Psalm 23:2 *Walking With the Shepherd: He Leads Me*

***Fretting About the Future***In early March, news came out that the FBI was charging at least 44 wealthy individuals, including a couple of well-known actresses, with paying large amounts of money to rig the entrance of their children into elite colleges and universities.

The case revolves around a college preparatory service called The Key, run by a man named William Singer, who is acting as a cooperating witness with the government. These parents apparently paid large sums of money, in some cases more a than a million dollars, for Singer to help their children through what he called a “side door” to schools like Stanford, USC, and Yale.

His methods included having the kids diagnosed with a phony learning disability so that they could take the ACT or SAT at a special location where Singer could bribe the proctor into altering the scores or, in some cases, have someone take the test for them. At least one person involved in the scheme was a test-taking genius who—apparently—could get any desired score on a test. Thus, if you wanted your kid to look smart, but not suspiciously smart, this guy would take the ACT and get a 33. If you wanted your kid to look like a genius, this guy would take it and get the perfect score of 36.

Singer also exploited a loophole in which athletes recruited to a school’s sports teams would have reduced admissions standards. He would create fake athletic profiles for these children for sports that they had never played, let alone have any interest in. In one hilarious example, he photoshopped a student’s face onto a picture of a water polo player. He would then bribe underpaid assistant coaches on these less publicized sports teams to put the kid’s name in front of the school admission board.

The case caught national attention in part because two of the parents are well-known actresses. Felicity Huffman, who was on *Desperate Housewives*; and Lori Loughlin, who cultivated a wholesome image as Aunt Becky on *Full House* and its spin-off, as well as the star of *When Calls the Heart* on the Hallmark Channel, have both been implicated. And there are indications there may still be more people charged. A New York Times article this week said:

[William Singer](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/us/william-rick-singer-admissions-scandal.html?module=inline)… was based in Newport Beach, and many of his clients were in the Los Angeles area. Some of those clients are now grappling with a secret, nerve-racking waiting game, while fellow parents openly gloat about cheaters getting their due or whisper about which high school senior might have benefited from some shady help.

“For many of these people, this is the only thing they can think about,” said one defense lawyer in Los Angeles whose firm represents multiple parents who have not been charged, some of whom have been in contact with the government. He declined to be quoted by name, citing concerns about how that might affect his firm’s clients. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/us/college-admissions-scandal.html>

I think this story has captured the nation’s attention for a couple of reasons. One is because it seems to confirm the widely held belief that rich people play by different rules than the rest of us. It often appears that those with lots of money feel they should be afforded opportunities the rest of us are denied, whether they have earned those opportunities or not. Thus, I think a lot of the fascination with the case comes from seeing these rich people exposed and embarrassed for their shenanigans. There is a kind of schadenfreude—that is, delight at the downfall of others—that comes from seeing somebody like “Aunt Becky” get called out for trying to cheat the system.

But I also think this story taps into something every parent has felt: what if my kid doesn’t get the opportunity to succeed that everybody else gets? I think the story shows the lengths to which some parents will go to give their children every perceived opportunity to get a leg up.

And why does that happen? Why are parents willing to cheat and bribe and forge just so their child will get into a school that is perceived as slightly more prestigious?

I think it is because—and I don’t think this is limited to those who have obscene amounts of wealth, I think this is generally true of all of us—we worry about what the future will hold. We fret. We have anxiety about what is coming. And so we try to engineer our future—or the future of our children—so that we will have every advantage possible.

And so, while you may have looked at your child right after this story came out and said: “You know I would never spend that kind of money just to get you into college, right?” I think none of us are immune from feeling uncertainty about where are lives are headed. For us, the future is unknown, and because it is unknown it often scares us.

***God Has Plans For You***It is for people who fret, worry and fear that Psalm 23 was written. One of the things the Shepherd Psalm is meant to address is our anxiety about what the future holds. Psalm 23 is written so that we can have confidence going forward. But it is also written in such a way that we will know God’s care for us does not mean we will have our every wish fulfilled.

We started our series on Psalm 23 last week. One of the things I said was that, since it is such a short Psalm, and it is one I want you to be familiar with, that we will read it together each week. So **would you read it with me** now?

**1**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
**3**    he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.
**4**Even though I walk
    through the darkest valley,
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 overflows.
**6**Surely your goodness and love will follow me
    all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
    forever.

Our series on Psalm 23 is going to take six weeks. There are six verses in Psalm 23, and so we are going to go through it one verse at a time.

That means, this week, that we are in **verse 2:**

**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

The word that stands out to me in this verse is “leads.” “He leads me.” The truth we need to know today—especially as it relates to our anxiety about the direction our lives are going and questions about what the future holds—is that the Lord is leading us.

I’ll put it like this, our big idea for today: **When God is your shepherd, He has plans for you. He has a destination for you in His mind.** God knows where you need to be, and if He is your shepherd… He’s going to take you there.

Last week, I mentioned that Psalm 23 is frequently listed as one of the 5 most popular passages of the Bible. I briefly mentioned the other four, which includes Jeremiah 29:11. And if you are familiar with that verse, then you recognize some of its language in the way I phrased the big idea. **Jeremiah 29:11** says this:

11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

I see Psalm 23:2 and Jeremiah 29:11 conveying similar ideas. Both of them can be helpful when we are tempted to fret about our future. And so, I would like to consider both verses together in order to learn four things about God’s plans for us.

***He’s Not Taken By Surprise***First, **God’s plans are planned.** I know that’s a little redundant, but I want what seems pretty obvious to be perfectly clear. God knows where He is leading us. He has a plan. He is not taken by surprise.

As I said, **Jeremiah 29:11** is one of the most popular verses in the Bible, especially at this time of year with so many graduations taking place. It is very common for people to inscribe this verse in a greeting card or to stencil it above a baby’s crib. It’s a verse that seems to offer a blanket assurance that everything is going to be O.K. and we are all going to reach our unlimited potential. It is a good verse, a hopeful verse, but one that we often take out of context.

The context for this verse is a letter that Jeremiah has written from Jerusalem to the Jewish exiles living in Babylon. This is shortly after Nebuchadnezzar has destroyed Jerusalem and carried most of its leading citizens into captivity. Jeremiah has been warning that this was coming, that it was part of God’s judgment on the nation, and he has even been wearing a wooden yoke in public as an object lesson to let the people know they needed to be prepared for an extended period of slavery.

But there are false prophets, most notably a man named Hananiah, that are giving a different message. Hananiah is claiming Babylon is going to fall apart, and that within two years the exiles will all be back home (Jer. 28:3). Hananiah even takes the yoke off Jeremiah and breaks it (Jer. 28:10-11). His is a message of misguided optimism and empty promises. Hananiah is the one preaching a blanket assurance that everything will turn out fine, and that if the people just follow their hearts they all have unlimited potential.

It’s Jeremiah’s job to say that is not the case. Jeremiah is the one that has to point out that what has happened is not an accident, but is in fact God’s judgment for the choices the people have made. Hananiah, Jeremiah says, is preaching lies (Jer. 28:15-16). And so, Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles to tell them they are going to be there for a while. In fact, **Jeremiah 29:10**, the verse immediately before the one we quote so often, tells them they will be there not for two years, but for 70. There’s a promise that the exile will end, but it is certainly not on the time frame the people would prefer. In fact, most everyone alive when Jeremiah writes the letter will be dead before the Jews return home.

It’s in this context that our **famous verse** is written. When God says “I know the plans I have for you,” the most immediate plans He is referring to are to leave these people far from home and in captivity.

And the point is—and here is where this verse is reassuring—is that what is happening to the people is not outside of God’s control. What they are experiencing is not accidental. God is not being taken by surprise. What is happening, no matter how much it is something the people would not prefer, is in fact a part of God’s plan.

And I see that in **Psalm 23** as well. When we are told that the Shepherd leads us, the idea is that He knows where He is going. He does not take us into places or circumstances by accident. And that includes pleasant places—like green pastures and quiet waters—but it also includes, as verse four says, dark valleys. Or, as older translations put it, even “the valley of the shadow of death.”

His plans are planned. What we are experiencing is not an accident. We are not subject to the winds of fate. Following the Shepherd means trusting that He knows what He is doing.

***He Has a Purpose***Which leads to our second point: **God’s plans are for our good.** God’s plans are for a purpose. He leads us where He leads us for a reason.

Another word that stands out to me in **Psalm 23:2** is the word “makes”. “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” Sometimes God leads us to places where we don’t necessarily want to go, but which are for our good.

My experience with sheep is limited, but I do know they don’t always know what’s best for them. I have one sheep story I’ve told here a couple of times:

When I was in seminary, I did a summer internship at a rural congregation outside of Aplington, IA. They were in between pastors, so they let Beth and I lived in their parsonage and I got to pretend to be a pastor for three months. And since it was a rural church, the property included some pasture land, which the church rented out to a sheep farmer. So all that summer, we had just weaned lambs bleating all through the night just outside our bedroom window. If you think the sound sheep make is cute—“Baaaa!”—trust me, it is not. At least, it is not at 2:00 in the morning.

Anyway, one day I came outside to discover one of the sheep had gotten on the wrong side of the fence. I called the farmer and together we tried to get that sheep back in the pasture. The funny thing is, sheep are herd animals. There is nothing that sheep wanted more than to be back with the flock. But he didn’t want to do what we wanted him to do and go through the gate. Instead, he wanted to take the most direct route back to his brothers by running directly and violently into the fence. All he needed to do was go another 20 feet down, but he didn’t want to do that. It wasn’t until he was stunned and confused from multiple collisions that the farmer was able to wrestle him down and make him go through the gate.

And I think that’s true of our relationship with God. So often God knows what is best for us, and yet we think we know better. He knows where the greenest pastures are, and yet we resist. Sometimes God must make us lie down.

That’s the case with the **verse from Jeremiah** as well. The news that the exiles would not be returning for 70 years was not what they wanted to hear, but God had a purpose in it. They were receiving an education in the exile. They were learning to thrive where they were planted. God told them to seek the peace and the prosperity of the city in which they lived, because if it prospered they too would prosper (Jer. 29:5-7).

More importantly they, were learning to depend on the Lord. For generations, the people had been ignoring God. Now they would learn to look to Him again. **Here are the verses** right after Jeremiah 29:11:

**12**Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. **14**I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.” (Jeremiah 28:12-14)

Just like a parent who must sometimes make a toddler take a nap “for his own good,” sometimes God’s plans for us are not what we think we want, and yet they are what we need. Following the Shepherd means trusting that He is doing what is best for us.

***Plans to Prosper***Third: **God’s plans are good.** Not only does He lead us for our good, but God’s plans are, objectively, good. God is leading us to truly good things.

In **Psalm 23:2** this is captured in two beautiful images: “green pastures” and “quiet waters.”

Sheep eat grass. They need good, green grass to eat. The hills of Israel are not like the fields of Iowa, though. Here, especially right now, anywhere there is an unattended patch of dirt, we get green things. Everywhere you look during the spring, everything is green as can be. But in the arid hills of Israel, where it is rocky and the rain can be unpredictable, green things are few and far between. A shepherd’s job then, is to know where the green patches are and get his sheep to them. Literal green pastures, wide ranging swaths of lush and succulent grass, were to be treasured and carefully protected. A shepherd who knows where to find the good grass is a good shepherd.

Likewise, water can be hard to find in Israel’s hills. And, because the terrain is so steep, what water there is is often in rapid running streams. Fast moving water is dangerous for a sheep. Imagine falling into a river while wearing a heavy wool coat. The wool would instantly absorb the water and weigh you down. So imagine what it would be like for a clumsy sheep wearing all of its winter wool to step into a fast moving stream. It would be a good way to lose a sheep.

A good shepherd knows that his sheep need quiet pools of water to drink from. A good shepherd knows where to find that quiet water, or he will use rocks and stones to create it. Water is vitally important to every living creature—it’s a basic component of life—and the good shepherd leads His sheep to living water.

Both these images indicate that God’s plans for us are good. He has good things in store for us. He is leading those who belong to Him to good places.

And that’s what **Jeremiah 29:11** is telling us as well. God knows the plans He has for us. Plans to prosper us and not to harm us.

It’s tempting to connect this verse to financial success. God wants to prosper us. For us, prosperity means being wealthy. There is even a version of Christianity known as the “prosperity gospel” that teaches that God wants all of His people to be rich.

But such an understanding misses the point of the verse, and really reduces the scope of this promise to just one aspect of our lives.

The word that is translated “prosper” here is the Hebrew word *shalom.* It’s one of the most important words in the Bible; and one of the highest ideals in the Hebrew language. Usually we translate it with the English word “peace.” But it also has the meanings of wholeness, completion, prosperity, well-being and safety. So it is more than just the absence of conflict and strife, it encompasses the entire range of well-being.  Therefore, it includes spiritual and physical completeness, harmony and fulfillment.

More than that, shalom comes from an Eastern culture, while we live in a Western culture. Where we are very concerned about possessions, Hebrew culture is much more concerned about relationships. To have *shalom*, then, is to have peace and prosperity in all your relationships, especially your relationship with God.

I had an Old Testament professor in seminary who argued that s*halom* is the main theme of the Bible. He says our *shalom* with God is broken at the beginning of Genesis with Adam and Eve, and the rest of the Bible is the story of how this *shalom* can be restored through Jesus. Ultimately, the Bible ends with the perfect peace—the *shalom*—of the new heavens and the new Earth in the book of Revelation.

The promise of Jeremiah 29:11 then, is the promise of *shalom* in the plan of God. God’s plans are good. God’s plans lead to peace and prosperity. Following the Shepherd means trusting that what He has for us is good.

***He’s Been There***And then, finally, **God’s plans are scouted.** Where God is leading us, He’s already been. He’s gone on ahead of us.

This is implied in **Psalm 23** in the word “lead.” The old saying is that cowboys drive cattle, but shepherds lead sheep. They go before the flock. In the little book “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23” Philip Keller writes:

[The good shepherd] clears out the water holes, springs and drinking places for his flock. He has to clean out the accumulated debris of leaves, twigs, stones and soil which may have fallen into the water source during the autumn and winter. He may need to repair small earth dams he has made to hold water. And he will open the springs that may have become overgrown with grass and brush and weeds…

The parallel in the Christian life is that Christ, our great Good Shepherd, has Himself already gone before us into every situation and every extremity that we might encounter. We are told emphatically that He was tempted in all points like as we are. We know He entered fully and completely and very intimately into the life of men upon our planet. He has known our sufferings, experienced our sorrows and endured our struggles in this life; He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Because of this He understands us, He has totally identified Himself with humanity. He has therefore, a care and compassion for us beyond our ability to grasp. No wonder He makes every possible provision to ensure that when we have to cope with Satan, sin or self, the contest will not be one-sided. Rather, we can be sure He has been in that situation before, He is in it now again with us and because of this the prospects of our preservation are excellent. (p. 105-106)

In **Jeremiah 29:11** we are told that God’s plans are to give “a hope and a future.” Ultimately, for those who follow the Shepherd, our hope is grounded in what Jesus has done for us. We are promised that just as He overcame the grave, we too will one day be raised to new life. Russell Moore writes:

God has a plan for us, in Christ. That plan is not for our destruction but for our well-being. We are being conformed into the image of Christ—by sharing in his suffering—and our ultimate end is not as victims but as victors, as joint-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:12-39).

How do we know this? We know it the way the exiles of old did: not by observing our present condition but by the word of God, his oath and his covenant. That means that our plans may evaporate. Our dreams may be crushed. Our lives might be snuffed out. But the God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise us up with him. <https://www.russellmoore.com/2017/06/28/jeremiah-2911-apply/>

Christ has gone before us. He has scouted the way. Following the Shepherd means trusting in what He has already done for us.

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We worry and we fret. Sometimes we get so anxious about the future that we are tempted to break the rules in an attempt to engineer better outcomes.

But Psalm 23 and Jeremiah 29 exist to remind us that God has a plan. He is leading us. Our futures are in His hands.

That doesn’t meant things will always go the way we want them to go. But it should fill us with confidence that our Good Shepherd knows where we need to be, and He’s going to take us there.