

Dear Friends,

We gladly sing about high spiritual ground and blessed times with the Lord, but few of the Lord's people brave the valleys and dark season closely aligned with Jesus to ever arrive at that high country. For so many naive believers, singing about it is the closest they are ever to it. In David's rich teaching in this Psalm, we discover so many rich blessings, so many ways in which our "Shepherd" protects us in ways we never imagine. So it should be. However, the same Psalm that reminds us of our Shepherd's care cautions us of dangers on every side. We discover the blessing only as we stay close to our Shepherd and His staff, and with our church friends. An isolated sheep was a ready meal for a vicious predator, and an isolated believer is also ready prey for Satan, the roaring lion who ever watches the Lord's people just to spot that lonely soul. He can move in on us so quickly and devour our faith before we give him second thought. In the Shepherd/sheep symbolism, the more we distance ourselves emotionally from our church and our church friends the more we become easy prey for the hungry and powerful "Beasts" of life. Be aware. We can attend church every Sunday, but we can be a thousand miles away from church emotionally. We need to put ourselves, body, heart, and soul into church and in safe fellowship with our brothers and sisters in our church.

Spiritual high country is where our Shepherd prepares the lushest table for us, but take note. That table is well served, but even in the midst of our best spiritual meal our spiritual adversaries are watching and looking for an opening to destroy our faith, "in the presence of mine enemies." While spiritual high country is a thing to be desired by every believer, we need to learn from such instructive lessons as this that that high table is also the locus of our fiercest adversaries and dangers. If you hope to reach that high ground, build the faithful habit now of living every part of your life with your eye on your Shepherd's staff, for it is always in His hand. The path from the ordinary for believers to that high table leads us through the valley. And, once we arrive at the high table, we must stay closer than ever with our Shepherd and with our faithful brother and sister "Sheep."

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

## Prepared Banquets

*{ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies}. (Psalm 23:5 KJV 1900)*

In our last study, we noted that often the trek through valleys occurred as the ancient shepherds led their sheep to summer high country for some of their best grazing. Interesting, those high plateaus are referred to as mesas, "Tables." David likely appealed to this common shepherd's yearly habit by the thought in our study verse. In the ancient practice of shepherding sheep, during the safe winter months, shepherds would frequently visit those high mesas, looking for the safest grazing areas for their sheep the next summer. A shepherd didn't blindly lead his sheep to the high country and search for good and safe grazing "On the fly" at the beginning of summer. No, he studied and carefully surveyed those areas many times long before he ever took his flock there to graze for the summer. As he surveyed the choice areas, he would methodically identify dangers to his flock and remove them or mark them out to keep

the sheep clear of those dangers. The shepherd truly prepared that “Table” or mesa to be as safe as possible for the sheep, once he led them to it in the early summer.

Not only did those high plateaus provide the lushest grass for the sheep; they also exposed the sheep to the greatest danger from ravenous beasts and poisonous plants or other natural dangers. Quite likely David encountered those lions and bears during his time with his family’s sheep in the high country. A caring shepherd must live his summer at constant high alert to protect his sheep while they naively enjoy the best grass of their lifetime.

These simple details from shepherds’ care for their flocks affords many rich reminders of the amazing care we daily receive from our “Shepherd,” often never knowing what He has done, or does almost constantly, to protect us and to provide us with the best of blessings.

In our last study, I observed how Christians gladly sing about going up to higher ground, but many who sing this sentiment have no sense of that high spiritual country whatever. We only reach spiritual “High ground” by faithfully following our Shepherd, not by ignoring Him and living life by our own ways.

Further, if the natural “high country,” those high lush plateaus, depict spiritual growth to greater spiritual maturity, we must understand that the path from the mundane to spiritual maturity has only one way, through the valleys. The old hymn, “Higher Ground,” teaches the wrong lesson. We don’t reach spiritual maturity by our own pressing; we gain it only as we faithfully follow our Shepherd. Further, He doesn’t magically “Plant” our feet on higher ground. He leads us to it through the valleys of affliction and trial to our higher ground. Unless we cultivate the steady habit of following Him in every area of our thinking and life, even through—especially through—those valleys, we shall never realize that higher spiritual experience. Many naïve believers think the Lord magically transports them through the clouds to spiritual high country, so, when they find themselves in the valleys of trial and pain, they become disillusioned. They forget that our Shepherd has promised to go with us through every valley, every trial, and every pain, so, when those valleys confront us in life, we need, as never before, to look to Him, cling to Him, and stay close to Him. I love the pictogram idea of His leading that I mentioned in our last study. Our following the Lord means that we always look to His staff, to His Person and guiding, protecting presence as we wind our way through those seasons. We “Continue toward the staff,” especially in our dark and difficult seasons if we hope to realize our Shepherd’s attentive and protective care. He doesn’t lead us through secret chambers that avoid the valleys; He protects us as we walk **with Him** through the valleys, but only to the extent that we constantly stay close to Him and follow Him through those valleys.

This thought holds even more wise teaching. Although the high plateaus, “Tables,” afford sheep the best grazing of their lives, they also expose the sheep to the greatest dangers. Ravenous beasts often watch the flock from a distance, waiting for the right opportunity to attack and capture an unsuspecting sheep. Take Scripture’s warnings to heart. Those predators do not eye the sheep who stays close to the shepherd and safely in the midst of the flock. They are ever on the watch for the sheep who wanders away from the flock where the predator can quickly attack and kill it. Solomon, David’s son, may well have had just such a danger in mind when he wrote these words.

*[If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth **by the footsteps of the flock**, and feed thy kids **beside the shepherds' tents**]. (Song of Solomon 1:8 KJV, emphasis added)*

Experience and observation have repeatedly confirmed this truth. False teachers and unbelievers have a keen eye for believers who live in personal isolation from their church and godly fellowship with them. Just like ravenous predators, they go for the believers who have compromised their fellowship with their church and faithful friends in the faith. Our one safe strategy in following Jesus is to “Follow Him” closely, not casually. Following Jesus is not about our emotions or our favorite pastimes. It is about daily prayerful time with Scripture and frequent and open contact and communication with our church family. One of Satan’s favorite success strategies of our day is to convince believers that all professing believers are part of their “Church.” Go to Scripture. Did Paul regard the Galatians with the same regard and confidence that he showed toward the Ephesians or the Philippians? This notion of one universal church in the here and now predictably leads to confusion, to a broken spiritual compass that slowly loses the ability to distinguish truth from error, like the sheep who wanders away from the flock and becomes easy prey to the predators who watch the flock especially to see those careless wanderers. Stay close to your home church and its teachers. In the words of Scripture.

*[Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you].*  
(Hebrews 13:17 KJV)

If you have lived long as a believer, you have experienced those dark seasons when something or someone pointed your mind to a path that would lead you directly away from your Shepherd and His flock. Oh, they may well assure you that their path will actually in the end take you closer to your Shepherd than you’ve ever been, but they are singing the enticer’s favorite song, “*Yea, hath God said?*” I well recall seasons in my life when things that appeared altogether beneficial and good on the surface, nudged me to abandon my faith and my “Flock.” I thank the Lord that He also nudged me to look more closely. I learned by experience what Scripture had often taught me; anyone or anything that encourages me to abandon my faith, my Shepherd, **or** my fellow-believers is carefully veiled with the seductive and enticing lies of Satan’s wiles. Satan and his minions never appear with sharp horns, a long tail with an arrow point on its end, and an evil sinister look on his face. He will appear as an angel of light, as a devoted believer who just happens to think differently about “My Shepherd” than I think. He will tell me, or you, how his way will end with such amazing blessings. However, when our faith ends in shipwreck on the rocky shores of our own unbelief, he will be nowhere near us. We’ll find ourselves in our own ruins all alone. He who enticed us to alter our course and follow him quickly disappears when we crash into our own ruin.

How can we avoid such disasters in our faith’s journey? As the pictogram describes, keep your heart, your affections, and your faith’s focus on your Shepherd’s staff, and move only toward Him, following the course mapped out in Scripture and exemplified by faithful believers who live close to you and around you to protect and to encourage you along the way. My first source for information I try always to make Scripture alone. However, over sixty-seven years of experience on this journey has given me ample occasions to observe. What I find in Scripture’s teachings—and warnings—I have lived to see affirmed consistently and repeatedly. Anyone or anything that in any way attempts to compromise our faith in the Lord, His Book and its wise and sure counsel, and the safety of fellowship with faithful believers whom we know by long experience to be faithful may appear as simply another innocent sheep, but

beware. Jesus warned us in the Sermon on the Mount, His personal guide to His disciples, that we should watch the fruits of those who try to lead us along their paths. They may say all the right things but look at their life. Is it defined by the “Faith of Christ,” healthy relationships, and peaceful harmony, or by contention and strife?

Those wild, hungry predators never attacked the sheep who were near their shepherd. They looked for that stray sheep who naively wandered away from the shepherd and the other sheep in the flock. The most dangerous season of our faith’s journey is that time when we choose to isolate ourselves from other believers and “Go it alone.”

That same high “Table” that afforded the best grazing also exposed the sheep to the fiercest predators. Spiritual high ground is not about sitting in the comforts of our home, humming our favorite hymn, and thinking heavenly thoughts. Spiritual high ground is where we learn most fully the essential necessity of living all our life, not just our Sunday mornings, in close fellowship with our Savior, with other “Sheep” in our flock, for only there are we safe from the dangers of the roaring adversary.

When we find ourselves bewildered and unsure about our direction, we are most likely to strike out on our own, but that is precisely what Solomon warns us to avoid. More than at any other time in our lives, when we are uncertain or in doubt, we need to anchor our lives with the “Flock,” with our personal church and pastor, and as close to our Shepherd as possible. If we strike out on our own alone, we become an easy mark for Satan who constantly prowls for lonely sheep who have abandoned their Shepherd and their fellow-sheep. And what are his plans for that isolated sheep? To devour them! (1 Peter 5:8 KJV) If we are honest with ourselves, each of us has likely lived through seasons when the idea of abandoning our faith, along with our faithful friends whom we need for our own spiritual safety. And that fierce lion can hide so adroitly that we look out “Over there” and think it to be the safest and best thing we could imagine. Only after we have isolated ourselves do we see that lion, teeth bared, roaring and paralyzing us with fear. We set ourselves up to be his next meal, not to find our life’s best chapter. God help us to learn from David’s inspired and rich words. Keep your eye on your Shepherd’s staff and ever walk toward it, no detours, no paths of your own choice. Stay daily close to Him by reading His Book, by talking to Him in prayer, and by seeking out quiet times of reflection always on Him and His faithful shepherding of us through life’s dangers, trials, and pains. He is faithful. He is good. He is your Shepherd! He is my Shepherd!

Elder Joe Holder