

LIVING WATERS

A Message About God's Restoration The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 3)

The Need for Water

It is, I suppose, an obvious implication of this morning's scripture lesson that sheep require regular watering places. As, with you and me, you see, 70% of a sheep's body is actually made of water. Without a regular supply of liquid to replenish the resources lost from hours under a hot middle-eastern sun, dangerous dehydration begins to set in. The early effect, of course, is merely discomfort and increasing irritability. If the drought persists, the animal will begin to get dazed and disoriented. And, given several days without water, a sheep will begin to experience severe tissue damage, and ultimately death.

So how does your average sheep which -- let's face it, would probably never take top honors in an animal I.Q. test -- how does it know it needs to replenish its water supply? The answer of course is *thirst*. In sheep, as in virtually every other creature, thirst works like the fuel warning light on a car. It tells the driver that something vital *inside* has gotten so low that it is time to stop and fill up on it from an *outside* source.

The Bible teaches that you and I work that way on a *spiritual* level too. At the root of our lives, scripture says, is our soul -- that part of us that is most uniquely and permanently us. Your soul permeates your entire being. It animates and enlivens your spiritual nature, a bit like water fills and keeps alive your physical nature. I have been struck palpably by that reality every time I've visited by the bedside of someone who has just died. It is amazing to me how "spiritually dehydrated" those forms suddenly appear after the soul has departed it.

The Effects of Spiritual Dehydration

And yet such dehydration isn't confined merely to those who have died. It can apply to those of us who, in all physical respects, are very much alive. I'll dare to be bold: Many of us here this morning are probably undergoing the effects of spiritual dehydration, perhaps without knowing it. In the early stages, it shows itself in a sense of discomfort with life that may make you anything from slightly edgy with other people all the way to downright cantankerous. In the intermediate stages, it may show itself in a listlessness about life, or a sense of disorientation in your relationships and confusion about your direction. In its most advanced stages, spiritual dehydration results in tissue damage, in a sense.

What do I mean by that? Well, the compassionate heart for other people that God wants you to have can become so hard or tense that it actually goes into arrest. You cease caring. The mind of Christ --- that capacity to see problems and possibilities as

Jesus does -- loses its capacity to make sound judgments. The spiritual strength or muscle-tone that God wants you to use to improve your witness at work, strengthen your important relationships, influence our world for the better -- well that gives way to a weakness of will and purpose. Can you identify any of those symptoms in yourself?

If you can, then don't despair, because there's good news ahead. It's those of us who are inclined to ignore our thirst, or try to handle it all by ourselves, that I'm most eager to reach this morning with a message. As far as I know, God didn't make the human soul like those big vans and trucks with the hidden reserve fuel-tank inside that kicks in when the other one gets absolutely dry. No, we have to stop and drink intentionally from something altogether outside of us.

"Water," you understand, is repeatedly used throughout the scriptures as a metaphor for the infilling, soul-restoring power of God's Holy Spirit. God has made us with souls that are meant to be filled up with the living water of God's Spirit. To "drink" in spiritual terms is to "receive... accept... take in" the life of God, to the point that it becomes 70% or more of you. If you read about the Jesus People in the Book of Acts, you get this picture of a people who not just on the Day of Pentecost but day after day were being filled up by a Life beyond themselves. Acts 15:32 says that "**the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit**" (NASB). The question for each of us has to be: Are we as purposefully focused as we might be on drinking in the Spirit of God?

Seeking the Still Waters

That's one of the things I think we can learn from sheep. They don't play the denial game. When they're thirsty, they set out deliberately to find something to satisfy their thirst. But here's the tricky part: When sheep are thirsty, they are not particularly discriminating. I'm told that, sometimes, they'll try to drink from a mountain stream or river -- one that is moving too fast. The problem there is that in their weakened condition, they aren't as steady on their feet as they might otherwise be. One slip, and suddenly all that wool becomes a sponge-like anchor that drags them down.

I've seen that happen to people too. Maybe they know they need to pay attention to the thirst in their souls, but they make the error of venturing a bit too far into some fast-moving religious current or trendy spiritual wave and, instead of being refreshed, are actually swept away. Cults thrive on people like that. Some of you have read or heard about the book *THE SECRET* that is carrying people away like that. Just because something is "spiritual" doesn't necessarily make it safe. It's one of the principal reasons, perhaps, why thirsty sheep are encouraged to seek "**still waters.**"

Now *still* waters, we must be clear, are very different from *stagnant* waters, although apparently sheep aren't always quick to discern the difference. Left to their own devices, many sheep will drink from bad waterholes and polluted potholes, where they pick up internal parasites like nematodes, and liver flukes, and other nasty "you-never-want-to-get-them" germs. To some extent, I suppose, all of us have done that at one

time or another. Maybe we tried to fill the cistern of our souls by sucking in new possessions or working harder. Perhaps we sought to slake our thirst by drinking in the fine arts or the wisdom of self-help books. Maybe we buried our faces in the shallow pool of a sexual fix or some other entertainment.

I'm reminded of the story of the man who went to a Memorial Day party and tipped back more than a healthy number of holiday beverages. A few hours later, he was seen driving the wrong way down a major one-way street. The cop who pulled him over angrily asked whether the intoxicated man hadn't seen the arrows on the street coming at him. "Gosh, to be perfectly honest, officer, I didn't even see the Indians." There are more than a few of us, aren't there, who thought we could find still waters by drinking deeply from the waters of a still?

Drinking From the Early Morning Dew

There are a lot of places where a dehydrated sheep can find false solutions to his or her thirst. That's why it is such good news for them and for us, that there is truly a Good Shepherd in the pasture. In his wonderful book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, real-life shepherd Phillip Keller says that there are two places that a good shepherd will endeavor to lead his sheep in order that they may find genuinely refreshing water.

The first is almost deceptively simple. Keller says that sheep could actually survive for months on end, simply by licking the dew which could be found on the grass in the early morning and late evening. Anyone who has ever seen such droplets of water glistening in the early morning light will appreciate afresh how this fits the image of "still waters." Keller said: "In my mind's eye I can see my flock again. The gentleness, stillness and softness of early morning always found my sheep knee deep in dew-drenched grass. There they fed heavily and contentedly" in preparation for the day. "Nothing pleased me more."

You just can't read the biographies of the great heroes of the faith without being deeply impressed by how many of them seemed to find living water for their souls through the habit of early morning quiet time or evening prayer. You can't read the story of Jesus' life in the gospels, without being awed by the fact that the heavier the anticipated heat of the day, the more time the Good Shepherd himself spent time in study and prayer. And He was the Son of God. His spiritual well was deep. But he kept going back to drink daily from his Father's resource and God said: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

How about you and me? Do you think we'd suffer greatly if we were to forego quaffing with such intensity the morning news or the rantings of those ideologues disguised as journalists? Do you think we'd lose a lot if we missed the juicy update on that celebrity's most recent shameful act? Would life be less if we turned our heads from all the tainted water that sweeps us away, pollutes our systems, or else has no power to really fill?

What if we resolved that for just the next month and just on weekdays, we'd follow the Shepherd's leading in this area? Would you do that with me? Let's covenant to drink the dew of devotions in our daily life. Read a chapter of the New Testament instead of watching the tube. While you're eating breakfast or having your morning coffee, use one of the daily devotionals you can find at the Bookstore. Just try drinking from the still morning dew and let's see if you don't feel like the living waters within you rise, equipping you better for the heat of the day.

Drinking From the Deep Cistern

Then consider taking one last cue from the Shepherd's leading. Keller says that besides the dew of the grass, there was one other dependable source of water for the Shepherd's flock. Keller writes: "I recall standing under the blazing equatorial sun of Africa and watching the native herds being led to their owner's [personal] wells. Some of these were enormous, hand-hewn caverns cut from the sandstone formation along the rivers. They were like great rooms chiseled out of the rocks with ramps running down to the water trough at the bottom. The flocks were being led down into these deep cisterns where cool, clear, clean water awaited them." Yet it was not the architectural wonder of these cisterns that impressed Keller most. It was this: "Down in the well, stripped naked, was the [shepherd] himself, bailing [the still waters] to satisfy the flock."

You know, I've been to a place like that myself, and seen the Shepherd at work. It's an awesome sight. I saw Him gazing with loving eyes at the 50 rams who came to the Men's Breakfast Fellowship this past Thursday and to the 100 ewes who were part of the Mothers of Preschoolers group I visited some time before. I saw the Shepherd ladling the fresh clear water of life over 7 lambs baptized last Sunday, over hundreds of children in our Sunday School Ministry, and hundreds more through our student ministries. I have seen the Master reaching out through our Ascend Singles' ministry, and through gifted teachers in our other adult communities and our Sunday night services.

Call me crazy, but I have heard the Shepherd's laughter in the song of the singers and musicians here. I've seen him extend his brimming cup through the comforting words spoken by Deacons to a family in grief, in the warm welcome of greeters and ushers alike. I swear I can hear the sound of living water splashing as it pours over the support groups who meet weekly here, in the circles of the faithful who gather for prayer, in the dozens and dozens of small groups meeting out in the neighborhoods of our region. I have seen Love with his sleeves rolled up, pouring buckets of living water over parched lives through the ministries of Project Serve and the other local and global missions with which we partner.

I know the world out there may look hostile at times. At moments it looks like the most desiccated desert one could imagine. But that's all the more reason why we must tell those thirsty sheep who are not yet a part of the Lord's flock that God has carved out a deep and expanding well called the Church of Jesus Christ. *Invite someone along* with

you to come drink from the living waters. If you've not yet found a place where YOU are drinking deeply yourself, then I invite you to speak with me or one of the other church leaders. We'd love to help you find for yourself the refreshing flow of God's grace.

Make no mistake about it, the Shepherd's invitation is meant for you and for all people. Meet me in the morning where the dew is sparkling and still, he says. Meet me by the well I have carved out of the rock. Jesus said: **"If anyone thirsts, let them come unto me and drink... For the water that I will give you will become in you a spring of water, welling up to eternal life."**¹

Let us pray...

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How does spiritual dehydration express itself in your life?
2. Where are you finding the living water?
3. What difference does that water make for you in the heat of the day?
4. When was the last time you invited someone else to "go drinking" with you, in the spiritual sense?

¹John 4:14