill that message down it says that true life is about me getting something I think I want. If we lived our lives following the true Shepherd we'd know that's not true. We'd know that life and fulfillment aren't found in money, power, fame or success, but in loving and serving him, and in loving people. Real life isn't found in getting, but in giving. But this is what happens when we are our own shepherds. We take wrong paths that ultimately lead to our souls

being sick and eventually dying. You may think I'm being overly critical of the movie, but I read the producers' explanation of the meaning of the movie and discovered that they intended it to say exactly what I just described..

We need a shepherd, all of us. And sadly being our own shepherds proves to be a disaster. Just consider the case of Eve, who was her own shepherd with the result that death, pain and suffering are the themes of life in this world for all of us.

THE LORD IS THE SHEPHERD WE NEED

David makes the astounding assertion that the Lord is his shepherd. David claimed that Almighty God, the creator of all of us, is his shepherd. This Creator God directed his life. The images of still waters, green pastures and refreshing the soul are all about fullness of life. Not just about having lots of stuff, but having life to the fullest. It is about a life at peace, a life of contentment and satisfaction. The Psalm starts with the amazing statement "I lack nothing."

My problem with that statement is that I don't think there has ever been a time when I lacked nothing. I can always think of something that I wish I had. I lacked success as an athlete. I lacked success as a novel writer. Michael and Carissa have some good friends who got out of the Marines last spring and the husband went to work for Delta Airlines. Michael and Carissa are on the same path. Only their friends moved to the Orange County area because the wife's parents gave them a \$1.8 million house there. I wanted to do that for them but I lacked the \$1.8 million.

So what did David mean when he said he lacked nothing? He meant he lacked nothing that is necessary to live content, at peace, lying beside still waters, having your soul refreshed. A shepherd does not give sheep whatever they want. They might want to wander off, out of the pasture he has found for them. He does not give them what they think they want. He gives them what he knows they need to be healthy. That's what the Great Shepherd does for us. He gives us everything we need for our souls to be healthy and whole, for our lives to be full.

As we follow the shepherd's lead he will take us on the right paths that will get us to the place where we have what we need and actually long for. He will refresh our souls and make them full and whole. We will lack nothing that is necessary for that to happen.

But there is a little statement in verse 3 that is easy to overlook. The Shepherd refreshes our souls and guides on right paths "for his name's sake." He doesn't just do it for us, but for his reputation. In theological terms God does it for his own

glory. This perspective is what keeps us from having our focus be only on ourselves and our petty interests. The whole thing that God is doing as he guides us is for his glory. Romans 11:36 says, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.” If you look at all the blessings God gives us in Ephesians 1:3-14 you will see repeated the phrase that it is all for “the praise of the glory of his grace.”

We have difficulty with the idea that all that God does is for his glory. That sounds selfish to us, and it seems like the kind of thing that a really insecure person might do. However, it is actually necessary for God to do that in order for good to triumph in creation. That’s a discussion for another time, but it is true and important. But it is also for our own good that God works for his name’s sake.

Go back to the image of the shepherd. Let’s imagine a shepherd taking care of sheep for his name’s sake. What would that mean? It would mean that he desires to have a good reputation as a shepherd. This would be important, for how would he convince anyone to hire him as a shepherd? How would he get the sheep to trust him? He would establish a reputation as an excellent shepherd who takes outstanding care of the sheep. We understand that he loves sheep. He wants to have the opportunity to shepherd them because he cares so much about them. This desire will drive him to provide for them and take the best possible care of them. In other words, he works for his name’s sake so that the sheep will trust him and people will entrust their sheep to him.

Now we look back to God. Why does he work for his name’s sake? It is so he will have a sterling reputation. He will care so diligently for his sheep so that they learn that they can trust him. This means that his working for his name’s sake means that he will always do what is best for us. It is the guarantee that God will always care for us.

APPLICATION

TRUST THE SHEPHERD

The only way we will follow the shepherd is if we believe that he really is both desirous of and capable to guide us in right paths. It comes down to the question, do you think the Great Shepherd is trustworthy? Do you think he is always seeking your best interest and is he able to bring it about?

David had many occasions in his youth when a sheep he was shepherding failed to follow his lead and wandered off. He could remember talking to the sheep and saying to them, “You need to trust me and follow me.” He could see that God does

the exact same thing for his flock, for us. And he could see that the height of foolishness for any sheep is to fail to follow the shepherd.

I have had a life long battle with allergies and sinus problems. The past few years it has been better because an ear nose and throat doctor has found a treatment that works for me. Unfortunately it involves literally getting a shot in the nose a couple of times a year. She sticks a long needle up in my nose and injects the tissues in there. It's not as unpleasant as it sounds. Actually, yes it is, but it works. However the first time the doctor proposed this treatment, my reaction was kind of like Merlin in *Top Gun* when Maverick slowed down with a Mig on his 6. "You're gonna do what?" It came down to a pretty simple question. Did I trust my doctor? Do I think that she is looking out for my good and that she knows what she's doing? It was tempting to say, "Aw, I don't need that. I know more than she does." But then I said, "No, I don't. So I'd better do this."

Do we think we are better shepherds of ourselves than God is? Do we trust him both to know what is best for us and to bring it about?

SUBMIT TO THE SHEPHERD

When the shepherd leads, the sheep has to follow if he is to remain under that shepherd's care. Will we follow the shepherd wherever he leads us?

How does the shepherd lead us? He leads us through the message of the gospel. It starts with submitting to the truth that we can be forgiven, accepted, have a relationship with him, have eternal life by trusting in what Jesus Christ did for us and putting our faith in him. But then it continues with his instruction for our lives. Psalm 119:9 says, "how can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word." How do we find the pure path, the right path? We follow his guidance given to us in his truth, the Scriptures. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." It shows the way.

What is most important to do in life? How should I treat people, especially those who are downtrodden or those who are not kind to me? What should I do with my money? What should I do with my sexuality? How can I feel secure in who I am? How can I feel I am worthwhile? How do I deal with the inevitable disappointments in life? How can I build a healthy marriage and raise healthy children? All of these questions and so many more are addressed in God's instruction. They are also addressed by our culture and our own thoughts, and the answers are not the same. Who will you follow? If the Lord is our shepherd then we must follow his answers.

We also took care of Toby and Anna's dogs, Doc and Banjo this week. At one point Doc and I were passing a pole, only he went on the opposite side and his leash got hung up. I tried to get him to come around it but he resisted because he wanted to go forward. It reminded me of something C. S. Lewis once wrote about how we are to understand it when God tells us to do something hard, something we don't understand or want to do. He described being in that situation with a dog. "You pull him back because you want to enable him to go forward. He wants exactly the same thing...to go forward. For that very reason he resists your pull back, or if he is an obedient dog, yields to it reluctantly as a matter of duty which seems to him to be in opposition to his own will. Though in fact it is only by yielding to you that he will ever succeed in getting what he wants."

Beyond everything we think we want is something far greater than the thing we are focused on. It is not the thing itself that we really want, it is what we think it can produce. That is the life of a refreshed soul, a life lacking nothing. We only get that greater thing when we yield to the Shepherd. He knows how to lead us there, and though we think we do the sad fact is we don't know the way. We will take the wrong path that is a dead end, but God will lead us there.

LIVE FOR THE SHEPHERD'S NAME

Probably the hardest thing for us to accept is that life is not about us. I think I am the star of my show, and it annoys me when others don't recognize that this is true. So it is a hard thing to accept that even my life is not about me feeling good or being happy or fulfilled. I was created and exist for the glory of God. My life is to be lived for his name's sake.

While this is difficult at times, it turns out to be the most freeing thing in the world, for the most severe slavery of all creation, is enslavement to self. There is tremendous joy and power that we will experience when we choose to live for his name's sake, and not for our own selfish desires.

Have you ever been around someone who makes all of life about themselves? You have if you've ever had children. We love our little granddaughter, Ella, but she is only 15 months old. At that age she has almost no concept of anything but herself. She is a delight, but if she is the same at 15 years that she is at 15 months, she will be a horror, and her life will be miserable. The only way she can be whole and happy as a human being is to learn that life is not about her, but about the Shepherd.

We were created to give ourselves to something bigger than self. We will never be refreshed, we will never be lacking nothing in life when we make life about self. The amazing thing about our good and wise Shepherd is that when we live for his glory, it turns out to be for our own good. It refreshes our soul and brings us to the place where we lack nothing for a full life.