

## **Our Good Shepherd Feeds His Sheep**

Psalm 23, Part 2 of 3

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

### **A Psalm of David.**

<sup>1</sup> *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters.*

<sup>3</sup> *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness*

*for his name's sake.*

<sup>4</sup> *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil,*

*for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff,*

*they comfort me.*

<sup>5</sup> *You prepare a table before me*

*in the presence of my enemies;*

*you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.*

<sup>6</sup> *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*

*all the days of my life,*

*and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord*

*forever.*

### **Are you hungry? What are you feeding your soul?**

Who's hungry right now? That's probably a really foolish question to ask right at the beginning of a sermon.

Do you know that your soul gets hungry just like your body? We recognize when our bodies are hungry and we start thinking about food and how we might best satisfy that hunger. But we often don't realize that our souls are hungry, and we most often don't know what best satisfies a hungry soul.

Sometimes we might think our soul-hunger is sadness or loneliness or nostalgia – a longing for laughter, for relationships, or for the past – not the past as it was but as we have mis-remembered it in our nostalgic memories.

Have you ever made the mistake of reaching for a bag of chips when you're really hungry? Or maybe for some cookies? How does that make you feel after you've eaten? Satisfied, or kind of sick to your stomach?

When our souls are hungry, sometimes we quiet the grumbling by binge-watching YouTube Shorts or semi-mindlessly scrolling social media or streaming a whole season of a TV series in one weekend. How does your soul feel after that?

## **I. The Nature of our Hunger – Separation from God**

The hunger of our bodies comes from a lack of nutritional food, and so we realize that we need more than empty calories to satisfy it. We need protein and solid nutrition to satisfy and strengthen our bodies. Our souls' deep hunger comes from alienation, from separation from God and His good gifts.

If we misunderstand the root cause of our soul hunger – if we misdiagnose the case of our soul sickness – we will busy ourselves chasing things that are not cures, feeding our souls with what cannot satisfy. Jesus said, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?”

Some people chase exciting experiences, because you can get some fleeting joy from a rock concert or a hike to a stunning overlook or a cruise or even from the thrills of skydiving or bungee-jumping. Some people take darker paths chasing that feeling, getting into drugs or getting addicted to gambling or engaging in very high-risk behavior. But there's always a let-down after these experiences, an adrenaline high followed by a serious crash.

When I was younger, I chased after the Christian equivalent of these adrenaline experiences – summer camp, Christian concerts, youth conferences, retreats and other emotional-spiritual highs. And I almost always came crashing down afterwards. Was I seeking Jesus? Yes, but I was also seeking a powerful emotional experience, a Jesus-adrenaline high.

What our souls need most deeply is not an emotional experience or a rush of adrenaline but communion with God. The root of our problem is not boredom or restlessness, but it is sin and the nasty consequences sin and the fall bring into our lives and the whole world God created.

In the beginning, Adam and Even enjoyed fellowship with God in the Garden of Eden. They would walk with Him in the cool of the day, and He would speak with

them and teach them. But when they rebelled, this all changed. They hid from God in shame and were expelled from the Garden in judgment. They died spiritually, and this was seen in their shame, their hiding, and their blaming of one another.

Sin is toxic to our souls and relationships. Our sin separates us from God and alienates us from Him, from one another, from His creation, and even from ourselves. We need reconciliation to God, to one another, to creation, and to ourselves, and we need fellowship – communion – with God and with one another in the body of Christ.

The reality is that, to get this feeding for our souls, we need to slow down, take time, and go to God. Psalm 23 has two references to the Good Shepherd feeding His sheep, and they both involve stopping and laying down to rest and eat. No spiritual drive-thru, grab-and-go fast food here:

*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters.*

*He restores my soul.*

*You prepare a table before me*

*in the presence of my enemies;*

*you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.*

## **II. The Green Pastures and Still Waters**

The Good Shepherd makes His sheep lie down in green pastures because He knows what we need. The green pastures are the spiritual food found in His Word.

On Wednesday, at the men's Bible study at Larry's house, we were reading about the Word of God in *Deeper* by Dane Ortland. In his book, he quotes what the Gideons print in the introduction to the Bibles they publish and distribute:

Here's the introduction to the Bibles published by the Gideons:

*The Bible contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable.*

*Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you.*

*It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here Paradise is restored, Heaven opened and the gates of Hell disclosed.*

*Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened at the judgment, and be remembered forever.*

*It involves the highest responsibility, rewards the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.*

Ortlund, Dane. *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners* (Union) (p. 144).

That's very well said and true. Yet many, if not most, Christians struggle to read their Bibles consistently and profitably. I would propose that's because of two basic realities: The devil keeps us harried and distracted and we don't make daily Bible reading and regular Bible study high enough priorities in our lives, and when we do read the Bible, two things are often missing – the still waters and the other sheep.

Lying down in green pastures and sitting down at the prepared table are necessary, not optional.

The green pastures are beside still waters because we need the Holy Spirit – the living water, the refreshing and renewing work of the Spirit. The Bible is spiritual food and the Spirit is water to refresh our souls. We need the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds to understand and prepare our hearts to receive the Word of God. Practically speaking, this means we need to pray earnestly for God to speak to us through His word, help us to understand His Word and to respond in faith and joyful obedience.

We need other sheep, too. While the LORD is our Good Shepherd personally, and He seeks communion and fellowship with each of us personally, He is not our Shepherd alone, and He does not call us into a solo following after Him. He has a flock of sheep lying down in the green pastures beside the still waters together. He calls us as a family to sit at the Table He has prepared.

Practically speaking, the Lord Jesus the Great Shepherd, has called and equipped under-shepherds to tend His flock and help feed His sheep. In John 21, when Jesus restored Peter after His resurrection, He asked Peter three times if Peter loved Him. Each time, when Peter professed His love for Jesus – once for each of the times he has denied Him – Jesus called Peter to “Feed my lambs” and “Tend my sheep” and “Feed my sheep.” Jesus has called you to be part of His church, and He has specifically called you to be part of this church. The elders of this church are called to help you feed your souls on the Word of God. My calling as a Teaching Elder is to specifically labor, to work hard, to preach and teach the Word, to prepare regular meals of God’s Word for you. We have them weekly together in worship, and I prepare daily, smaller meals for you in the devotionals that are covering every chapter of the Bible.

You don’t have to figure the Bible out on your own. You’re not supposed to. The ministry of the Holy Spirit, especially through those whom He has called and equipped to serve His church, makes the Word of God clearer and drives it home to your heart. But you do need to come to the word prayerfully expectant, ready and eager to be fed.

You also have to know what you’re needing and what Jesus is wanting to give You – Himself. Jesus invites us to feed on the Word of God so we can feed our souls on Him. We don’t mostly need practical life advice on how to be happy and successful. We need reconciliation and fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. We need to know the character and mind of God as revealed in Jesus. God brings us to Himself and Himself to us in His Word, as we seek Him and His will.

As God reveals Himself in His Word, He restores our souls. He renews, revives, and refreshes us with Himself.

### **III. The Table in the Presence of Our Enemies**

But the Good Shepherd doesn’t just lead us to lie down in green pastures beside still waters to restore our souls. He also prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. While I can’t say with certainty that the Lord’s Supper is the primary meaning of verse 5, I do think it is an excellent application of this verse.

Our Good Shepherd has prepared for us a Table, the best Table. The Lord’s Supper is the Table of the Good Shepherd, where He invites us to come and feast, and where He is both the gracious host and the soul-satisfying feast.

In John 6:48-50, He said, *“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

Now, I don't think Jesus was teaching us specifically about the Lord's Supper in John 6. He actually clarifies what it means to eat the bread of His flesh earlier in verses 35-40 –

*“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. <sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

And then, in case we missed it, in verse 47 – *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”*

When we come to Jesus and believe in Him, He satisfies our souls with Himself. He is the nourishment our souls need. At the Lord's Supper, He gives us a tangible demonstration physically as He meets with us spiritually. We don't receive anything different at the Lord's Supper than we receive through the Word of God – it's the same grace of God in the person of the Lord Jesus, received the same way, by faith.

We call the Lord's Supper “communion,” because here, we, as His people, commune with the Lord by faith. We also call it the Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word for giving thanks, because here we give thanks and remember what Christ did for us.

1 Corinthians 11, which we read every time we share in the Lord's Supper, calls us to partake of the Table prepared in a worthy manner, as we examine ourselves and we discern the Body. This means our faith is to be a knowledgeable, discerning, self-aware, and Christ-focused faith. We must know who Christ is and what He has done to save us, how He is indeed the Son of God, Savior of Sinners, and the only Satisfaction for our souls. We must understand our own sinfulness, our own soul-

hunger, our deep and persistent need for communion with God that only He can satisfy, and then we need to believe that He is the satisfaction our souls are seeking, that He alone is the perfect righteousness and peace we need.

But why does the Lord prepare a table in the presence of our enemies. For two reasons:

1. We live in enemy territory. We need to be nourished and strengthened to stand in the battle against the world, our flesh, and the devil.
2. Our enemies are already defeated, and they watch us feast and grow stronger to prepare for battle against them, a battle they have already decisively lost.

Along with the table prepared in the presence of our enemies, we are also anointed with oil and given an overflowing cup. These are two more symbols of the Holy Spirit. The oil here is not formal anointing oil for office, but it's refreshing oil, given to weary travelers. And the cup is a cup of refreshing wine, overflowing with blessing. God is generous. He pours out His Spirit abundantly on His children, calling us to be filled with the Spirit and to sing to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs out of the overflow of the Spirit's filling.

### **Will you feast on what truly satisfies?**

As long as we are in this life, our souls will remain hungry and in need of regular nourishment and refreshment. When we neglect the Word of God, we starve our souls. When we neglect prayer and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we leave our souls dry and stiff. In the word and in prayer, in gathered worship and at the Lord's Table, the Lord calls us to be fed and filled, to be refreshed, renewed, and blessed. Will we lie down in the green grass, drink of the waters, sit at the table, drink from the cup, and enjoy the soul-satisfying blessing of the Lord?