

June 28/29, 2025

He Brings Me Back
Everything We Need Series
Psalm 23:3 and Luke 15:1-7
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Years ago, one of my professors in graduate school told a story that I've never forgotten. The reason it's been so stuck in my mind is that I think it so accurately captures the way we think about God and responding to Him. My professor, Jerry, talked about how he was getting to know a man whose life, in time, began to unravel. And in a moment of compassion but also with courage and directness, Jerry said to this man, "You need Jesus." I'll never forget how Jerry described this man's response. The man didn't push back at all. He acknowledged that was true, but then he said something like this, "I know I need Jesus, but I want to get my life in order before I bring it to Him."

I think that's a very human response, and underneath that response, behind that response, lies a fear of rejection. There's a fear that if we come to God and He sees us for exactly who we are, and we bring the mess that we find ourselves in, maybe He'll refuse us. Maybe He'll look and He'll see the entirety of the mess and He'll say, "Why don't you clean that up and come back a little bit later."

So, because of that, because of that fear of rejection, it seems that we are prone to think about God the way we think about a dinner party at our house. We can't have people over till everything looks just right. We fear that God will reject us, and if God were like our world, that would be a very legitimate fear. But, fortunately for each one of us, God is not like that; He's not like that at all. In fact, here is what He's like. He is the God about whom we can say:

He restores my soul; (*NASB, Psalm 23:3a)

That's the phrase we want to consider together this morning as we continue our look at Psalm 23. So, I'd invite you to turn with me in your Bible to Psalm 23. I also encourage you to keep your finger in Luke 15 as I'd like to turn there in a bit as well.

**The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.**

(It's a phrase that we can only say if we have everything we need,
if we are adequately led by someone up to the task.)

**He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul;**

It's been necessary here for these few weeks we've been in this psalm, to spend some time talking about sheep. What are sheep like? You might know more about sheep today than you did three weeks ago. I certainly do. We've learned a few things about sheep. They are curious creatures.

They're very dependent creatures. They're helpless creatures. Sheep are the predator of no one, of no other animal. You don't need to be afraid if sheep are approaching, unless you are grass or weeds. Then you might be concerned. Sheep are prey, very needy.

There's one modern day rancher who repeated this phrase I was reading this week. He said, "It seems as though sheep are born looking for ways to die, curious to get themselves into trouble." This rancher in Montana went on to say that sheep have no conception of consequences, and so they do things that ultimately are going to be life threatening to them. He said that he's seen a sheep eat at a bale of hay to such an extent that the bale toppled over on top of the sheep and ultimately threatened to suffocate it. It had no concept of consequences, doing things that could be life threatening all the time. That's why it's so critical that sheep have a shepherd. That's true in general, and that is particularly true when we think about sheep in the Middle East—sheep in this vast Judean wilderness—because sheep are by nature curious and stubborn, and they are prone to wander. That's why it is so critical that they have a shepherd, and why it's so meaningful and so important for us to consider what it means that the LORD is a shepherd who **restores our soul**.

I need to talk about that phrase, and I want to start by just talking about that last word **soul**. Soul is a word you'll find all over your Bibles, and it really is referring to this deep reality of who we are, a spiritual reality we have, and we are, in many ways, souls. It's the deepest part of us. In so many ways it's so deep and it's so intricately linked to who we are, that it's possible, actually, to replace that word **soul** with just the simple word: *me*. I, in many ways, am my soul. That's who I am. That means it's appropriate when we read Psalm 23, verse 3, to say, **He restores my soul**, and to switch out that word **soul** and simply say, He restores *me*...He restores *me*! It's a perfectly appropriate translation or understanding of that phrase, but it still doesn't tell us exactly what it means. What does it mean to say that the LORD restores me?

We've been talking for a number of weeks now about this concept of rest, that the LORD is our shepherd, and that means we have everything we need. And one of the ways that we see that is that He brings us into the place that provides exactly what we need. The green pasture, the quiet waters...He allows us to rest, to come to that place, that sense of wellbeing. It's that deep sigh of relief within us that acknowledges it's going to be okay. Not because everything externally is okay, but because we're being led. Someone is in charge of our life who is sufficient to the task, so we're allowed to rest.

Now with that context in mind, I think it's very natural for us then to read, **He restores my soul**, and to think of it in the context of rest, and to read that phrase a little bit like this: to think of it as the LORD rejuvenates me; He refreshes me. In fact, if you are looking at the NIV translation, which is a great translation, that's precisely how they translate this phrase. It says, "He refreshes my soul." Now it is 100% true that the LORD is our refresher, that He is our rejuvenator. All of that is true. But I want to suggest to you this morning that I don't believe refreshment is what is being talked about here. I think what the psalm is referring to isn't refreshment, but *rescue*.

Psalm 23 here has in view the life of a sheep, prone to wander. And when sheep wander in the vast wilderness, they get lost. And to say, **The LORD is my shepherd, He restores my soul**, is to say He's the One that finds me when I'm lost.

One commentator said a great translation—a very literal translation of this phrase—could be this. “He brings me back. I was lost; He restored me. He found me; He brought me back. He saved me from the danger I was in, in the midst of this vast wilderness.” We’ve talked about this wilderness quite a bit, how it’s a dangerous place for anyone, but it’s particularly dangerous for sheep. Sheep are helpless and the wilderness is full of bandits, people that would like to steal sheep and sell them for profit. The wilderness is also full of predators, of wolves especially, that would love to come in and devour a sheep.

The other thing that’s true about these wilderness areas in Israel, though, is that they are scattered, just covered with different small little, almost hard to discern, sheep trails, forged over time by thousands and thousands of shepherds bringing their sheep and their flocks through that wilderness. If there was just one large road through the wilderness that was very wide, very broad and very easy to follow, you could start to say, “How do these sheep get lost?” But we need to understand that in this wilderness, it is quite easy to get lost. It’s quite easy to think you’re on the right path. But, before long, you have wandered into an area and you do not know where you are.

So, it’s very easy to imagine a sheep perhaps being distracted by a little tuft of weeds or grass and eating for a moment and then looking up and realizing the flock and the shepherd are gone. And there are a lot of choices, a lot of paths that could be walked on. That’s why it’s so critical that a sheep be led by a shepherd because the wilderness is a place where you can get lost very quickly. And to get lost, if you are a sheep, is essentially to know that you are going to die very soon. It’s a dangerous place; it’s a desperate place to be.

We think about what it means to be lost. To be lost just means you’re out of place and you are incapable of finding your way out. It’s a helpless place to be, a desperate place to be. You just don’t know what to do. You don’t know what direction to turn to. You aren’t sure exactly whether the way that you’re walking is the way that’s going to bring you further into the wilderness or it’s going to bring you into a safe place. To be lost is hopeless. If all of us were lost in the woods and someone provided us with a map, it would be useless to us because we couldn’t even find ourselves on the map. We have to have someone from the outside come in and help us understand, “Here’s where you are; here’s where you need to go.” To be lost means you need help. You are in a bad place. You are in danger.

As I was thinking about this, my mind went back again to Madrid. It seems like my mind goes there often. We talked about that last week, but there was one moment with my son that was this moment where I was struck with the fear of being lost. There was a coffee shop I used to love going to in the middle of this plaza in Madrid, and so one day, when Sam was about two years old, we made our way to that coffee shop. I usually ensured that no matter where I was going, the path would include walking by this coffee shop. I had to stop there first. It was on a walking street where tens of thousands of people would walk by every day. And as I ordered my coffee and got ready to explore the city a little bit with Sam, I looked down and suddenly realized that Sam was gone. He was nowhere to be found, and I panicked. Desperate, I began to think about what it means for Sam to be lost in that city. It meant he’s in a city of six to eight million people. He’s two years old. He can’t speak Spanish; he only speaks Sam, (*laughter*) and only Janae and I understood Sam. He doesn’t know how to find our house; it’s an urban jungle with loads of winding streets. Even if someone helpful would come and try to help him, he would be very incapable of even describing

anything in a way that was understandable to them. He was utterly lost. It's terrifying; it's dangerous. Now, the good news is he actually wasn't lost. He was under a table watching me run around and laughing the entire time, thankfully. But if he was truly lost, he would have been just like a sheep in the middle of that vast Judean wilderness, absolutely helpless and in danger. Sam would not have been able to figure out how to get found. He would have had to have had help from the outside.

In Psalm 23, David is reflecting the reality that each one of us has to face. We are prone to wander and we as human beings, we can get lost and lost is a dangerous place to be. And as lost people, as people who wander from the right path, we are incapable of getting ourselves back to where we should be. But thankfully, fortunately, we don't have to because we have a God who is our shepherd, and He brings us back. He restores us, and praise God that He does because if He didn't, we would be lost forever. That's who He is; He brings us back. **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.** I have everything I need. He's the One who brings me back.

So we ask, "What is God like?" This is what He's like. See, we are apt to think of Him as judgmental, severe. Perhaps He's the kind of God that once He finds us, He's going to really let us have it, to let us know how disappointed He is. But that is not who He is at all. He's a God who longs to bring us back. Where do we see this in Scripture? The simple answer is, "Almost everywhere." God's heart for the lost, His heart to bring back the lost, is constantly on display on the pages of Scripture. But I find its pinnacle, its focused heart is in the life of Jesus. We talked last week about Jesus, about how He is and was and still remains the Good Shepherd. I suggest to you that a great context to read Jesus' life is to keep in mind Psalm 23, that as Jesus was making His way through the world. I believe He was living in the absolute fullness of the assurance of all the realities of Psalm 23, and that allowed Him to endure incredibly difficult things with joy and confidence and with peace and with great assurance that everything was going to be okay. He lived and breathed the reality of a God that was intimately involved in His life, connected to the Father constantly. That's absolutely true about Jesus, but it's also true that He perfectly illustrates precisely what God is like. He lives out and demonstrates Psalm 23 in the way that He operates in the world and the way that He leads others in the way that He cares about others.

Turn with me to Luke, Chapter 15. I want you to consider Jesus' heart for the lost. Now the context here is that Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. We'll see that in just a moment. But I think as we read this passage in Luke 15, verses 1 to 7, I think it's very, very likely that Psalm 23, and particularly Psalm 23 verse 3, sits in the background of what Jesus is doing here with these Pharisees as He interacts with them. Jesus is the One who demonstrates precisely what God is like, that He is the One who restores our soul, that He is the One who brings us back when we are lost.

So, with that in mind, let's listen to the story of Jesus. It begins in verse 1. Luke sets the context for us. He says:

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (*NASB, Luke 15:1-2)

So here's the setting. Jesus was hanging out with people, and it seems that throughout His life He loved to hang out with people. In fact, some commentators believe that He was actually hosting a dinner party in this setting at His house in Capernaum, and people were coming over. Can you just imagine a dinner party with Jesus at Jesus' house, sitting at His table? Jesus did that frequently. But here's the problem that He ran into often. See, it seems that the religious leaders of the day were convinced that Jesus was very willing to have dinner parties and hang out with the wrong people. Luke tells us **the tax collectors and the sinners**, and that's shorthand for the people that the religious elite, the people that the religious leaders deemed were not worthy of being hung out with. In fact, any self-respecting, God-fearing, religious person, at least in the mind of the Pharisees and the scribes—anyone that's self-respecting and really knows God would never hang out with—people like that. Tax collectors were, of course, people who were understood to be in cooperation with Rome and the Roman Empire and all the evils that were done at the hands of Rome. And Rome was the occupying force and ultimately no-good God-fearing person could possibly work with them. And so, **tax collectors** were a horrible bunch of people, at least in the mind of the Jewish elite. **Sinners** is kind of a catch-all term, and it just involves everyone that the religious elite deemed unworthy. They weren't doing the right things. They weren't keeping the Law the way they were supposed to. They weren't praying the way they were supposed to. These are the wrong people, and Jesus was constantly causing friction because He seemed to be very willing to hang out with the wrong people.

The Pharisees and the scribes believed that when the wrong people approach, what you do is you stop them; you turn them around and you have them march the other way. You certainly don't have them come sit at your table. So the Pharisees and the scribes—people who were passionate about doing everything religious just right—they were not compelled or entertained by Jesus' actions here. And so, in response, Jesus turns and He tells them a story. We've already read in Psalm 23 about how the LORD is the One who restores our soul. He brings us back. So now, with that in mind, let's hear these words of Jesus in verse 3:

So he told them this parable, saying, “What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?” (Vs. 3-4)

So here's the context of this shepherd story. The shepherd is bringing his flock, a flock of a hundred into a place where they could be safe, into open pasture, and as the shepherd is counting: 96, 97 98, 99 uh...oh, missing number 100. And in that moment, the question then becomes, “What does a good shepherd do?” And the answer is clear from Jesus' story. A good shepherd leaves the 99 but certainly leaves them in a place where they are safe, either with someone else or in a safe spot. But he leaves the 99 and he ventures back out into the dangerous wilderness in order to find the singular lost sheep. He retraces his steps, sings his song. We're told that if sheep are lost in the wilderness in that part of the world, what they would often do is they would go hide under a bush, and they would start to wail, just waiting to die. The shepherd knew just that, so a good shepherd leaves the 99 to go find the 1. Now what's interesting is that as Jesus tells the story, He doesn't just make a statement. He asks the questions. He said, “*What man among you wouldn't do this?*”

The question is really meant to expose that the Pharisees and the scribes are the type of leaders that would not do that. It's precisely what they had been demonstrating. See the Pharisees and the

scribes, the leaders of Israel, they were called by God to act as shepherds, to shepherd the people, to help them understand the heart of God and the ways of God. And they were supposed to have a heart like God's heart as they shepherded His people, Israel. But what has become very apparent, and Jesus makes very clear, is that the Pharisees and the scribes—the leaders who were supposed to be good shepherds—they had determined there were some people that were expendable. There were some people who were lost, and they don't need to be found. Jesus' question exposes the way they had been leading. These are bad leaders...bad shepherds...because God's heart is for the lost. Jesus came into the world to show us precisely what God's heart is like, and to lead as God was and God does through His Son, to lead as the Good Shepherd. So here is how a good shepherd responds after making his way out into the wilderness and finding that one lost sheep. Verse 5:

“When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’” (Vs. 5-6)

The shepherd, at great personal cost, understands it was a dangerous thing for a shepherd to venture out alone. The shepherd would possibly face bandits, possibly face the wolves that would want to come and attack. This was a costly thing the shepherd did, to make his way out and to find the sheep. And then once he found him, he put the sheep on his shoulders tenderly and began to make his way back to the safe place. And all the while, as he walked, he rejoiced. Joy filled his heart. The lost sheep, incredibly valuable to him, was found.

Suppose a question could be, “Is one sheep that valuable?” And the clear answer from the story is, “Absolutely!” “Is one person that valuable?” “Absolutely!” In fact, in the story it's clear it's not appropriate only for the shepherd to rejoice. The shepherd says this needs to be a communal party. So, he gets back to the safe place and says to his friends and his neighbors, “Join in the party with me. Let's celebrate. Rejoice with me, because a lost one was found!” That's how the leaders of Israel were supposed to lead. That's how Jesus does lead. He shows us exactly what God is like. **The LORD is my shepherd, He restores my soul.** He brings me back. When I was lost, when I was helpless, He found me and brought me back.

As we finish this part of Luke 15, Jesus gives us an insight here that is really remarkable and so let's read verse 7 together. He says:

“I tell you in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Nearly every commentator agrees that this is most likely Luke being very reverent towards God. And what I mean by that is that sometimes writers would not say God's name, but instead they'd say something like *in heaven*, rather than *in God* or *for God*, it seems that Luke is doing just that here, which would mean that it's appropriate to read this verse this way. ***There will be more joy for God; there will be more joy with God. God's heart will rejoice over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.***

Now if that reading is accurate, if that's what Luke is doing, that makes this the only place in the New Testament that we are told clearly, “God rejoices; He is full of joy.” And what makes Him

full of joy? Someone who was lost has been found! This is His very heart. This is who He is. This is what He loves to do. What God loves to do is seek after those who are lost, and He loves to find them. And when He finds them, He doesn't berate them; He rejoices. His heart explodes with joy. That's who God is.

The question for us is, "Do we think of Him that way?" And if that is who He is, if that is true, the question for us this morning is, "How should we respond to that very truth of who he is? If we are accurately seeing His heart, a heart that brings us back, that rejoices in a lost one being found, then how should we respond? I'd suggest that all depends on where we sit this morning. I think that all of us in this room, we all fall into what I would call one of three categories.

The first category is this. I think it's very possible that there are people in this room joining us this morning who still sit in that place of being lost...being lost and trying to get un-lost all by yourself. It's important we remember, if that is you, to be lost is to be of incredible value, but it is to be lost. And to be lost is to be helpless, a dangerous place to be. And if that is you this morning, let me make this message very clear. It brings God absolute joy to do the work of seeking you and finding you. And when He finds you and He brings you back, He rejoices.

Repentance is essentially a surrender to His finding us, to willingness say, "I can't get myself un-lost. I'm going to quit trying. Someone has to find me." It's a surrender to the leadership of another, the Other who comes in from the outside and rescues us from our helpless estate to repentance. To look at Jesus and see the One who traversed the wilderness, went through sin and death and the cross, to seek and to find you, and to seek and find me...to receive that and to say, "Thank you," and to trust in Him. Maybe that's where you find yourself this morning. And to be found is as simple as placing your trust, your faith in Him. He's the one who finds.

Others of us this morning, I think have been lost. We've been found, but we are still prone to wander off. Probably all are familiar with that old hymn, "*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it*". That's us. We get distracted. We start to fall into a routine, perhaps with God. We start to take His saving of us for granted. And if that's you this morning, maybe given over to temptation, maybe you have wandered off beat a bit. Maybe if that's you, I want to say this to you very clearly. "He longs to bring you back." And maybe one way He'd want to do that, would be to have you spend a little bit of time just reflecting on what it means to be lost, on the absolute helplessness of lostness. Remember the helpless estate that He has saved you from as He brings you back. Know that He longs to bring you back into the safe place again, to reflect as well on the goodness of following a shepherd that's adequate, who can lead us into the places of rest, to come back to the place where we say, "I'm no longer going to think that I can find my way alone. I'm going to surrender to the Good Shepherd. I'm going to take up the joy that that involves, following after the One who is the Good Shepherd, who restores my soul, who always rejoices to bring me back."

The final category is one that I think many of us fall into. We've been lost; we've been found, and we are following after the shepherd with joy, and that's great! And if that's you, I just want to ask a question. "Do you know, do you remember that what the Lord loves to do is find lost people?" He loves to bring them back. And do you know, as well, that He wants to use you as part of His search and rescue operation? See, God's strategy is to use His people to share His very heart with the world. All of us walk through a world and live in places where we are surrounded by lost

people who are incredibly valuable to God but trying to do it on their own. And I think it's very possible, very easy for us, over time, to start to maybe move from having a load of passion for our neighbors and our coworkers and our family members and start to get into a place where we just start to find that lost people are just part of life. We lose some of the passion for the lost that our God has. So, I want to ask again, “Could it be that God wants to use you right where you are as part of His search and rescue operation, to find those who are lost so that He might put them on His shoulders and bring them back, rejoicing?” Now I'll be honest as I ask that question. I ask it with a little bit of what I might call maybe “holy envy”, “holy hunger”. And here's what I mean by that. I want to join in that celebration. Jesus says that the man who brings that sheep back and calls together his family and his friends—the whole town—and says, “Now join in my joy. Let's rejoice together. A lost one has been found.” And I will be honest with you. I want to celebrate that more often. I want to participate in that joy. I want to rejoice together with all of you and with all of heaven, as another lost one is found. I'm hungry for that. I long for us to be a church that's constantly overcome with waves of joy because we are joining in the celebration of heaven, because God is saving lost person after lost person after lost person. What a joy that would be!

God brings us back. That's who He is. **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He restores my soul.** He brings me back, and as He brings me back, He rejoices!

Our Father, we do turn to You, acknowledging You are our Good Shepherd. Jesus, You ultimately fulfilled that You are the Good Shepherd for us. But we confess to You that so often we do wander. We follow our own devices, the devices of our own heart, and we wander from You, just like sheep. And we thank You that You are gracious and that You bring us back. You restore us to Yourself. You restore our soul. That's an act, surely and only of Your grace. And so we thank You for doing for us that which we can't do for ourselves. And we ask, Lord, we ask that You would stir up within our hearts the same passion for the lost that You possess, that we might join in the celebration of heaven with greater and greater frequency as more and more of Your lost ones come back to You. Lord, we ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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