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Before, Beside, and Behind

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Before, Beside, and Behind

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May 6,
2017

Annie Sears

Daily Scripture Texts

Psalm 23

Ezekiel 34:1-16

Luke 15:1-7

| *“The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.”*

This idea of God as a shepherd is a common Christian epithet. Pastors use it to frame sermon messages. Christian families use it to plaster the walls of their homes with reminders of who He is, with the words painted on canvases in swirling lettering. Christian publishers feature it as images of cute, cuddly-looking sheep on the covers of devotional books. Composers write it into the lyrics of their choral pieces, repeating the chorus to create a placid effect.

Though this God-as-shepherd image is prevalent, I have trouble resonating with it. I've never personally met a shepherd, and I don't know anything about sheep. I can imagine what shepherd-ly duties require, and I can listen to scholars talk about the specifics of sheep-care, but I have no personal experience. I can understand, but I can't *understand*.

“He *leads* me beside quiet waters.
He *restores* my soul.
He *leads* me in the paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.”

I do, however, understand the idea of leading. I understand that leading is active, that it is about doing rather than passively allowing action to unfold. A leader is the subject of a sentence's verbs, the one initiating whatever events are going to happen. And in Psalm 23, this Shepherd proves a leader. Psalm 23's speaker, on the other hand, is never the one acting. Instead, the speaker is the receiver of all the good that the Good Shepherd does.

“You *prepare* a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You *anoint* my head with oil;
my cup overflows.”

So not only is God a leader, but He's also a generous leader. He takes initiative for the benefit of another. Specifically, God acts on behalf of those who offer him nothing in return. A sheep cannot prepare a table for its Shepherd, nor can a sheep anoint its Shepherd's head with oil. A sheep cannot guide its Shepherd to food, to shelter, or to safety. A sheep cannot protect its Shepherd. A sheep cannot offer conversation or sustained company. A sheep can offer nothing substantial, nor does it seem to want to repay its Shepherd for His provision. Regardless, the Shepherd acts on its behalf. And that? That is the definition of grace.

“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.”

The Shepherd’s rod and staff – the very tools by which he leads – ensure that the sheep can live fearlessly. The sheep will wander away from green pastures and quiet waters, soon finding itself in the valley of the shadow of death. Though I don’t *understand* much about sheep, I do understand that they meander aimlessly, which is precisely why they need a Shepherd for their care. And because the Shepherd has always proved a gracious leader, the sheep can be sure that the One who expects no reciprocal care will continue to give them that care.

The Shepherd does, and his sheep receive. God does, and His people receive.

And the speaker notes that with God before us and beside us, what follows behind us will also be good:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me
all the days of my life
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.”

God leading before me. Grace in everything beside me. Goodness following behind me.

For all the days of my life.

Amen.