

June 14/15, 2025

He Settles Me Down
Everything We Need Series
Psalm 23:2a
Pastor Bryan Clark

If sheep in the ancient Near East took on the characteristics of the average person in 21st century American culture, how long do you think they would survive in the wilderness? Answer, “They wouldn’t!” They would survive one or two days with this fierce independence, this isolation, this, “*You do you...make my own reality...travel my own path.*” The belief system that defines our culture would be a death sentence for sheep in the wilderness. A lot of people say sheep are stupid. I don’t know if that’s true or not. I don’t even know how you test that, but here’s what I would say. They have figured out that unless they’re surrendered to the shepherd and trust him, they stand no chance for survival in the wilderness. That’s what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 23.

Last week Mark opened our summer study of the 23rd Psalm and reminded us of the significance of the whole concept of the shepherd in the Bible. It was a significant concept in the ancient Near East, certainly an important concept in the Bible. There were literal shepherds, but it was also an imagery, a metaphor that was applied to rulers and kings and leaders. It’s a major part of the theme through the Old Testament into the New Testament, when Jesus identifies Himself really as the fulfillment of the imagery. He is the Good Shepherd. It’s interesting that throughout about the first three hundred years of the church, it was very difficult to be a Christian. Christians were abused; they were mistreated; they were persecuted. And this image of God as a shepherd was one of the most significant images for them. They clung to this image to survive. But as the Roman Empire changed and Christianity became more acceptable, the imagery of God as a shepherd actually just kind of faded back into the shadows, and I would suggest, for the most part, has remained in the shadows until the present day.

Our hope is that through this summer study, we can revisit some of what it means to experience **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.** It’s easy to interpret that through the lens of a 21st century American. We have such abundance that we get pretty confused about needs and wants. It’s not saying you’re going to get everything you want. He is promising, “*I’ll give you everything you need for today.*” To really understand Psalm 23, you have to understand it’s a *wilderness psalm*. What I mean by that is we know David is the writer of the psalm. We know that David was a shepherd in the area of Bethlehem, and we know that in the area around Bethlehem, it was common during certain seasons of the year, that the sheep would be brought in close to town, put in pens and taken care of there. But there were other seasons of the year where the shepherd took the sheep out into the Judean wilderness, one of the most difficult ecosystems in the world. If you remember when David is having a conversation with King Saul about wanting to kill Goliath, and Saul says, “You really don’t know what you’re doing. You’re just a boy,” what does David say? “When I was a shepherd, I killed a lion and a bear with my hands!” What he was reflecting there was life in the Judean wilderness as a shepherd. When you look at the descriptions, they only make sense when you understand we’re talking about in the wilderness.

So think about that opening statement, **The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.** It's one thing to say that if you got the sheep penned in, in the Walmart parking lot. It's something entirely different from one of the most difficult ecosystems in the world. The shepherd would leave Bethlehem and the safety of the surroundings—no fences, no pens, no leashes—just a flock of sheep, and he or she would walk, and the sheep would follow. The sheep were completely surrendered to the shepherd. They trusted the shepherd. They went wherever the shepherd went, because they knew if they didn't, they stood no chance of survival. The shepherd was concerned for providing what the sheep needed one day at a time, which fits the line we want to unpack more this morning.

The LORD is my shepherd.

I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; (*NASB, Psalm 23:1-2a)

Now I think that line is a little bit misleading, because shepherds will tell you that you can't make the sheep **lie down**. I've had quite a few dogs in my lifetime, and I can make them sit...stay...heel...lie down. I don't know a lot about sheep, but I do have horses, and I've tried it. You just can't make it work. "Sit boy." (*laughter*) They just look at you like, "What are you talking about?" You can't make a horse lie down. You can't make sheep lie down. One Hebrew scholar suggested the translation: *He settles me down in green pastures*. There's debate about whether the theme of that line is provision—so food—or whether it's more rest. The food is a means to an end, so I can settle down, take a deep breath and rest for today.

Several years ago, we had one of our neighbors call and told us, "Hey, just so you know, one of your horses is either really sick or dead." Patty said, "Why do you say that?" "Well, because it's lying down in the pasture. Horses don't lie down in the pasture unless they're really sick or dead." So Patty will say, "Okay, thanks for the call." But that's completely a myth. Horses do lie down as long as certain conditions are met. If they feel safe, they've had enough food, they're free from all kinds of pests that annoy them, they lie down quite a bit. Ours lie down the most in the winter, because all of the pests that annoy them are dead. People will say in the wintertime, "Oh, how are your horses doing?" It's like, "They're great. They're lying down in the pasture because everything that annoys them this time of year is dead." (*laughter*)

It's very similar with sheep. There are certain conditions that have to be met in order for the sheep to lie down. What's interesting about that is there's not one single thing that the sheep can do to create those conditions. It is totally the work of the shepherd. All they can do is surrender and trust.

Shepherds tell us that these are the basic conditions. The first one is **freedom from predators**. The Judean wilderness was full of predators. David talked about a lion and a bear, and there's snakes. There are all kinds of things that can kill you in the wilderness. What's interesting about sheep is they are pretty much helpless. It's not like a sheep is going to roll up its wool and say, "Bring it on." Sheep just don't do that. They're fearful; they're jittery. They're anxious because they have no real defense system other than "panic and run". So, it's up to the shepherd to make sure they feel safe from predators. Shepherds say that once in a while a sheep will panic for no reason and start to run, and pretty soon the entire flock is running in a panic...and none of them have any idea why they're in a panic. They're just running.

It kind of reminds me of the great toilet paper crisis of 2020. *(laughter)* I mean that was the strangest thing. The Coronavirus had nothing to do with anything that involves toilet paper, yet that's all it took. A little bit of panic fed more panic, and pretty soon everything's out of control. I think we learned a lot about ourselves during that season, and much of what we learned isn't real encouraging. That's the way the sheep were. As soon as one of them panics, they all start to panic. So it was the responsibility of the shepherd to communicate to the sheep, "Hey, as long as I'm here, trust me. Everything's going to be okay." And the sheep had to believe that if they were going to experience rest.

That reminds me of our conversation a few weeks ago when we were talking about fear and anxiety and worry, and we looked at the feeding of the 5000. There's no question what Jesus was doing in the feeding of the 5000 was He was trying to teach and train His disciples, "Hey, when I'm here, trust Me; everything is going to be okay," so that when they got out on the Sea of Galilee and the storm began to blow, they wouldn't panic, because as long as Jesus the Good Shepherd was there, the message was, "Everything's going to be okay. Just trust Me." If you were here when we talked about that, the disciples didn't get it. It took them quite a while to figure out that as long as the Good Shepherd is here, I can trust Him.

Predators for us come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. It could be a person, could be a disease, could be a long list of things. But the reality is we probably can't change that. We can't fix it; we can't control it. The option we have is to surrender to the Shepherd and to trust that He's got it. "It's going to be okay today."

The second condition was **freedom from friction**. It's what the shepherds call it. So, as is true with most herd animals, there is a chain of command. With chickens, we refer to it as a pecking order. With sheep, it's referred to as a butting order, because that's how they fight it out. They butt each other and knock each other over to figure out who's at the top of the heap and then all the way down. The problem in terms of rest—lying down—is no sheep is going to lie down as long as the bullies are loose in the pasture, because they're going to get whacked. So, there was always this tension. It's just not safe. You never knew when it was coming.

Think of a classroom where there's a couple of bullies in the classroom and there's no teacher. You have this feeling that this doesn't feel safe. You never quite know what's going to happen, but that changes dramatically when a strong teacher walks into the classroom and establishes control. "I'm the top sheep here, and we're not going to have any more butting in the classroom," and students feel a sense of safety as long as the teacher is there. "It's going to be okay now." That's the idea. When a strong shepherd was among the sheep, the message was, "I'm the boss; (I'm the top sheep), and we're not going to do that anymore," and the sheep felt safe that that was going to stop. It created conditions that would allow them to settle down and rest.

I think that one is very interesting in light of the culture in which we live. We live in such an angry, out-of-control, Crazyville culture. It's like, "This is out of control!" Anger has become a way of life for people. For some people, I think it's become their identity. It's who they are. They're always angry; they're always offended; they're always the victim; they're always upset; they're always fighting. I think a lot of these people, if you stop them and ask them, don't even know what

they're angry at. It's become a way of life; it's an identity; it's how they live. But it's become Nuttyville.

You see it on social media, where you have all these people unleashing their venom on social media. People sit in their basement and they send out these zingers full of sarcasm or full of anger, and they think of themselves as social justice warriors changing the world. The reality is, nobody's reading it and nobody cares. You're just mad. Anger has become a way of life. You see it on these weird reality TV shows. I used to refer to them as *unreality*. I think now they *are* reality. By the way, just a bit of a disclaimer. I see it on the commercials, but I don't understand what's going on. They're all mad at each other. They're all yelling at each other. They're all full of conflict. We even have it on the cooking channels. (*laughter*) Everybody's yelling at each other. And I think, "What in the world is going on?" The first question is, "Who makes these ridiculous shows?" and maybe the better question is, "Who watches these shows?" Like, what's going on? Why are we doing that? This is just crazy.

You see it now in the news stations. It used to be news stations were there to inform you. Now they're not there to inform you. Now they're there to agitate you; they're there to stir the pot. They're there to make you mad. They have to get you agitated and angry, to keep you tuning in, because they have to fill a 24-hour news cycle. So, they just continually stir the pot and agitate people.

You see it in how people drive. We've reached a point where you can't even drive from point A to point B without watching angry drivers out of control. They're zipping in and out of traffic; they're honking; they're impatient. They come right up behind your bumper. It's like, "There's ten cars ahead of me. What do you think I'm going to do?" Like, "Why are you so angry?" This is Nuttyville.

When I see that, I think to myself, "What is going on in your life that makes you act like that? It's just a life full of anger." But here's the deal. I can't fix that. I can't change that. I can't make it all go away. I can't change those conditions. What I can do is choose to live differently. I don't have to live that way. I don't have to be angry all the time; I don't have to be offended all the time; I don't have to be a victim all the time; I don't have to act like that. I can choose to be happy; I can choose to be joyful; I can choose to find joy in my life; I can choose to treat people with kindness and love and respect. I don't have to act like that. But...for that to be true, I have to be willing to surrender to the Shepherd and trust Him. He's got it. I'll trust Him. I choose not to act that way. But here's the deal. You cannot say in good conscience, "The LORD is my shepherd," and act that way...you can't...you can't have it both ways. If you're going to act that way, then you really don't have the LORD as your Shepherd. That's why you're acting that way. Freedom from friction, how I choose to live my life, is a really good indicator of whether or not I am actually surrendered to and trust the Shepherd.

The third one is **freedom from pests**. That may not seem like that big of a deal to us, but in the wilderness, the flies, the bugs, the insects, would drive these sheep to crazy behavior...some of them would go all but insane. Shepherds tell us that some of these sheep would bang their head on a rock until it killed them because they were so annoyed by the insects that were up their noses

and bothering them in so many ways. So unless there was some sort of freedom from the pests, there just was no way they were going to settle down.

So, I have a couple of horses, and my older horse has a thing with fly spray. I don't know what it is. I think it has something to do with his childhood. (*laughter*) I don't know if it's the squeaky sound the bottle makes when you spray it. I don't know, but when I try to help him, he goes goofy. Yet it's the same horse who, out in the pasture, seems so incredibly annoyed by all the bugs and the flies. So I look at him and I think, "I can help you with that. It doesn't have to be that way if you just surrender to me. Trust me, I can help you." That was the job of the shepherd. He had medicines; he had ointments. He had ways to help the sheep with the pests and the insects and the annoyances of the wilderness.

I think we would all agree there's no shortage of pests and insects and the things in our culture to annoy us. The list is endless. These are things we can't change. These are things we can't control. All we can do is be willing to surrender to the Shepherd. Trust Him. He'll handle the pests so we can rest.

The fourth thing, and the most obvious in the text this morning is, **He makes me lie down in green pastures**. They had to have food to eat. So what do you think of when you hear that phrase, *He makes me lie down in green pastures*? I've seen a lot of pictures over the years to illustrate the 23rd Psalm, and the pastures look like beautiful, lush, green pastures that you would find in Nebraska. But that's not what they were. What the psalmist is referring to, is in the Judean wilderness, there were tufts of grass that would grow up between the rocks, and the shepherd would lead them to a spot where there were enough of those tufts of grass to eat for today. That's all there was. As long as the sheep had enough to eat today and these other conditions were met, they would settle down. They would lie down and rest. The shepherds tell us that was the best, most efficient way to digest that food. You say, "Well, what about tomorrow?" Sheep didn't worry about that. They trusted the shepherd. Tomorrow they'll move; they moved every day. Tomorrow they'll have to go over the next hill, round the next mountain, through the next valley, because the shepherd knows the next place to go, and there will be enough grass there for one day, and then they'll move again.

This is a very consistent biblical concept. God doesn't promise an abundance. I think it's hard for us as Americans to process this, because we have so much. Our cupboards are full; our refrigerators are full; our freezers are full. The grocery store is full. The bank account is full. There's nothing wrong with that, by the way, but what happens is we drift into a self-sufficiency lifestyle. "Got it; everything's full," until something happens you can't control, and then you realize, "I'm not so self-sufficient," and like the sheep, we panic. "Now what are we supposed to do?" These sheep had no choice: one day at a time.

We saw this when we were going through the book of Exodus with the children of Israel. As a matter of fact, this was a major point of emphasis in the book of Exodus. I'll read it to you in Exodus 16. I just want to mostly summarize it. But here's what the congregation said.

“Would that we had died by the LORD’S hand in the land of Egypt when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger!” (*Exodus 16:3)

So, this is less than thirty days since God parted the sea. They’re hungry, and their immediate reaction is, “We’re all going to die here. We wish we were back in Egypt, because, man, it was great back there.” It’s kind of like the good old days. I think we all would say we’re very selective about what we remember about the good old days. They’re like, “Man, when we were in slavery in Egypt, it was great. We had all the bread we could eat. We had all the meat we could eat. We wish we’d have just stayed there till we died, because it was great.” It’s like, Huh? That’s not how we remember it from Exodus, chapter two. What I remember, what I read, is they were miserable, and they cried out to God, “Why don’t You do something? Why don’t You care about us? Why don’t You deliver us from these horrible conditions in Egypt?”

So God sends a deliverer; He sends Moses. They go through this series of plagues. They knew that. How could you miss the hand of God in that to deliver them? It brings the Pharaoh to his knees. As they left Egypt, God demonstrated His presence. He pictured His presence with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. There was no way you could miss that. Of course God is with us. When they got to the Red Sea, God miraculously parts it. They go through on dry land, brings it back down on the Egyptian army that was seeking to kill them, and God miraculously delivers them. Three days later, they don’t have water. They’re all going to die, and God miraculously provides water. Now we’re not even thirty days down the path, and they’re hungry and, “We’re all going to die. We wish we were in Egypt again.” So God said, “I’ll tell you what. Here’s what we’re going to do. I need to teach you something, and I need to test you with this. I promise every morning I’m going to miraculously provide all the bread you can eat, and every evening, I’m going to provide meat—quail—all you can eat. You can eat till you’re full every single day. But here’s the deal: no stockpiling. You’re going to have to trust Me...one day at a time.” But some of the people wouldn’t listen, so they gathered extra to stockpile it, just in case God doesn’t show up the next day...just in case God oversleeps...or for some reason isn’t the good shepherd tomorrow. We better stockpile, just in case. But God wouldn’t let them, and overnight, it all rotted. It was eaten by worms; it was inedible. And God said to them, “I told you; you failed the test. We’re going to try it again. I’ll give you what you need every single day, but no stockpiling. You’re just going to have to learn to trust Me one day at a time.” Mark read the quote last week from Deuteronomy chapter two, where, after 40 years in the wilderness of God keeping His promise every single day to these grumbly, rebellious people, to where God says to them, “In 40 years, you have not lacked anything,” in one of the most difficult ecosystems in the world.

Last week Mark read from the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus is talking about anxiety and worry and fear. And Jesus said, “Hey, you can trust Me. Check out the birds; I take care of them. Check out the flowers; I take care of them. Check out the sheep; I take really good care of them.” But at the end of that conversation, Jesus said, “...but we’re going to take this one day at a time. You don’t need to worry about tomorrow. It’s not tomorrow yet. Let’s just focus on today. I’ll give you what you need today.”

So what do we do with this part of the psalm? I think if we were to be completely honest, some of us would have to say, “We show up once or twice a month. We visit Jesus at church, and then we

go on with our lives. We don't really listen to the Shepherd. We don't really follow the Shepherd. We kind of show up and visit Him once in a while. But otherwise, we're going to do our own thing, run our own show. We'll figure out how to survive in the wilderness all by ourselves." And then we wonder why there's so much anxiety and so much fear and so much worry and so much chaos and so much unrest in our souls.

Mark said it last week. "We say, "The LORD is my shepherd," but we don't really believe that. I completely agree with that. If we did, our lives would look very different. So what would it look like to surrender to the Shepherd and trust Him? You have to get to know Him. You might have to make some fairly significant changes in your lifestyle in order to say with integrity, "Yeah, the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want."

To start, let's just think about today. Let's just take this one day at a time. I mentioned a couple weeks ago research shows 91% of the things we worry about never come to pass. It's just wasted energy. So, let's not worry about that. Let's start with today.

I know some of you are going through some very difficult stuff. So what would it look like to trust God with that today? Let's not concern ourselves with tomorrow. It's not tomorrow yet, just today. Can we trust Him to take care of us today, to meet the conditions necessary to find rest for our tired, weary souls? **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down** (He settles me down) **in green pastures.** I pray that's true for you.

Our Father, we're thankful this morning, You are the Great Shepherd. Lord, may we surrender to You. may we trust You to find rest for our weary souls today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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