

Opening Scripture: Matt 9:35-37 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”

Why does Jesus have compassion for us? Notice what motivated Jesus’s experience of compassion for the masses.

Jesus’s crowds were... They were “harassed and helpless.”

Helpless to change their social situation.—they lived in a highly stratified world of **haves and have-nots**. Some people had wealth, privilege and social power, and if you weren’t born into that privileged life you couldn’t get it. They couldn’t change their political situation—they had no right to vote on who governed them and they had no freedom to change their laws. So, if they were victims of Roman or Herodian injustice then there they were.

Now, I do not mean to suggest at all that feeling harassed and helpless isn’t also part of the American experience. What I mean to suggest is that for us it takes on a different form.

Americans are experiencing a dramatic uptick in feelings of fear, anxiety, confusion, and dread over our future. People have social anxiety over circumstances that feel out of our control.

Helpless to change their spiritual condition. —though they had the law they were still sinners who needed saving grace. And this inner longing for peace with God, to be washed and cleansed from all sin was exacerbated by the fact that they lived under an onerous burden of increasingly more laws. Laws heaped upon laws. More legalisms that prescribed an **ever-expanding regulatory burden** on religious life and expression.

And more loopholes for the people who prescribed it.

Illus. It’s like legislators practicing insider trading. It is fundamentally unfair to pass a law that you, as a member of the legislative body, don’t have to live under. This is why Jesus so often **addressed hypocrisy among the Pharisees** and scribes. Because they are legislative and judicial branch all in one—and they pass laws for you to live under and then think of all kinds of legal loopholes to avoid having to live under it themselves. All the while prancing around in public as if they are the models of Torah compliance.

Illus. Remember the Rich young Ruler. He has lived under this system his whole life—compliant to a fault—but comes to Jesus begging to know how he might inherit eternal life. Jesus essentially responds saying, “What do you mean? The bureaucracy has left you empty? Surprise!”

Helpless to change his spiritual condition through law keeping.

And when that happens we can go through seasons of melancholy, withdrawing into isolation.

Listen, no matter how free, rich, or full your life is—we all go through seasons where we feel as though we are in the valley of death’s shadow.

But the Scripture gives us encouragement that just refreshes the soul. Because it reminds us of the character and integrity of our God.

Psalm 23: The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake.

⁴ Yea, 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.

This passage is not some nice, trite little poem that we put on a plaque on our wall—full of irrelevant platitudes and empty promises. But we need to be reminded that this passage, as artful as it is, is a reminder of the unmoving, unshakable confidence of a believer.

Big Idea: Our confidence is in the LORD who is our shepherd. We know that we are His sheep always under his watch, in his gracious care. And God has staked his very name on its truth.

So now, what does this passage tell us about the good shepherd?

1. God is faithful to lead us to abundance and safety.

The Psalm: vv. 1-2 “The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

David’s situation: Scholars are agreed that this Psalm was either composed when David was running for his life from his mentor Saul or thereafter in reflection on that time. **Hiding in a dry and arid land—singing and composing worship songs against the implacable cliffs of the Judean wilderness.** And in the midst of this he sings about this God—Yahweh—who is his shepherd leading him to green pastures and quiet waters? Why would he use this imagery given his reality?

Because new grass and the quiet waters answer a restlessness in me. A tendency to wander away and seek sources of life that are in fact death to me. I’m surprised at how often God has to “make me” lie down and rest. It’s a peace and safety that transcends our outward environment.

Jesus’ Promise: John 10:8-10 “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

In context, Jesus is teaching them that he is the Good Shepherd—then switches his metaphor to the sheep gate. Shepherds would literally lay down at the entrance of the sheep pen and make their beds at night to guard the sheep.

Believers Today: Listen, we all long for safe and abundant pasture. And the **green grasses of Judea were seasonal** appearing in the winter and spring months. Motionless waters signaled to the sheep that it was safe to drink. If they fell into turbulent rushing water their wool would soak it up and they’d be lost.

God’s character is such that he cares about our wellbeing. He wants to restock the empty shelves of our emotional storehouses. To lead us away from the turbulent waters of political and social rancor; to lead us out of the barrenness of mere pleasure seeking; to guide us away from the burnt over meadows of worldly compromise.

God is faithful to provide for us because we are the people of his pasture—the sheep of his hand.

2. God is faithful to restore our souls through righteous paths.

The Psalm: v. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Now, restoration of the soul presupposes that the soul regularly becomes depleted. The soul is in regular need of being restored.

Illus. My Father in Law has a few old cars he's been in the process of restoring. He finds them in dilapidated condition—and when you see the old rusted out car/truck—you see the evidence of what it must have looked like in its original glory.

He restores it and then makes it even better. The restoration process involves making the car look like its original condition—but then upgrading it using new technology and newer, better materials.

The fact that the Psalmist tells us that he has to be restored presupposes that life takes its toll on us.

David's situation: And that was in fact the case with David. Here's another psalm he wrote in response to threats to his kingdom; being pursued by his life's mentor; losing his best friend Jonathan; losing his baby and having to ally himself with God's enemies, Philistia, just to survive in the wilderness. His son rapes his daughter, and his son commits treason and tries to kill him and take his throne. A man's life that is marked by suffering and loss.

No wonder he prayed this:

Psalm 31:9-10, 14-16

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief.

¹⁰ My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction and my bones grow weak.

¹⁴ But I trust in you, LORD; I say, "You are my God."

¹⁵ My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me.

¹⁶ Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.

That is by definition a PTSD prayer. When we understand the loss and pain he went through in order to fulfill God's purpose for him as Israel's greatest, most famous King, we can understand the anguish in his prayers.

Jesus says this: Matthew 11:28-29 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." How do we find rest for our souls? By learning Jesus's way.

Believers Today:

The soul that seeks life in the turbulent waters of political acrimony—or seeks life in the dying and burned over meadows of pleasure seeking—or seeks the compromise of woke Christianity—that soul will be in a state of unrest; constantly depleted.

Here's how we know whether we're being disciplined by the agitated, divided, godless culture or by the Word—how much rest does your soul have? Are you always in a state of war; is every conversation a knife fight; every correspondence turning into advocacy for your favorite team, partisan cause, your obsession with leisure.

If you're following an unrighteous path your soul won't be restored nor restful.

3. He accompanies us through dark seasons in life. Now, we said that green pastures and quiet waters are seasonal in Israel. There are seasons when we rest, when we are restored.

And there are seasons that feel like the valley of Death's shadow.

The Psalm: v. 4 Yea, 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.

What does this phrase mean, valley of Death's shadow?

David's situation: David's imagery of being led from the verdant pastureland and untroubled brooks into ravines and wadis with narrow paths and steep cliffs on either side—blocking out the sun's rays for miles—is something he personally experienced as both a shepherd and on the run from Saul. The valley of death's shadow means that at times David felt so close to death, that his life would be taken from him, that it was close enough to cast a shadow over his joy, his purpose, his hope.

Jesus' Promise: John 10:10-11 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” The fact remains that “the thief comes.” In context Jesus is talking about the thievery of religious observance. The religious leaders are those who have tried to enter the sheepfold—but, Jesus says, they do not come through the gate (himself). Instead they are strangers and brigands trying to steal the joy of the people—to kill off the last glimmer of life in them through the burdensome weight of performance. And to destroy—to obliterate them.

But Christ has come, as the good shepherd to offer resurrection life in the Spirit and a life of abundant grace and mercy.

Believers Today: Yea—for those of us not born 400 years ago “yea” means, “yes.” Indeed. No doubt, there are times when I am going to walk through valleys where I feel like the shadow of death is upon me.

I think as a culture we are in the valley of death's shadow now, presently. So, what's David's prescription here?

I will fear no evil. What's the key to not fearing the evil that is set against us in the valley of death's shadow?

For thou art with me. And what is it about God that comforts me?

Illus. That time when a gang of guys tried to surround me—I made it to a phone booth, called my dad. He got there in no time flat and brought two Louisville slugger bats. Handed one to me, then proceeded to have a very colorful conversation with the guys who were stalking me. In which case they became persuaded to disperse.

His rod (a tempered stick, sharp at one end and with a hardened pitch covered ball at the other end to whack predators) and his staff (the shepherds crook)! David would have had a shepherd's crook with a ram's horn attached to his staff. I follow the good shepherd yes who's led me into this valley—but my shepherd carries a couple of big sticks. To protect me, and to get me back on a righteous path.

Jesus has put himself between us and harm's way. As the good shepherd he has laid down his life for us on a cross to die for our sins. To save us.

4. He reminds me of Christ's victory.

The Psalm: v. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. The imagery in the Psalm has turned now from The LORD—Yahweh as Shepherd to Yahweh as the gracious host who celebrates his son's victory in battle.

David's situation: 2 Sam 3:20 When Abner, who had twenty men with him, came to David at Hebron, David prepared a feast for him and his men. Why does David prepare a table for Abner? Because in the story he comes to broker a deal with David—to deliver to him the good news that the political winds have changed and Israel is ready and willing to receive him as their King. David prepared a feast for Abner, Saul's cousin and commander-in-chief—his enemy, to celebrate this good news of victory.

Jesus' Promise: 1 John 5:4-5 “because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith. ⁵Who is the one who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” You see the table is prepared in the midst of my enemies—those spiritual forces in high places set against me, the temptations of the flesh from within me; the world's system that threatens to swallow me up and steal away a faithful heart. But the table reminds us of our victory.

Believers Today: The imagery of the table represents feasting, celebration. The Lord who is our shepherd prepares that table in the midst of the battle—to constantly remind us that if we are in Christ we are victorious. But Christ is victorious over sin, death, hell, the devil.

Oil, like the feast, was a symbol of refreshing—in a dry, arid land. An image of a flask of sweet oil poured over David's black coils of hair. A symbol of refreshing glory. An overrunning cup of gladness in the midst of this heartbreak and hardship.

We are reminded that we are God's sheep and his guests of honor, at the table of Christ's victory.

5. He leads us into a legacy of godliness and the assurance of heaven.

The Psalm: v. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.

David's situation: What had been following David? This word “follow” can refer to either that which pursues us, or that which we leave behind. What had pursued David was his enemies—Saul and his armies—squandering the promise of their reign by chasing after the son of Jesse. So paranoid of losing the kingdom that they spent their energies trying to stop God's King. And what did David leave behind?

But in the midst of being pursued by his enemies David leaves behind a testimony of God's grace—his goodness and mercy in the midst of it.

Jesus' Promise: 1 Thess 1:4 “For **we know**, brothers and sisters loved by God, that **he has chosen you**,⁵ because **our gospel did not come to you in word only**, but also **in power**, in **the Holy Spirit**, and with **full assurance**.”

Believers Today: he says “we know.” But I hope what follows me is that people see the goodness and mercy of God in this sinner's life. Life was hard, but God was good. Life was cruel; the world was harsh—but God was merciful and compassionate in Jeff's life. Life was trying and challenging—but God was faithful and he never left me nor did he forsake me.

And even though forces of darkness have been pursuing my life—I'm going to leave behind a testimony of God's goodness, his mercy to me a sinner.

I have the promise and the hope that as a believer in Jesus I will live with God for all eternity in his house—his realm—his kingdom.

We know that God has chosen us. You see the basis of my confidence is not in myself. It's in the God who has chosen and elected me.

The gospel of Jesus comes in word (true and sound teaching), in power in the Holy Spirit (the Holy Spirit changes us from the inside out), and with full assurance (you see if you have believed in the true Gospel of Jesus—the good news of salvation in Christ—your assurance is grounded in the Gospel of God and the God of the Gospel. Both are trustworthy. If all your chips are in and you're betting on you—you're going to be smoked. Lost forever. But if your confidence is in the God who chose you—the Gospel of God which is that God saved, raised, and recreated you; and the God of the Gospel makes good on his promises. Who will never sign a check that he can't cash, that he can't make good on.

Ushers please come forward to prepare for Communion.

Questions:

1. Who or what is discipling you? If it's the culture then you are going to remain perpetually agitated, disturbed, fearful, and angry. Because the culture wants to lead you to barren fields and turbulent waters. But your Shepherd Jesus wants to calm you, give you rest and take your burden exchanging it with his yoke. Leading you to still waters, restoring your very soul. Jesus will disciple you and I so that we have restored souls. Is your soul restored today?

2. What are you afraid of? What fears drive you or motivate you? What's the other "shoe" you're waiting for to drop? Understand that the Good Shepherd wants to remind you that you are in Christ and Christ is in you—and the table is set—we being by celebrating our victory in him.

Communion. Jesus welcomes you to a table today with two things on it—the bread and the wine. The flesh and the blood. Symbols of his victory of sin, death, and hell. And in a world where we are surrounded by death's very shadow hovering over everything—we are reminded that Christ has prepared a table in the midst of death and suffering. And we are victorious in him.