

Lesson Three Sermon

THE
GOSPEL
IN
HARD
TIMES

The Gospel in Hard Times

Lesson Three

An Ever-Present Help

Story: The boy was thrilled to receive his new bicycle for Christmas. What boy wouldn't be. With just a little instruction from dad, he took off down the street—invincible. The road started out flat and the ride was easy. After a hundred yards or so, the road went from flat to a gradual downhill. Never being on a bike before, the boy didn't realize just how steep the hill was becoming. It never seemed this steep when he was riding in the back of his parents' car.

As the bike picked up speed, panic filled the boy's mind as he saw a sharp curve coming up at the bottom of the hill. He couldn't remember what his father told him about braking as the curve was approaching faster and faster. The boy simply froze, unable to move, paralyzed in his fear.

Out of options, at the last minute the boy turned the handlebars trying to follow the narrow road around the corner. As the bike tires tried to grip the pavement, a small patch of gravel separated the rubber of the tire from the pavement and down the boy went, hitting hard.

The father immediately sprang into action, heading toward his banged-up boy. With scrapes, bruises and blood flowing from his knees, elbows and face, the crying boy ran to his father with his arms up.

Now, I bet every parent in here can relate, and you know how the father responded. "Son, what were you thinking? Didn't you see the curve? Why didn't you calculate the ratio of velocity and trajectory coming to a reasonable conclusion on speed and aerodynamics—making a rational decision of brake pressure and turn radius. The outcome would have been much better."

No, any caring parent at this point would simply scoop the son up, give him a comforting hug, assure him that everything was going to be alright, and then see about getting him bandaged.

Introduction: All through Scripture, God communicates to us that he is an ever-present help in our times of trouble. Let's face it, life can be hard. Seasons can have great difficulty and challenges. Sometimes we're like the boy—we make a mistake and find ourselves bloodied and bruised by the turns that we didn't see coming. Psalm 23 is a comforting reminder that we have a Father, a Caretaker, here pictured as a Shepherd, who is watching over us at all times and is ready to run to our sides when we fall.

Big Idea: God is always with you! He knows your ups and downs. No life-circumstance that you have gone through, are going through or will go through has taken him by surprise. As a skilled shepherd knows how to lead his sheep through rough terrain, so your Shepherd knows how to lead you on your journey—even when that journey includes pain and struggles.

Text Reading: Psalm 23

Context of Scripture: If appropriate, provide some historical or situational context to the immediate text.

Point 1) My Shepherd Knows Me (Vv. 1-3)

Shepherds are so familiar with their sheep, that regardless of the size of the flock, they know each by name as well as each sheep’s temperament and tendencies.

- A. The Shepherd knows your needs. (V. 1)
 - a. The beauty of this passage is that it’s a reminder that God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, has declared himself as our Shepherd. He’s not a hired hand just putting in his time, who would flee in the face of danger (John 10:12). The Great I AM is watching over you!
 - b. God knows how to motivate you, care for you, correct you and provide for you.
 - c. Have you heard that sheep are the undisputed “neediest” animals on the planet?
 - i. Have you noticed that you don’t see wild sheep? That’s because sheep cannot consistently locate food sources, nor can they defend themselves from predators. They rely 100% on a shepherd for their existence.
- B. The Shepherd knows your soul. (Vv. 2-3a)
 - a. Part of a shepherd knowing his flock is recognizing when his sheep need rest. The dust and heat of the day, the constant pestilence (bugs) bothering them and fear of predators stalking about—it all takes a toll.
 - i. Green pastures: The shepherd knows when to find a restful place that is appealing to lie down and rest.¹ (V. 2a)
 - 1. Phillip Keller is a Christian author and an actual shepherd from East Africa. He’s learned much about human nature and faith from caring for his flock. Keller says that there are four irritations that make sheep restless:²
 - i. Fear: from predators or other animals lurking about
 - ii. Flies: pests and parasites
 - iii. Friction: peer to peer pecking order contests
 - iv. Food: insatiable hunger

¹ “He makes me lie down” is in the Hebrew Hiphil verb stem, which emphasizes causation. So then, the sheep don’t lie down on their own, in their own wisdom, the Shepherd causes them to lie down because he knows they are weary.

² Phillip Keller, *The Inspirational Writings*. (New York, NY: Inspirational Press, 1993), pp. 28-37.

2. According to Keller, the shepherd must alleviate all these issues in order for the sheep to lie down.
 3. A good shepherd works relentlessly to find green pasture for the flock to feed and rest. If a shepherd desires for the sheep to gain weight, produce desirable milk, and grow thick wool coats—eating and resting are key.
 4. **Illustration:** If you're a parent, do you remember when your child napped during the day? Do you remember how they behaved when they didn't have their nap? Oftentimes, they were fussy, winey, and not a pleasure to be around. Why? Because they needed rest. Most kids have to be forced to rest at naptime because they don't understand the value of allowing the body and mind to rest during the middle of the day.
 5. Sadly, some adults don't appreciate the value of rest either, but our Shepherd knows our bodies need it.
- ii. Quiet waters: Again, being timid, sheep will not approach nor drink from moving waters. Often, a shepherd uses his staff or a nearby rock to dig a small trench or manmade pond where the sheep can drink peacefully from "still waters." (V. 2b)
 - iii. Restores my soul: There's an unfortunate phenomenon in shepherding called, "cast sheep." A cast sheep is a sheep that has gotten stuck on its back with its feet flailing in the air—picture a turtle stuck upside down on its shell. It sounds funny, but once a sheep is cast, it cannot get back on its feet alone. If the shepherd does not restore the sheep to its upright position, it will die as a result of gas buildup in part of the stomach within hours or days depending on the heat.
 - iv. In Psalm 23, David is comparing the rest and restoration that sheep receive from the diligent care of the shepherd with the restoration God gives us when our souls are weary, tired or we find ourselves knocked off of our feet along the journey.
 1. The report from the doctor is not what you hoped for. The career path you expected did not come to be. The divorce papers came. Your son or daughter did not rebound as you had hoped after rehab. Fill in the blank, we are all weary from something. Your Shepherd knows.
- C. The Shepherd knows how to lead you. (V. 3b)
- a. He leads us in the way of righteousness.
 - i. One of the most fundamental tasks of shepherding is leading the flock. Sheep are by nature creatures of habit and if left to their own devices, will feed in the same pasture even when the field has been damaged due to overgrazing.

- ii. The shepherd must lead the sheep to new food sources every few days depending on the condition of the field.
- iii. God, as our Shepherd, must lead us in the paths of righteousness. We, like sheep, will often not pursue righteous, kingdom priorities unless he leads us. Also, like sheep, we tend to want to graze where we're comfortable, even if it's a sinful, parasite infested, despicable place.
- b. He leads us for his name's sake.
 - i. Keller tells us that as a shepherd, he felt as though his sheep were an extension of himself. Other shepherds in the district knew his flock and his reputation amongst the shepherd's fraternity was inextricably tied to the status of his flock. In other words his name and reputation were tied to the sheep, so Keller was motivated to prove himself as a competent, caring shepherd.
 - 1. God is motivated to lead us because he loves us, but also for his glory. As God's children we are his ambassadors in this world, here to bring him honor and glory.

Point 2) My Shepherd is Present with Me (Vv. 4-5)

- A. The Shepherd is present in your valley. (V. 4)
 - a. Shepherds would often have to lead their flock through various valleys in order to find green pastures. These valleys were valleys "of the shadow of death" because of the dangers that lurked nearby. Dark caves, large boulders, and crevices in the rocks allowed predators like coyotes, bears, wolves, or cougars to hide, ready to attack at any moment.
 - b. Not only were there predators in the valleys, but also natural dangers: sudden storms or flash floods could cause rock and mud slides, snow avalanches could make a valley hard to pass through.
 - c. Why would the shepherd lead the sheep through such a dangerous place?
 - i. During the summer months, shepherds lead their sheep to find places to graze on the higher pasturelands. In order to get to the elevated grazing areas, shepherds had to lead their flocks through the valleys, ravines, and gorges.
 - ii. Whatever that valley, Psalm 23 reminds us that God is present with us. In fact, David indicates that he will not fear evil, because the Shepherd is with him in the valley. You see, the presence of the Shepherd makes ALL the difference. Part of that comfort for David is that the Shepherd has his rod and staff
 - 1. Rod – used for protection and discipline.
 - a. Exceptional shepherds are skilled at hurling their rods at predators with an uncanny accuracy.

- b. Shepherds would also throw their rods at sheep who wandered off into danger.
 - 2. Staff – used for guidance.
 - a. The shepherd is adept at using the staff to return a straying sheep or to return a lamb who has been separated from its mother. The shepherd uses the staff to return the lamb because the shepherd does not want to risk the mother rejecting the lamb because of the scent of the shepherd.
 - b. The shepherd also uses the staff to pull sheep close to him in an effort to cultivate intimacy, especially for shy sheep or sheep prone to keep their distance. Intimacy is important to every shepherd and sheep relationship.
 - 3. Together, these tools provide assurance of the Shepherd’s protection, guidance, and intimate relationship.
 - a. God desires an intimate relationship with his people and he will skillfully protect us from our enemies.
- B. The Shepherd is present when your enemies are present. (V. 5)
 - a. He prepares a table for us.
 - i. As the shepherd leads the sheep to higher ground, before he allows them to graze, he must take his rod or staff and beat back the grass to chase away the snakes. Even after doing this some vipers will remain in their holes. When the shepherd finds a snake hole, he will pour olive oil in the hole, which traps the viper. This is preparing a table in the presence of our enemies.
 - 1. God is working to thwart the attacks of the enemy, though he does not sabotage every attack. The overwhelming majority of evil directed at us daily is subverted by God and his army. Be encouraged.
 - b. He anoints our heads with oil.
 - i. Even after the shepherd has poured oil in the viper holes, some serpents will spring from these holes biting sheep on the face as their heads are down grazing. To protect against this, the shepherd will also pour oil on his sheep’s heads, so that if a viper strikes, the lubrication from the oil does not allow the viper to fasten its fangs into the sheep’s face.
 - 1. Are you glad that the Shepherd goes to such great lengths to protect us from the enemy’s venomous assaults?
 - 2. When our Good Shepherd is doing all that he can to protect us, our cup can really run over. We can dine until our hearts are content, because the Shepherd has prepared a feast for us—even while our enemies lurk about.

Point 3) My Shepherd is Good to Me (V. 6)

- A. He brings about good in all your circumstances and his lovingkindness sustains you.
 - a. Goodness: welfare, prosperity, or happiness—the favor of God. טוב (Tov) in the Hebrew Bible is the equivalent of grace in the New Testament. Even in hard times we experience the grace of Almighty God.
 - b. Lovingkindness: חֶסֶד (Hesed) is one of the most important words in all the Bible. Since there is no equivalent translation in English, we combine two words in an attempt to capture the wealth of this word. Lovingkindness speaks to the covenant fidelity, loyal love, unyielding love that God has for us because he is a covenant-keeping God.
 - c. The grace and loyal love of God will pursue, or follow after us, all the days of our lives.
- B. I will dwell or return in the house of the LORD.
 - a. The invitation to stay in someone’s home in the ancient Near East was an unparalleled honor. It was the ultimate honor, for meals were shared, stories were told, it was one’s sacred space.
 - b. David is assured that he will return or abide in God’s presence, in God’s house, all the days of his life. This is what we call in the Christian tradition “The Beatific Vision.” The most beautiful vision a human being could ever enjoy is the first time we lay eyes on the Ancient of Days, the Alpha and Omega, the One who was, is and is to come, the Son of Man. David understood that he would be awestruck for all of time and eternity because there would be no end to the Beatific Vision.
 - i. How about you today? Does it excite you to learn more about how intimately our Shepherd loves and cares for us? Psalm 23 gives us a glimpse into how he watches over every detail big and small.

Takeaway

In this life, even with a perfect, impeccable Shepherd, we are not immune from the perils of parasites, predators, and personal pride. Try saying those five “P’s” fast three times. Seriously, we’re not exempt from hard times, tragedy, suffering, adversity, or hardships. The consolation is that our Great Shepherd knows, leads, protects, and promises goodwill to us through it all for our good and his glory.