

Series: *WHEN NO ONE'S LOOKING*—September 3, 2006

**GET READY, GET SET...
Psalm 23**

1. I saw a great picture posted on AOL last week that reminded me what happens every September. It was a picture of the Space Shuttle on it's moving launch pad. Apparently NASA officials were a little ambivalent about a launch because of Hurricane Ernesto—so they started the 12 hour, 4 ½ mile trip back to the Assembly building on the huge caterpillar pad it sits on. Half way through, they changed their minds, and started back.

-I've always thought that September should be the start of the new year. I mean, for all practical purposes, it's launch time. Summer vacation's over; cottage season is done; we start getting serious about work—and kids go back to school! It's the most wonderful time of the year!

 - a. As I thought Labor Day as starting the countdown for the launch—I thought about the **launch philosophy** we sometimes apply to our lives. In the space industry, the technicians don't just load the rocket engines up with pile of fuel and say, "Once you we get you out of the earth's atmosphere and into orbit, you're on your own. Aim for the Space Station—call home when you get there. Good night...and good luck! 4-3-2-1-Whoosh!"

-They spend a lot of time calculating where they want to go, how to get there, who will do it, and how much fuel they need, the velocity and course corrections it will take to get their and back.

But the most dangerous part and energy-intensive part of it all is the launch. It takes a **lot** of power to get the shuttle off the ground and into space. Apparently these launches are quite awe-inspiring. The sheer power of the engines, feeling the ground shake, watching that thing go off in a blaze of fire. Then the problem becomes, "How do we get them back alive!"
 - b. When we launch our lives and our kids into a new phase every September—whether it's university, going to school for the first time—there's always a little bit of ambivalence. It's kind of a mixture of fear, anticipation—maybe a little relief.

-When it comes to our own lives, or the lives of our children, we are tempted to think a little like NASA—that if we make our calculations right, and put enough fuel and thrust behind things—it should be okay. In fact, we approach a lot of areas of life like that.
2. Let me make a few assumptions and see if I have us pegged right. You can just smile, nod your heads, or say, **Amen, preach it, brother!** This is a pretty high octane group. We're achievers. We've learned that if you want something in life, you go after it—even if you have to knock a few people down to get it. If you really **want** something--you set your sights on it, dream about it, eat it, drink it, plan for it—and then load your rocket with fuel and launch in that general direction. If you have enough thrust—you'll get there and maybe get there first.

-We think about our children, if we have them, the same way.

If they're going to get ahead, if they're going to be successful, if they're going to get the **plum**, the plum schools, the plum opportunities, the plum job, the plum life—they're going to have to have an edge. In our mind, that edge is the right education, a relentless work ethic, and enough wins in their success file to give them the right portfolio. In our minds, the key is a strong launch and lots of velocity.

-Loosely put, our philosophy is, **good things come to those who blow away the competition and get launched at Mach IV toward their pre-determined goals.** Now, am I at least somewhat accurate in my statements? Vote...**now!**

- a. Next week, I'm going to be officially starting a series of talks on character, entitled **When No One's Looking.** Mayor Don Cousens is going to be here to speak as well. I'm going to be talking about how important it is to take initiative, to be a responsible person—to not just sit back and think life will happen, but to think, plan and work.

-But there's something that we launch-happy, advantage-obsessed, **ready-fire-aim** people need to know about life. The calling of Jesus is not, "aim for the moon, fire up your engines—and launch." The calling of Jesus is, in a word, **"follow."** Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd...my sheep hear my voice and **follow me.**" -Jesus walked up to James and John, caring for their fishing business—cleaning out computer files, lining up customers and said...**follow me!** A rich young up-and-coming business man ran up to Jesus and said, "What do I need to do to be saved!"

Jesus said, "Sell the stuff that's anchoring your life, give away the money, and...**follow me.**" After the resurrection, Jesus had a long talk with Peter about love, about some stuff he would face in the future—and Peter was really concerned about John—Jesus said, "Never mind him; you, Peter, **follow me.**" Before he left, Jesus told his disciples, "follow me."

-We're tempted to think, "Yeah, well, that applies to **spiritual** life. Of **course** we should choose to follow Jesus there—but in my **everyday** life, if I don't set the course and launch, I'll spend my life riding back and forth on the launch pad!"

- b. Please understand—I'm not recommending that we sit around and wait for God to phone and tell us what to do—but it's also wrong to think that the soul arena and life arena are two different compartments—and one is the God compartment—the **up-to-God** part, and the other is the **up-to-me** compartment. Jesus didn't say, "Follow me when you're at church" or "follow me on the God-stuff." He just said, **"Follow me."** And that takes an adjustment in thinking that I want to spend a few minutes talking about.

3. How many of you are familiar with Psalm 23? Psalm 23 has brought huge comfort to people for years—especially in the dark valleys life has a way of bringing. David, the author, had had a whole **pile** of dark valleys—some we can barely imagine. But, at the core, it's a Psalm about **following.** Let's read it:
The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even 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. You prepare a table before me in the

presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever (Psalm 23).

a. David, as you know, had been a shepherd for years—as had most of his ancestors. Over the years, they had honed shepherding to a fine craft. The commitment of these shepherds was legendary. David tells of single-handedly fighting off a bear and a lion to save a sheep. I just need to say, ***I wouldn't do that! "Here, bear—Sir! TAKE the dumb sheep!"*** I know, I'm an uncommitted loser but I have to weigh it all—"Hmmm. My life... or mutton." But Jesus, Son of David, would later say, "The good shepherd doesn't run away when danger comes—he lays his life down for the sheep. ***That's why the sheep listen to the shepherd's voice and follow him!***

b. A lot of times, we look at Psalm 23, and we say, "Wow! That's cool that God is ***so committed*** to me and my safety and happiness! Someone who lays down their life for me, takes me to a place of blessing and anointing—and into his fold forever. That's a fantastic deal!"

-Let me tell you what we tend to do, when push comes to shove. It's instinctual. It's to go passive. To think, "I just do what I want and God protects me as I pursue my dreams."

This psalm actually is the story of the yearly journey of a shepherd with his sheep—who ***follow him!*** The end point of this journey may be a little obscured because we're not familiar with the language. It's,

"...You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

-Let me explain as best I can what David's talking about. Early in the spring, shepherds would go into the mountains to find a special place where the sheep could graze all summer—called the ***tablelands***. They would take a lot of time and effort scouting for the best places and preparing it for the sheep. They would pull out any poisonous weeds that were growing; they would rid the place of predators; they would dam up a stream so the sheep would have a quiet, unpolluted source of water.

-When it comes to our lives, we call the tablelands, "The good life;" "having it made;" being ***financially secure.***" It's what the OT—and Jewish people still call ***shalom***. It's this place of peace with yourself, peace with others—settledness—this under-lying joy that infiltrates your life. People of faith sometimes say, "I'm really ***blessed.***"

-If we were to describe the bullseye, the goal of what we're launching ourselves and our kids toward, it would be this. Table lands; the full, blessed life. It's what everyone wants.

c. Now, the question is—***how do you get there—to the tablelands?***

CW says, "Well, good things don't come to people who sit around and wait for blessing to call them on the phone! You need to dream about it, set your sights on it, set goals, come up with a strategic plan, and powerlaunch yourself or your kids or your career toward it!

-In our world, **velocity** is the answer to how someone gets there. Make a run for it, build up momentum by doing the right things, and if you don't choke or stumble you can probably make it. That's the teaching of our culture. It's like getting to the table land, the good place, the place of plenty is a straight shot.

-But the implied answer in Psalm 23—and the direct answer of Jesus is—if you want to find a blessed place in life you have to **follow** the One who has the power to bless. In fact, that's really the point of a shepherd/sheep relationship. The shepherd cares for the sheep—leads them to where they really want to be. But if you're going to be **led**, you have to...**follow!**

-And for high octane, highly independent, make-it-happen people like us, following sounds a little crazy. We live in a world, a culture, where it's all about finding your own individual path—not just to where you want to go, but to God. We launch our own lives and ask God to draw His bullseye around wherever we land. "God, bless the path **I've** chosen." And His answer, frankly, is "**Why don't you follow the path I've BLESSED!**"

- d. Us choosing our own path and asking God to bless it totally contradicts the truth the Bible teaches about having a relationship with God. Psalm 23 tells us that the Lord, the Good Shepherd **prepares** the table for us. He goes ahead of us and does what's necessary to prepare the place of blessing—and then He leads us to it. But to find it, we have to...**follow.**

- 4. So, that takes us back to the beginning of Psalm 23. Where does it start? Well, it actually starts with choosing the Lord as your Shepherd—because you believe that the Lord is a Good Shepherd, a wise shepherd, a shepherd who leads you with your best in mind. Those who follow Him "don't want for anything." Anyone know what that phrase means? Well, for sheep—it doesn't mean that all the pasture, protection—everything it needs for the rest of its life is stacked in a big pile around it. It means knowing that the Shepherd will **always** be there—and will lead them to a place where they'll be protected, fed, watered and properly cared for. The sheep's confidence is in the goodness and the competence of the shepherd it's following. **That's** the source of contentment.

-We get really confused about that in our world—even as believers in Jesus. We think, "I will be contented **when...**"—and the **when** gets followed by just about everything. It's usually **table** stuff.

- a. Psalm 23 is saying that yours and my decision, at the start, is about **where** we will look for contentment. It really comes down to choosing which shepherd you'll follow. Choosing Jesus as the Good Shepherd—choosing to follow Him is **not** saying, "At the end of the day, I want to be in his fold—heaven—but for right now I'll follow money, or success or something else to round out my life. Choosing Jesus as the Good Shepherd is in essence saying, "My ultimate contentment in life rests on his love, his care, his protection—now how fast and high I can launch my life."
- b. Something else comes before table time. Quiet streams. I want to be careful not to over-spiritualize this. Sheep, like any kind of livestock, need water. Lots of it. Like, two 500 ml. of **Aquafina** a day won't cut it. David is talking about the fact

that sheep need **quiet** water before they'll drink. They don't drink from fire hoses, waterfalls or whitewater rapids.

-Water symbolizes the Holy Spirit, life, lots of things. But I want to emphasize the **quiet**. In a very noisy world, filled with high speed highways, cars, planes and internet—to be totally honest, we need **quiet** if we're going to hear the Shepherd's voice calling us above the roar of life.

-Listening, thinking, just being quiet in the presence of God before you launch is very important. It may save your life. I wonder if the pilots or traffic controller in Lexington might have realized that the plane with 50 souls in it was on the wrong runway if they'd had some quiet space to think and look before revving the engines and launching the plane in a space that was too short? A life jammed with noise, confusion—running on empty—doesn't lead to blessing.

- c. We also need our souls restored by the good shepherd. This is a direct reference to what happens when a sheep gets stuck. In old shepherd terminology, a sheep being **cast** was when it somehow got rolled over on it's back and couldn't get up—kinda like a turtle. See, sheep have wool. Wool is not only heavy, it's absorbent. A sheep's wool sometimes gets caked with mud—and when they lay down, they can't get back up—and if they don't, they'll die.
- And sheep are like walking balls of Velcro—all they need is something sticky—like a thorn bush—and they're stuck; coyote bait. Shepherds are always on the move and always counting their sheep; "97, 98, 99...99--someone's missing!" They'll leave all the other sheep and go out looking for the one that's lost or stuck.
- Anyone here besides me ever done something dumb, been somewhere you shouldn't have been, gotten your "wool full of dirt"—and couldn't get back on your feet? Who comes looking for you? Who helps you find your way back when you're lost? Who helps you get out of the mud? Well, the Good Shepherd does...**if** you're following **Him**.
- d. That's why it says here that, if you **follow** Him, He will lead you in the **paths of righteousness**. Does anyone have a clue what that means? Well, it means that He'll help show you the **right** path. He'll keep you from detours, from paths of stupidity, paths that will kill you, paths that are littered with landmines. He's not just smart, He's **brilliant, wise**; He knows that future. Anyone here know the future? We don't. See, if the place of blessing and goodness and protection is something God has gone ahead of us and prepared—then he also knows how to get there.
- Not only that, the path to where you want to be isn't this 4 lane highway. It's sometimes dark and steep and treacherous—like a valley with shadows of death in it. But He knows the way—and He, as a **Good Shepherd**—won't run. He's bigger than any enemy out there.
- Anyone know what the key might be to being led on the right paths—and through the dark valleys? What do **we** have to do? **FOLLOW** would be the right answer to that question. We have to follow. The question is--**why wouldn't we?**
5. I'll tell you why. David knew, Jesus knew, most people who've been around sheep know that they're some of the dumbest, most helpless animals on the planet. Most wild

animals know not to eat poisonous plants. Not sheep—they'll gobble them right down. I've said this before, but sheep are so focused on eating—they're like lawnmowers with hooves. They'll walk right off cliffs.

-The crazy thing is that they'll **follow** one another right off cliffs. No sheep ever stops at the edge to ponder, "Hmmm. Sally stepped off here and totally disappeared. I wonder what happened? Following her might be a ba-a-a-ad idea! Oh well...a-a-a-ah! They roll over on their backs—"Ha-ah! I've fallen and I can't get up!"

-But shepherds **love** these animals. I've never heard of a pig farmer laying down his life for his pigs, or a turkey farmer laying down his life for a turkey. But shepherds, like soldiers, will lay their lives on the line. And that's what Jesus did.

a. Know what our biggest problem is? It's our pride. "I'm no dumb sheep! I can find my own way in life. I'm not some stupid, directionally-challenged loser. I'm going to aim my life in the general direction of my dreams, fire up my engines and launch! I'll draw the bullseye after I land!"

-To be honest—we're too arrogant to follow. We can be way down some detour, rolled over in some ditch—our life smashed on the guardrails, "Hey—need help?" "No! I'm fine!" We're over-worked, frazzled, too tired to think—and we blunder on, too arrogant to rest, find quiet, and listen.

b. I'll tell you another problem. It's thinking that get some general directions at the start of the journey—then launch ourselves in the direction of where we think we should go. Sometimes we walk until he gives some direction, or gives a warning we don't like.

c. So, let's just be really clear that following the Good Shepherd means admitting:

*I **can't** stack enough stuff around me to be content

*I **can't** bring peace to my own world

*I **can't** find myself when I've lost my way

*I'm not **smart** enough to find all the right paths on my own

*I **can't** stuff my fear, suck it up, and bluff my way through the scary places in life

*I can't launch myself or my kids high enough, far enough, for fast enough to skip the all the steps in following—and land on the tablelands.

*I'm not **good** enough, **wise** enough, or **powerful** enough to know what the future holds and make my own place in it...

-But, if I follow a Shepherd who's the creator of all, Lord of all, wise and brilliant and loving beyond my wildest dreams...I can.

6. Friends, truth is that **everyone** has a shepherd. Everyone has something or someone that they're following—thinking it will bring them to the table lands, the life where their cup is full, and goodness and love and success follows them all the days of their lives.

-For some, that shepherd is money. For others it's success at work, or a relationship, or popularity, or their magnificent portfolio. At first, it's kinda hard to tell who or what's the good shepherd and who or what's not. But over time, it becomes obvious that everyone follows a shepherd—but there's only one **Good Shepherd**.

-If you're not following Jesus as your shepherd, who or what are you following? Can't your shepherd bring you contentment. Can your shepherd lead you to a place of peace? Does your shepherd come looking for you when you've lost your way—and everyone thinks you're an idiot? Does your shepherd **always** know the right way to go? And do you have a shepherd with a plan for you—to bless you; to give you a hope and a future. And, when it's all over, does your shepherd know the way home?

7. We call ourselves Christ-**followers** because that's what we do. We do what Jesus said. We actually **follow** Him.
We follow what He said. We follow what He did. And we follow where He leads.

-Don't just launch yourself mindlessly into another year. Velocity won't get you or anywhere else where you want to go...and need to go. God's question this morning to you is, "Will you choose to **follow** me? One step at a time? Will you actually **follow?**"