

Sermon Series:

# **Our God will go before us**

*Exodus 33 & 34*

## **THE SHEPHERDING PRESENCE OF GOD - Psalm 23; John 10:11-15**

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Scott and I enjoy watching Landline on Sundays after church. I am always amazed at how much agriculture is changing and how innovative people are. With internet connectivity and AI, it is getting so that more and more of farming can be done without moving from the farmhouse. Sensors on watering troughs can automatically release water when needed. Drones with cameras can check on the health of the pasture and even herd the animals from pasture to pasture. Electronic fencing can be moved at will to reflect changing conditions. All this can be done without the farmer even going near the paddock! Not everything can be done remotely, but more and more can.

However, there is a problem with this. These systems can work out what is generally good for the stock, what the average cow or sheep needs, but it can't know or take into consideration the needs of individual animals. This is fine with a large flock of thousands of animals. You have to work for the good of the majority and you expect that you will lose some animals who aren't hardy enough or who have special needs which can't be met. But it is quite different when you are working with a small herd or just a few animals. We've also enjoyed watching the new version of the British series, "All Creatures Great and Small". There, the farmers know each individual animal and will do whatever it takes to give their animals exactly what they need. They are fully present with their animals – sometimes sleeping in the barn with them, or bringing them into their house, in order to care for them. They know their animals intimately and what each needs to thrive. They have to do this because they can't afford to lose even one. But they also do it because they love their animals and have a real relationship with them.

In Exodus 33, God says that He will give the Israelites the land He had promised them and He will give them an angel who will protect them and enable them to drive out their enemies, but He won't go with them personally because of their sin. This feels to me a little like remote-controlled farming. God gives them what they need, but there is not relationship there and the provision is general and not specific. However, when they finally realise the seriousness of their sin and repent, then God relents and promises His presence with them. That He will know them individually and be with them personally. This is a different level of relationship.

In exploring some different ways to look at God's presence with us, I realised that the Bible gives us many pictures or illustrations to help us understand this. For instance, God's presence is likened to a light to guide us and enable us to discern right and wrong. In other places God is likened to a parent with both mother and father images used. This is used to highlight His love, care and instruction. As I looked around the Bible, however, I kept coming back to one image, that of God as our shepherd – the personal, intimate kind of shepherd, not the remote-controlled kind of shepherd. The first time God is called a shepherd is in Genesis (48:15) and the final time is in Revelation (7:17) and there are many, many instances in between. I think the reason this image is so common is because so many facets of God's presence can be captured by it. Psalm 23 is the most famous of these passages, with Jesus' words in John 10 also very important. I am sure that you have heard many sermons about these two passages. I've preached from both of them in the past two years. I know that the things I will say this morning will not be new to you. However, they are important things, things that I need to be constantly reminded of, things which affect the way I view life and how I feel about what happens. So, we will look at them again this morning, and ask God to show us what it is that we need to learn this time as we face life in God's presence today.

### **Psalm 23: What does God, our shepherd, do?**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing (v.1)*

This opening statement summarises all that comes after it. Because the Lord is with us as our shepherd, He will make sure that we have everything we will ever need. But He will not give it to us like a vending machine in the sky – impersonally handing out whatever we request. No, He will walk with us and do what is best for us every step of the way. The rest of the Psalm explains this in more detail.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul. (v.2,3)*

A shepherd's first responsibility is to make sure the sheep have everything they need to grow and maintain their health. He has to know exactly what they need – what kind of vegetation to eat and where to find clean water. The words used here show us that God is no modern farmer who manages his flock through drones and computers! He personally *makes them lie down* and *leads them* to the best nourishment. He is right there with them. And he knows that sheep need more than just physical nourishment. They need peace so that they can rest and be refreshed.

God cares about our physical, emotional and mental needs – even the smallest details. I can look back to times when God has provided a phone call which has lifted my heart, or a doctor who has shown kindness as well as medical skill. He's met a physical need, but in a way that went beyond my basic need and showed me that He knows me and cares about me more than just keeping me alive! God, my good shepherd, nourishes my body and soul.

*He guides me along the right paths 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. (v. 3,4)*

Sheep are vulnerable. They are smaller than most of their predators and they don't have sharp claws or teeth with which to defend themselves. They have poor eyesight and can't always see predators coming and they can't run fast to get away from them. All they can do is huddle in a group and hope that the predator is confused by the mass of moving, bleating forms. Their poor eyesight also means that they don't always recognise threats – steep cliffs, sharp rocks, poisonous plants. They need the shepherd to be their eyes and ears for them. They need him to use his larger size and his tools of the trade – his rod and staff – to protect them. They need his knowledge to lead them into the best places to eat and sleep.

We like to think that we know what is best for us. We want to do what we want to do and don't like anyone limiting our freedom! And we like to think we can take care of ourselves. But we can only see a few steps in front of ourselves. We don't have God's perspective. Our perceptions are so often shaped by the sinful world around us, and our own sinful tendencies. We need God to show us what is right and true. We need Him to show us the best way to go. And we need His protection from Satan, the enemy of our souls. If we walk closely with God, He will show us the best way to go. He will show us how to live in harmony with the way He has made us. He will surround us with His peace and protection as we walk through the dark times in our lives. We don't need to be afraid. God, my good shepherd, guides and protects me.

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. (v. 5)*

The next section moves away from the shepherd picture. I find it helpful to remember that this was written by David, a king chosen by God, but not always acknowledged as God's king by others. God directed Samuel to anoint David as king so that there was no doubt about his calling. Even when he was surrounded by enemies who were seeking to kill him, God blessed him, figuratively preparing a feast for him, In the midst of the attack of his enemies, God made it clear that He was with David, and no one could touch him.

We are chosen by God to be His sheep, His children, His people. Anointing with oil is a picture of the gift of the Holy Spirit. We'll look at the role of the Holy Spirit more next week, but in this instance the presence of the Holy Spirit is a sign that we are God's children, and nothing can take us away from Him. And when attacked by Satan, we are protected and honoured by God. I can't help but think of the three Israelites, named Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego, who were captives in Babylon. Because they chose to stay true to God, they were thrown into the furnace. The king thought that they would perish, but instead, when he looked into the furnace, he saw, not three, but four men walking around unharmed by the flames. The fourth man was God Himself. When they came out of the furnace, they didn't even smell of smoke! It is almost as if God was mocking the king. God, my good shepherd, chooses me and honours me as His child.

*Surely your goodness and love will follow pursue me all the days of my life,  
and I will take up residence in the house of the LORD forever. (v. 6)*

The Psalm finishes with a wonderful affirmation. Even if we wander away from God, He will pursue us. The NIV's translation, which says "follow", is too tame – God actively goes after us to bless us! His desire is to be with us and surround us with His goodness and love. And when He reaches us, He takes us home to take up residence in His presence. One day we

will know this completely, but even now, we can settle down and relax in His presence. We're not just renting, living under the threat of being kicked out! His home is our home. We can be settled in His presence and know that it will only get better as we get to know Him better.

### **John 10: How does God do it?**

If David's words in his Psalm tells us of what God does as our shepherd, Jesus' words show us how God carries out His work as our shepherd through the work of Jesus.

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.  
(John 10:11)*

Of course, David did not know the extreme lengths to which God would go to be our good shepherd. He experienced God's goodness and care in wonderful measure, but we know that God loved us so much that He gave his only Son to die for us so that He could deal with our sin once and for all. His death and resurrection both paid the penalty for our sin and broke the power of sin in our lives. And with our sin taken care of, we can once again live in His presence. Jesus' disciple, Peter, puts it this way:

*Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God (1 Peter 3:18)*

Christ, our good shepherd, lays down his life for the sheep in order to bring us safely home to take up residence in God's house.

Jesus goes on to say:

*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep ... (John 10:14)*

God's shepherd care is not generic – not 'one-size-fits-all'. Each one of us is unique and has unique needs. God's presence with us means that He knows us intimately and knows exactly what we need. He knows when we are most vulnerable and need his care. Isaiah says:

*He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart;  
he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11)*

God cares for those at the beginning of their lives – lambs and nursing ewes. And God knows the unique needs of those who are at the end of their lives as well. A few chapters later, Isaiah says:

*I have cared for you since you were born. Yes, I carried you before you were born.  
I will be your God throughout your lifetime—until your hair is white with age.  
(Isaiah 46:3,4)*

Whoever you are, and whatever your stage of life, God commits Himself to us. He shepherds us from his intimate knowledge of us each, providing just the right type of care at the right time. He wants us to know Him as "*the God of compassion and mercy*". (Exodus 34:6) Dear friends, do you know this God? Do you trust Him to show His compassion and mercy by caring for you as a shepherd cares for His sheep?