



“What People Really Want”
by Timmy Fearer
Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Matthew 28:1-10

¹ After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

There was a crucifixion. Then there was death and burial. It makes you think about your own death. I remember one pastor said, every major decision in life ought to be made in a graveyard, just to give you a reality check. What am I going to do about

my death? What am I going to do about my sin? So there was a crucifixion, there was death and burial.

And then there was this empty tomb. Rest in peace? I don't think so. Apparently not. If this is true, there's a lot for you and me to think about. There's a lot here to make us nervous, if we're taking it seriously in this story.

The men were afraid. They were sheltering in place. (That brings back fond memories of four years ago. No.) The women apparently were not afraid. They were not cooperating. They were out running around and they run into an angel. Then they run into Jesus because he was out running around. He was not cooperating either. He was dead. Now he's alive again. And the women become the first evangelists telling the world Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Incredible! If that's true, it changes everything.

Let's read something together, something that's also out of the Bible. This is Psalm 23, from the book of Psalms. That's a book in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. There are 150 Psalms. They are poetry. They are prayers. They are songs to be sung. This is one that many of you know. This may be new to some of you.

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 goodness and mercy

shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Lord is my shepherd, amen. David, the great warrior king of Israel, who had been a shepherd himself when he was a boy and a young adult, he wrote that 3,000 years ago, 30 centuries ago. It's as fresh and beautiful and powerful today as it was then.

At its heart, it's answering a question that everybody has asked or will ask him or herself perhaps multiple times in life, regardless of your race, regardless of your gender, regardless of your age, regardless of where you are in the social strata, at the top or at the bottom. It's answering a question and here's the question: What do you really want in life? What do you want out of life? Can you boil it down and tell me in one single sentence?

Typically, when I ask people that, if they've thought about it – and a lot of people honestly haven't really thought about it, they're just living life on autopilot, what's going to happen now – but for those who thought about it, and can boil it down into one single sentence, one single thing, I get a lot of different answers.

For example, some say, “I want a long life, health right now. I want to do what I can to stay healthy and young and make it last as long as I possibly can.”

Others say, “I just want happiness in my life. I just want to be happy.” The two often go together. “I want a long and happy life.” Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – that's written right into our

Declaration of Independence as a national document, as part of our story.

Some say, “I just want some peace. Finally! I don't want to keep waking up in the middle of the night, worrying, stressed out about [fill in the blank – what is it for you?] I don't want to be in the middle of conflict with my kids anymore, with my parents, with my significant other, with the boss, with the neighbors, with my siblings, with my best friend who's now at odds with me. Just give me some peace.”

Some say, “I just want food and shelter in life. I just want the basics – not a lot, just a roof over my head, something on the table. I'm not asking for much.”

Others say, “I want a lot of food and a lot of shelter. I want the house, and the second house, and the boat, and the trips, and the clothes – the so-called good life, all the material comforts. Just keep it coming.”

Our immigrant friends may say, along with many of our forefathers and foremothers, “I just want freedom and the opportunity to pursue my dreams.” That's really what this country is about when it's at its best, isn't it?

The young can be heard to say, “I want meaning and purpose in my life. I want to make a difference with my life. I want to change the world for good. I want to make it a better place. I want to make it a just world, a beautiful world for people.

For many of you, what you want in life is all about what you want for others – friends, family, maybe the grandkids, niece and nephew. As a young,

single mother said to me once, some years ago, as she was trying to raise her son all by herself, "I just want my son to grow up and be a good person." That's not an easy task these days, is it? "I want him to stay out of trouble. I want him to survive. I want him to thrive."

All of that sounds like the 23rd psalm, which is all about what sheep want in life and turns into what people really want in life. We are kinda like sheep, in some respects. We want our needs met. We want peace and rest, like the rest you get lying down in a green meadow.



You know what this is? It's an open buffet, all you can eat. We want that in all of its dimensions, don't we? We want that beside a cool running stream. We want restoration of our body and our soul in a place like that as a regular part of life.

Some of you are here and your soul needs to be restored. You are wiped out. You are tired. You're about empty.

We want guidance in life, to be led through life on the right paths, as David wrote, making the right decision. Some of you have got some decisions weighing on you, heavy. You're not really sure which way to go but you've got to decide.

Along with that, we want assurance in life – no fear as we walk through the darkest valleys of life or, as the old translation used to say, the valley of the shadow of death, or the death shadow. What was that all about? Well, that's what a Middle Eastern shepherd would call a narrow passage in a canyon, in a ravine with sharp turns, dark corners and caves, where wild animals and bandits could hide out and easily jump out and suddenly attack the sheep.



You may be in one of those valleys right now in your life, passing through a dangerous stretch, sudden crisis, reversal possible at any moment. That's where our country is today. That's where so much of our world is today. Life is full of that. We don't want that but we've got to walk through that from time to time, and as we do, we want to know that we're going to make it out okay, with no fear of the evil that's just waiting right around the corner.

So, we want protection in life. We want somebody with, as David put it, a rod and a staff. Those are shepherds' weapons. The rod was a big club with a rounded head on it to attack and defend, and then also this long staff with a crook at the end. That's for reaching out and helping sheep get out of a bad situation, stuck in the rocks below.

And we want rich provision. Why not ask for it? We want a full table and an overflowing cup, even with the enemy in the vicinity. We want goodness and love and mercy in this life, following us wherever we go, all the way through life. We want, as it were, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, right now with everybody there, in this life and in the afterlife, in an everlasting life, beginning right now. What part of that picture don't you want?

David is saying, what we really want in life, what we're really looking for, is a God who will provide all of that for us – a God who we can know, a God we can have a relationship with, a God who's like a shepherd to us, who's going to lead us, provide for us, watch over us, protect us, always be with us, now and forever. We want to shepherd God in this life. That's right. If that's what God is like, I want that God and then I want more and more of that God every day.

That's a really good answer. That's a smart answer. That's actually Jesus' answer to the question, "What do you really want in life?" He said this about himself at one point: "I am the good shepherd." And then he said, "The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep." And he wasn't done. A few moments later, he said this: "I laid down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I

have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again."

Listen. Jesus Christ really is risen from the dead. He lives. That is Easter. That is Christianity. That is a resurrection story. And without that resurrection story, this is all just a pretty game we're playing. But *with* that resurrection story, this is the only game that ultimately matters. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Jesus Christ is the shepherd God we want in life. Jesus said this in the same chapter I was just reading from: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of My hand." This is the God you can know. This is the God who will lead you and provide for you and watch over you and protect you and always be with you. What good news!

Let's wrap this up with the story Jesus told about such a God. He told it to some people who were having a hard time understanding this God. He said, in so many words, "Think of God like this."

Luke 15:4-6

⁴ Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

Which one of you wouldn't do that for one of your kids? There is such a God and you are that lost sheep. You're that lost child.

If you're looking for some peace and some rest, if you're looking for restoration, if you're looking for guidance and assurance and provision and protection, there's a God in heaven who loves you. Jesus Christ has been looking for you. He has found you. He's here right now. The question really is, are you going to let him Shepherd you? Are you going to let him do that? Here's a prayer you can pray: "Jesus, if you're there, show me my next simple step with you." That's easy, isn't it? "Jesus, if you're there, show me my next simple step with you."

I'm going to pray for us right now. Maybe that's your prayer. Just follow and pray as you feel led.

Father, we come to you. This whole thing was your idea. You loved the world so much that you gave your only son that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life, starting now. Jesus, if you're there, show me my next simple step with you. Father, you know where each one is, the decisions they brought in, how full or empty they are, how hungry they are, how broken they feel. Meet each person right where they are right now in the power of the Holy Spirit, on this Easter. We thank You that death could not hold you, that you conquered sin and death. We celebrate that. That's our hope and it's sure. We pray this in the name of the Crucified and Risen One and Coming Again One, Jesus. We pray this in his name. Amen.