



"Thou Preparest a Table for Me" - Chapter 9

A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Faber McMullen- Facilitator)

Tablelands are sought after by sheep herders. The high plains are always referred to as "mesas" out west. In Swahili the high ranges are referred to also as "mesas". That world was brought to them by Portuguese. "Table mountain" is right outside of Capetown in South Africa.

Before all of the snow is melted, a shepherd will head to the hills, to the mesas, to survey the forage up top. He looks over the table lands where the sheep will graze. He will locate where the damp areas will be located. At this time, he decides which parts will be grazed the heaviest.

The author relates how one of his first ranches was infested with poisonous weeds, and he planned his program to graze away from them, and he took drastic steps to eradicate the weeds. Interestingly there were two weeds that looked very similar, but one was poisonous and one was not. Keller took great care to direct the sheep so they didn't go after what was poisonous. The author and his family went out onto the mesas and pulled the bad stuff up plant by plant. For the flock to survive the poisonous plants had to be plucked out. I am sure David went before his flock and plucked out what was bad for them.

The fact that these weeds looked a lot like grass is a metaphor for the things that attract and distract us. We're attracted to things that look like lush grass to us, but when we go into them head long and "eat them all up", it is like poisonous weeds to our spiritual selves. These cheap imitations leave us empty. Sin often mimics goodness. Satan is a great imitator. He provides cheap imitations to God's blessings. For example, men and women were blessed with a love relationship that includes sexual intimacy in the confines of marriage. Satan imitates that with pornography and steamy novels that leave men and women hungry for the real thing. They never provide what they first appear to offer. Imitations NEVER satisfy. The same is true for the other gifts that are pleasurable to our senses. Alcohol which is a gift of God is taken and abused. Food is a wonderful pleasure that people abuse. They get the taste of a good thing and eat it until their health is ruined. A shepherd must be careful to keep his livestock away from the imitations that do harm to the herd.

I have done the same thing with my cattle and horses. Klein Grass is a beautiful grass that stands green and tall and horses will eat it in a second. It is deadly to them. It poisons the liver and will kill the horses. Horse handlers must be careful when they buy hay to not ever get any Klein Grass in the mix. Likewise, simple Johnson Grass if left to seed out in drought times will poison cattle. They look fine, but these grasses will devastate a horse or cattle owner. What looks so appetizing will actually kill the animal.

In a way, we are like sheep. We have to sample everything in the field whether it's good for us or bad for us. But really in this way we are dumber than sheep. We will eat on what we KNOW will be poisonous and hurt us. We willfully poison ourselves. We go after things that we know will destroy us. Jesus warned us of this. Jesus told Peter, *"Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat."* (Luke 22:31) Jesus warned him, but Christ pointed out that He had prayed that Peter would not fail in the face of this trial and temptation. Even now, He goes before us like that shepherd removing weeds. He gives us a way out of every temptation. ¹³ *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."* (1 Corinthians 10:13 NIV)

Another task the shepherd takes on when the sheep are up on the mesas is to stop predators. They are lurking in the distance ready to pounce and prey on the flock. The shepherd's preparation is the ONLY thing that can save the sheep from their would be predators. We too are ALWAYS in danger of attack. Scripture tells us, ⁸ *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.* (1 Peter 5:8) Don't laugh Satan off as a joke. He is real, but we do not need to fear him. He is like a cougar. I have never seen one out in Whitehall, but others have. My own father saw a mountain lion/cougar in the middle of his hay field. One of my workers saw a mountain lion within 300 yards of my house. I have never seen one, but I know they are there. They are illusive if not invisible, but they are powerful. They will bring down a 2,000 pound bull in a heartbeat. Their raids defy description. That's a good picture of the illusive nature of Satan and his minions.

This reminds us that we should never be loners. Bulls will often separate themselves from the herd, and it is then, that the mountain lion strikes. I remember when my father's prize bull lost its tail to a mountain lion's attack. Satan isolates so he can assassinate. Don't become isolated. Don't try to do it alone. Surround yourself with the safety of committed Christian brothers and sisters who can hold you accountable, and lead you back to the safety of the Good Shepherd when you are prone to wander off. We desperately need each other.

Some sheep are utterly dumb before their attack. They don't make a sound. We too can crumble and become too fearful to cry out. Jesus wants our mountain top times to be times of rest and comfort. He wants us to feed up on the mesa (His word) undisturbed by the predators. Have you ever noticed how distracted you become when you sit down quietly to read the word and pray. You have to use all of your powers of concentration to not be distracted by every little thought or "to do" on your list. Satan will use anything and everything to distract you.

Another thing the shepherd does in preparing the high-country mesas, is to examine the water holes, springs, and drinking places. He has to clean them out or even repair earthen dams he has made. In the same way, Christ our Great Shepherd has gone before us. The writer

of Hebrews tells us, "¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* (Hebrews 4:15) He has known our sufferings. He was a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. He makes every provision so that our conflicts with Satan and self are not one-sided.

The Christian life CAN become a mountain top experience. It can be a table land where we feast on His provision. Jesus has been over all of this before. He will prepare that table before us in the presence of our enemies. Keller doesn't mention this, but I think this statement is powerful. "He prepares a table before us in the presence of my enemies." I know when I'm all shook up emotionally and otherwise, I lose my appetite. It is like David is saying, "He feeds me and I enjoy a banquet feast and I'm able to eat it EVEN when I see my enemies off in the distance." Just as Jesus went through Gethsemane, we to go through tough stuff. Even on the mountain top a dozen hazards can be out to get us. But we WILL have some gladness with our sadness. Do we fully appreciate what it cost our Savior to prepare a table for us in the presence of our enemies? You and I can eat on the mountain top with any and everything that might come at us, because He promises to be with us! Amen!