

THE SHEPHERD'S TABLE

A Message About God's Bounty

The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 7)

Over these past weeks we have been journeying with the Good Shepherd described in David's famous 23rd Psalm. We've seen how this Shepherd would lead his sheep out of their familiar folds, across the meadows, and up into the hills. Though the journey would require passing through dark valleys at times, the goal of the Shepherd was to help his flock reach the highest plateaus where, even in the heat of the hottest summer, the rains came and the forage was plentiful. Nothing so filled the Shepherd's heart with joy as to finally see his sheep there on the high tablelands feeding to their heart's content.

God's vision for you and me is like this. He wants us to find the wide open spaces of his peace and rest and feeding. He wants to lead us off the barren ground, and past those dry places, and through those dark valleys, to places of bounty where we grow stronger and healthier in all the best ways. And yet there exists for those of us who go on this journey -- as for those sheep on the tablelands -- FOUR peculiar dangers.

The Dangers of the Tablelands

There are, first of all, some dangerous plants. In his wonderful book, *A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-Third Psalm*, Philip Keller speaks of leading his own flocks to the high mountain pastures where grew the lovely *cammas* plant. The cammas had blue lily-like leaves and succulent green shoots. It was attractive to the eye, fragrant to the nose, and delicious to the taste. The only problem with the cammas, says Keller, was that it was poisonous to sheep. If a younger lamb grazed upon it, the lamb's joints would begin to freeze up, total paralysis would follow, and then came death. But there were other dangers.

The sheep on the tablelands were also subject to the parasites that thrive on plentiful water. There were the *nasal flies* that buzzed about the head of the sheep and laid their eggs in the moist membranes of the sheep's nose. I know this isn't a very pleasant image for a Sunday morning, but when those eggs began to hatch, the larvae would crawl up into the sheep's nasal passages and burrow in. Terrible infections ensued. Sheep were known to even go blind as a result of that infestation. Sheep on the high table lands were also subject to a microscopic parasite called *scab*, which would root into the scalp of the sheep, causing terrible itching and infection. It would pass from sheep to sheep as they rubbed heads against one another. The effect of either of these parasites was so maddening that it prevented the sheep from getting any kind of significant rest. They'd run about stomping their feet, shaking their body, sometimes rolling over and over again, thrashing about, trying to rid themselves of this infestation. Sometimes in their frenzy they'd trample their own young, injure one another or, says Keller, actually kill themselves to escape the torment.

But sometimes, the most extreme danger came not from plants or parasites, as from

the sheep's peers. As the summer wore into autumn, the rutting season began -- that season when the males of the flock sought to establish an order of dominance for mating with the ewes. The tablelands would ring with the crash of clashing ram heads and horns. Rams were injured and sometimes died. While ensuring the survival of the physically fittest, the effect on the flock was to introduce a terrible tension that depressed eating and resting and ruined for a season the quality of life for the sheep.

But there was one more danger. Alongside deadly plants, infesting parasites, and combative peers, there was the illness of *Pneumonia*. Phillip Keller describes it in these words: "Some of the most vivid memories of my sheep ranching days are wrapped around the awful storms my flock and I went through together. I can see the gray-black banks of storm clouds sweeping in... I can see the sleet and hail and snow... across the hills. I can see the sheep racing for shelter in the tall timber and... standing there soaked, chilled, dejected. Especially the young lambs went through appalling misery without the full benefit of a full heavy fleece to protect them. Some would succumb and lie down in distress only to become more cramped and chilled."ⁱ

The Enemies in Our Fields

I suppose it is obvious to most of us that sheep aren't the only creatures that face these kinds of dangers. Most of us have had some experience of the attractive cammas that grow around us -- those appetizing opportunities to take that ethical shortcut in business; to venture in to that relationship that may not be healthy; to distort the truth in just a subtle way to improve our standing; to acquire that possession we don't need or can't really afford. The flowers of temptation are fragrant, but not that filling. They have this tendency to slowly paralyze our conscience and poison our soul.

Many of us have experienced too the withering effect of those parasitical worries, guilts, and fears that burrow into us. We know how they can get passed from the head of one of us to another in the daily friction of life. We see how these things make us or others rush about frantically, thrash about destructively, sometimes hurting members of our own family.

And then we encounter also, even among our peers, those seasons when healthy competition gives way to deadly conflict. You may not hear the sound of skulls crashing together in the hallways today. But the constant vying for position, the exhausting effort to establish ourselves as the Survivor or Top Sheep, has an effect on our health and the life of our society.

And then, as if this was not enough, there's always the risk of the pneumonia that comes as we shiver against the storms of life. Whether the storm is financial or medical; whether it has to do with the icy winds that sweep through our family relationships, or those feelings of vulnerability that come sometimes as we grow older, the truth is that no life escapes the storm. All of us get to a point when we know that whatever wool we've acquired, it's not quite enough to keep out the cold.

Thank Heaven for the Shepherd

These are the sorts of dangers that confront the flock as they journey through life. What great news it is that in the presence of these enemies you and I have a very Good Shepherd. You know, I learned something fascinating in my study of that phrase in the 23rd Psalm that reads **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”** I learned that a very good shepherd would actually prepare the tablelands before leading his sheep there. Leaving his sheep in the care of his hired hands, the chief shepherd would go out in advance of the flock and venture up on to the mountain mesas. He'd identify a route for the sheep that would avoid the worst patches of cammas, and where the plant was unavoidable, the shepherd would pluck it from the ground himself. In fact, Phillip Keller says when he was a shepherd he would spend days weeding the pasture of the poisonous plants, till his hands were bloodied from the effort.

This morning we gather to remember that we have a Shepherd who loves our life and labors for our health to the extent that He too was willing to bloody His hands for our sake. On the cross of Calvary Jesus did what was required to rob sin and death of its ultimate capacity to kill us. You and I will still grow sick at times from the things we insist upon nibbling, despite his good warnings against them. But, the ultimate truth for the Christian is that the Good Shepherd, our Savior, has absorbed the poison into himself that in the end we might live.

The Shepherd knows about parasites too. A good shepherd would prepare a special mixture of olive oil, sulfur and spices. Then he would take this oily substance and smear it on the head of the sheep. He would **“anoint [their] head with oil.”** It served as an organic repellent to insects and other parasites. With frequent applications, the sheep would be relieved of their torment. Our Shepherd has prepared an ointment like this for us too. Are you coming close enough to the shepherd to allow him to make the application frequently? To apply his Word to your mind, to receive through the oil of prayer the help you need?

I'm told that the shepherd would sometimes also apply another kind of oil as well. Shepherds back in David's time would smear cooking grease all over the heads of the most contentious rams, so that when they battered one another for domination, their heads glanced off one another, rather than absorbed the full shock of conflict. Keller says that it was almost amusing to watch how, after slipping past each other a couple of times, the rams would stand there feeling kind of foolish for a moment, then let go of the fight. Could the Shepherd be trying to apply some of the grease of grace to some of our heads today? Do we have to win the family fight we're in right now? Do we really need to be top sheep at school or work? Does our life really need to be filled with so much tension and jousting?

There was one last preparation the Shepherd made that offered help to the sheep, especially as they faced the storms of autumn and early winter. He would fill a container with strong wine mixed with water — some modern-day shepherds use

brandy. He'd then take one of the coldest lambs and allow her or him to drink from this cup. Keller says that he loved watching those little lambs who had been shivering suddenly shaking their tail with delight as this warm mixture "spread through their bodies." Beloved, for reasons only He knows fully, God cannot prevent the storms of life from chilling us. But He has chosen to pour out to us the cup of His grace to sustain us through them.

The great Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once remarked that most of the problems of humanity stem from this fact: We have forgotten with what a great love we have been loved. Would you remember it this morning? Would you remember how much God must value YOU that he would sacrifice so much to prepare for your needs? Come close to your Shepherd today. See those hands bloodied and scarred because He was willing to pluck up the poison of sin and death so that it could no longer destroy you. Let Him apply the oil of His peace and wisdom to your mind. Let Him fill your soul from the cup of His warming grace. Come this day to the Shepherd's Table and receive from His hands all that He has prepared and provided for YOU.

ⁱ Phillip W. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 126.