

All:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord with my whole life long."

Speaker 2:

This is the word of God for the people of God.

All:

Thanks be to God.

Speaker 2:

Please be seated.

Charley:

An 80-year-old man was fishing one day by himself. He was so glad to get away from all the distractions in life, all the noise. Just fishing, having a good time, when all of a sudden he hears this voice. "Hey! Pick me up!" He thought he was just dreaming or maybe going crazy, and so he ignored it. Again he heard, "Hey! Pick me up!" He looked down and there was a frog talking to him, just floating on the water, talking to him. Looked down, frog said, "Hey, pick me up and kiss me and I'll turn into a beautiful woman and I'll be your bride. You'll make all your friends jealous."

The guy thought for a moment. He picked up the frog, put it in his pocket. The frog said, "Hey, didn't you hear what I said? Are you nuts? If you kiss me, I'll turn into a beautiful woman and I'll be your bride." He said, "Nah, at my age I'd rather have a talking frog." Now, the point of that story is clear. It's all about perspective, amen? It's all about your point of view and your stage in life, sometimes. Sometimes for many of us, the 23rd Psalm is special, but for many of us, we've had the same point of view of it for our entire lives. We've said it at funerals, maybe, we've recited to ourselves when we need to be comforted. It's been a great source of strength.

But maybe we've just seen it in one particular way. My hope in the next few weeks during this season of Lent, as we take a deeper look at the 23rd Psalm, that we gain a different perspective of it, a different view of it. As we do, I hope we grow deeper into our faith and closer to the Shepherd, 'cause after all, the very beginning of the psalm says this, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want," which is a sermon unto itself.

Now, a famous actor once returned to his hometown to be honored. They were excited about their local celebrity who made it big. They wanted to honor him, and so they had a lunch in his honor and he was the guest speaker, of course. After he gave his speech, they loved his voice. He had a great speaking voice. They asked him to recite some literature and he did. After he did that, there was a pastor, an older pastor in the community who was there, asked him to recite the 23rd Psalm. He said, "I'll do it under one condition. After I'm finished, you recite it, Reverend, and then close us in prayer." Said, "Sure."

The actor began to recite the 23rd Psalm beautifully, eloquently. I mean, this silver-tongued guy just did a great job. It was beautiful how he interpreted this psalm. They applauded. Then the pastor got up and,

in a feeble and a very frail way, began to recite the 23rd Psalm. But when he was finished, there was not a dry eye in the house. The actor cut the silence by saying this. "You see, I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd." Do you know the Shepherd? You see, that's the central question of the Christian faith.

As you read through the New Testament, the central question of the Christian faith is not, "What denomination are you a part of?" It is not, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" The central question is not, "What is your particular theological view of said issue. The central question of the Christian faith is, "Do you really know the Shepherd?" Because there are really three people in this world, those who know nothing of Jesus Christ, those who know something of Jesus Christ, and those who really know Jesus Christ as the Shepherd. Which one are you?

As I've said before and as you've probably heard before, Christianity is not a religion, it is really a relationship with the Shepherd. Now, sometimes that gets lost under the guise of religiosity. Sometimes that gets lost under the machinery of the church and denominationalism. Sometimes that really gets lost as the church fights over irrelevant issues. You see, when I get up here, folks, on Sundays and preach to you, I'm not trying to perpetuate a political view. I'm not trying to perpetuate a religion or even a theological perspective. I'm trying to lift up the love and the power and the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and to spread the good news. That is my job.

One of the unique aspects of our faith is the fact that we can know God personally. The God who created this world, we can actually know this God personally. Now, sure, many people believe in God, don't they? USA Today, they do polls all the time asking Americans, "How many of you believe in God?" We're all always so proud when we read the majority of Americans believe in God, but the question is, "What kind of God do you believe in?" Even Eastern religions and other philosophies believe in some kind of force or higher power, but only the Christian faith dares to claim an unbelievable way we can know this God personally.

Never do we find it in a more powerful way than what I believe is the backdrop to this psalm in the New Testament, and that is the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, when Jesus says not only does He know His sheep, but His sheep know Him. This morning, folks, as I stand before you and proclaim, I'm here to proclaim to you even though it's an hour early, I'm still gonna do it, I'm here to proclaim to you that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords wants a love relationship with you. The Rock of Ages wants to empower and encourage you. I'm here to proclaim that Emmanuel, God With Us, wants to guide you and direct you and give you wisdom and power for life.

But maybe some of you are kind of skeptical of that. "Charlie, really? This big God who created this big world? Really, can I have a relationship with this God? Does this God really love me?" Jesus proved it once and for all when He said in verse 11, "I am the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep." In other words, Jesus said, "You wanna know how much I love you? You wanna know if I really love you? I love you this much."

Now, not so long ago, I came across an interesting article about a retired military paratrooper. They really wanted to get a good story about his adventures. The very first question the journalist asked this paratrooper was, "Well, how many times do you think you've jumped out of an airplane?" He said, "None." The journalist was puzzled. "Wait a second, I thought you were a paratrooper." He said, "I was. I am. But I never jumped out of an airplane. I've been pushed many times, but I've never jumped."

As some of you know, I know none of you are in here like this, but you know, some people need to be pushed to do the right thing. You know people like that? In some churches, not this church, of course, but in some churches they're filled with people that need to be pushed to serve and to give and to do the right thing. But you know what? Jesus Christ did not need to be pushed. He willingly came down as a human being in the flesh and died for us. When He did, He proved once and for all that God is not some

kind of vague, magical idea, that God is not some kind of impersonal being. Instead, God is a loving, intimate force and power who loves you more than you wildest dreams and wants a relationship with you, who believes in you.

If you're in worship today and you're at the point in your life where you don't think anybody believes in you, oh, make no mistake about it. This God of ours that we worship, this God of ours that we sing about, this God of ours that I preach about believes in you. I remember being changed by someone who believed in me in a very personal way. When I was in the first grade, before we moved to Dunwoody, we lived in Stone Mountain. We were about two miles from the park. It was great. But I went to Rockbridge Elementary and I had the best first grade teacher in the world. Her name was Mrs. Jones. I can still see her face.

She was great for many reasons, but one of the biggest reasons was she taught me how to read. You see, I was a little slower than my twin sister in learning how to read. I didn't like that at all. But eventually, I got it. She was teaching me how to say words and say sounds, and then all of a sudden, one day as she's teaching me, it just clicked and I could read anything. "Green Eggs and Ham," "Sam I Am," I could read, read, read, read, and she was so excited that she took me by the hand and took me to the principal's office for a good reason this time and called my mom. I'll never forget it. "Charlie can read! He can read! Oh my gosh, he can read!"

Then she took my hand and walked me around the school and we went to classrooms. "This boy can read! Listen to him read!" I'll never forget what Mrs. Jones said to me that day. It sounds like a cliché, but it is the truth. She said, "Charlie, I believe in you. Never forget this day, because you can do anything you set your mind to." She was right. Every time I read Scripture, every time I read a book, every time I read a newspaper, I think of Mrs. Jones. Then when I finally wrote my very first book, "One Heaven of a Party," isn't that cute? Some of you in the back are just not getting that. Who did the first copy go to? Mrs. Jones.

I called her and she was still living in Stone Mountain. This was 20 years ago. I said, "Mrs. Jones, do you remember me? I'm Charlie Reeves." She said, "Redhead, really loud voice even for a first grader?" I said, "Yeah, that's me. Thank you so much. I'm gonna send you something." I wrote in the book, "Thank you, Mrs. Jones, for teaching me how to read, because if you had not taught me how to read I wouldn't know how to write." She believed in me. Let me tell you this. When God looked down at you and felt how proud He was for you, He didn't send a committee to tell you. He didn't send an angel. He sent Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

"I believe in you and I love you." Don't you think the Shepherd is worth knowing? He believes you're worth knowing. Maybe for some of you in worship today, there has been a longing in your heart that can never be fulfilled. There has been a longing in your soul that you can never satisfy. There has been something inside you that is so restless that maybe you feel that way. Perhaps you feel that way because you're trying to live your life without the love of the Shepherd.

How many of you have heard of U2, the rock band? Most of you have. I know George Wilson has, up in the balcony so proud. He loves U2. Bono. But many years ago, they had a very popular song on the radio that played ad nauseum, over and over again, and they still play it. "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." Remember that? Here are the words. "I've climbed the highest mountain. I've run through the fields. I have run, I have crawled, I have scaled these city walls, but I still haven't found what I'm looking for." Does that describe you today? You know, Augustine said it best. "There is a God-shaped void in all of us that only God can fill." Money can't fill it. Escapades can't fill it. Pleasure can't fill it. Success will never fill it. Trophies will never fill it. Awards will never fill it.

Only the Shepherd will fill that void, and I can give you personal testimony today. It is true. I rely on that power. I depend on that power. In times of my past and my life when I've tried to find fulfillment in other ways, it never satisfies. It's like being thirsty and drinking salt water. It never does it. There is no golf score so low. Even though that's great. There is no action movie so exciting. There is nothing so awesome in life that compares with the love of the Shepherd who fulfills that void. Maybe for you or for some people you know, there are still people who are unwilling to embrace that love, to have a love relationship with the Shepherd. In my experience as a pastor, usually there are two big reasons for that.

One is what I call the religion trap. Some of you can relate to this. Depending upon how some grew up, they think faith and religion is about getting a set of rules, getting a list of rules of obligations, and checking them off. "I'm not gonna cuss. I'm not gonna tell dirty jokes. I'm not gonna drink. I'm gonna throw money in the offering plate. I'm gonna hold the door. I'm not gonna scream at my friend. I'm gonna show up on Sundays." They think the more they check off these things, check, check, check, check, then life will somehow find meaning.

Then they're totally devastated when they discover they can't stand religion and faith. You know anybody like that? They don't show up to church anymore. They used to go, but not anymore. Most of them, why? Because they didn't find any power in checking off a list because it never occurred to them that all the power and the love and the encouragement comes from a love relationship with the Shepherd. That's where it is.

The other hangup for some people, and maybe some of you can relate to this, are intellectual hangups. "I can't become a Christian. I can't join the church until all my questions are answered." Let me let you in on a little secret. We come to the faith heart first, not head first. There's something you can only understand with the heart. Also, this side of Heaven will never have all of our questions answered. You think I have all the answers? No. God's gonna be real busy when I die and go to Heaven answering all my questions.

Amen? I still have doubts. I still have questions. That's not the point. Become a good Christian and following the Shepherd doesn't mean giving intellectual assent to every single doctrine of the church. Oh my gosh, no. It means you are surrendering. You are embracing the love and the grace of the Shepherd and all that stuff and all that learning will come later. What's holding you back.

Now, I'm sure most of you know that I'm a very cultured person. Very sophisticated. Did you know that? I love good film. Really good film, like "Caddyshack." I am still amazed that that didn't win the Oscar. I'm still amazed that Bill Murray didn't win the Oscar for that. Big hitter, the Dalai Lama. And "Fletch," why didn't "Fletch" win the Oscar? Good film. Also, there's another one that I enjoy. Ever seen Pixar's movie, "Up?" I'm learning to watch those a little more with Paul. You know, I never knew this. This is a revelation to me and some of you parents will say, "Well, duh, Charlie."

You know, those movies are kind of written for adults, too. I can actually sit through some of them. But "Up," how many of you have seen "Up?" Yeah, good movie. What a great movie. It's about this guy, in a nutshell, who wants to go to Paradise Falls, this beautiful place. He tries to think, "How can I fly? How can I get to Paradise Falls?" Then he has an idea. "I will connect helium balloons to my house and I will float there." That's what he does. It works for a while. He floats and he floats and he's headed to Paradise Falls and he floats and he floats.

But then some of the balloons begin to pop and the house begins to sink and he's frantic and he's like, "What am I gonna do? How can I stop this? How can I rise again?" Then he discovers the only way to do it is to throw out all of his stuff, to let it go, to throw it out. That's what he begins to do. He throws out the furniture, throws out the clothes, throws out all of his stuff, and what happens? As he does that, his house begins to float, float, float, float, higher, higher, higher.

What's holding you back from soaring with the Shepherd? Pride? Shame? Doubt? Questions? Just let it go. The Shepherd will take care of all that. Let the Shepherd grab hold of you. Maybe as I preach this sermon, some of you are saying, "You know what? I'm out of answers. I'm out of excuses. I'm out of strength. I need it." We all do. Let us [inaudible 00:21:18] together. As we're in the spirit of prayer, maybe there are some of you here today who feel like reaffirming your faith in the Shepherd. You've been drifting and trying to find fulfillment in other places, and you know here today that the only place it can be found is in and through the Shepherd.

Maybe there are some of you here who have never really heard the message of the faith like this and you wanna embrace that love that forgives you and believes in you and wants to empower you. Well, if that's the case, just say this prayer quietly to yourself as I say it aloud. "Lord Jesus, come into my heart today. Forgive me and cleanse me of all my sin. Put a new and right spirit within me. Walk with me and guide me every day. Thank you for believing in me. I will rely upon your strength." It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.