

The Gate That Holds Fast

Texts: Psalm 23 | John 10:1–10 | 1 Peter 2:19–25 | Acts 2:42–47

I want to start with a question that most of us don't ask out loud very often. Maybe because life moves too fast to slow down for it. Maybe because we're not sure we want to hear our own answer. But here it is:

What do you do when you feel fully exposed?

Not just tired. Not just stressed out. I mean *exposed* — when something has reached past all our plans and skills and got to the part of y that doesn't have a next step. You know that feeling. When the test results aren't good. When the person we counted on most is suddenly gone. When we've been lying awake since two in the morning and the quiet feels worse than the noise did.

That's the moment I want to talk about today. And here's what I think is worth knowing going in: every single one of these four passages was written for people in that exact place. Not for people who had it together. For people who genuinely didn't know what came next.

So let's walk through them together, and see what they're actually saying.

We're going back about a thousand years before Jesus — to the hills of Judah, and to a young man named David, who at that point in his life smelled like sheep and had the rough hands to prove it.

David wrote Psalm 23. And what's easy to miss is that he wrote it from *experience*. This wasn't a nice idea he had one afternoon. He had done this job. He knew what it meant to walk a flock over dry, stony ground to find water and grass. He knew that you can't take sheep to a fast-moving stream — the sound of rushing water frightens them, and they won't drink. He knew what it was to stay awake at night with a staff across his knees, watching the dark.

So when he writes, "*The Lord is my shepherd*," he's not being poetic. He's being specific. He's saying: what I have done for these animals — that's what God does for me. God leads. God guards. God goes ahead. God stays.

Now, here's something we need to hear clearly: a shepherd in David's world wasn't a gentle, romantic figure. It was hard, lonely, dangerous work. But it was absolutely essential. A good shepherd was the only thing standing between the flock and everything that wanted to destroy it. A careless shepherd was a disaster.

And that's exactly why David reaches for this image. Because it holds more than almost anything else he could say. The shepherd doesn't just feed — he *walks with*. Doesn't just provide — he *protects*. And when things get dark, he doesn't go home.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

That verse is present tense, by the way. Not "once God was with me" or "God will be with me someday." *Is*. Within me. Right now. In this valley. Always.

So here's the first thing Psalm 23 is telling us: when we're afraid, when we're exposed, the answer isn't a better plan. It's a person. Someone who is already *there*, already walking beside us through the thing we cannot get around.

Now, here's a piece of history that most of us have never heard. And once you know it, Jesus' words in John 10 hit completely differently.

Between David's time and the time of Jesus, the image of the shepherd changed — and not for the better. Over those nine hundred years, shepherds had fallen very low in Jewish culture. Very low. Jewish law, as it had evolved in Jesus' day actually said that shepherds couldn't be called as witnesses in court. The reason was practical: they literally couldn't keep the Sabbath, because sheep don't take Saturdays off. They were always in the fields, away from the temple, missing the holy days. By the standards of the law, the ritual cleanliness demanded was almost impossible in their work.

The written record of Jewish law actually puts shepherds in a list alongside tax collectors and gamblers. People you didn't trust. People who were, in the eyes of the religious system, just outside the lines of where belonging was defined.

So when Luke tells us the angels went *first* to shepherds on the night Jesus was born — that wasn't cozy and rural. That was a declaration. This is who this is for. The ones the system has pushed to the outside.

And by John 10, that tension is right at the surface. Jesus is in the temple. And the people he's talking to have literally just thrown a man out of the synagogue. A man who had been blind from birth. Whom Jesus healed. Who had done nothing more than say, "this man is from God." And they expelled him for it.

These religious leaders saw themselves as the guides of Israel — the ones who held the gate of belonging, who decided who was in and who was out. And Jesus looks at them and says: *you're not shepherds. You're thieves.*

"The one who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber."

He's not softening that. He's naming something clearly: when religious authority becomes about controlling who belongs — about keeping people out and calling it faithfulness — that's not care. That's taking.

And then he says something that changes everything.

Here's where Jesus does something really interesting in this passage. He's working with one image — the sheep pen — and then he shifts his position inside it.

He says he's the good shepherd. The one who knows his sheep by name. Whose voice they recognize and trust. That makes sense to us.

But right before that — and this is the part I've skipped over more than I should — Jesus says:

"I am the gate for the sheep."

"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture."

To hear what that meant to the people standing there, we need a quick picture of how sheep pens actually worked in the hill country of Israel.

At night, the shepherd would bring the flock in — sometimes into a stone-walled yard, sometimes a cave, sometimes just a fence of thorn brush on an open hillside. One opening. That's it. One way in, one way out. In a village, there'd be a gatekeeper watching it. But out in the open country, when it was just the shepherd and his flock? The shepherd would lie down across the opening. *His own body became the door.* Nothing got in or out without going through him. Literally.

That wasn't poetry. That was just a Tuesday night. That was the job. Not a metaphor, but a description for first century ears.

So when Jesus says *I am the gate*, he's saying something very physical and very deliberate. He is saying: **I am the one who puts himself between you and everything that would destroy you. With his own body. At his own cost.**

And he sets that right next to this: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*

The false shepherds — the ones who climb in another way, who use the flock rather than serve it — they drain life. They diminish. Jesus says: I am the door into something completely different. Through me, you find pasture. You find safety. You find more than you need.

This isn't a picture about religious membership. It's a picture about rescue.

Jump ahead about thirty years. Peter — the fisherman, the one who swore three times he didn't even know Jesus, the one who was forgiven and put back on his feet — is now an old man writing a letter. It goes to followers of Jesus scattered across what is now Turkey. Some of them are enslaved, with no legal standing. All of them are under genuine pressure for how they're living.

And he writes to them:

"If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."

Then this: *"For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls."*

What I love about Peter here is what he doesn't do. He doesn't explain the pain away. He doesn't say "God has a plan" as a way of moving past what they're feeling. He doesn't hand them a better strategy.

What he gives them is a *location*. You are here — in this, hurting — and you are being watched over by the one who took your wounds into his own body. The word he uses, Guardian, ... episkopos ... literally means one who surveys the whole field. Someone who sees the complete picture when we can only see the corner we're standing in.

The call isn't to be tough. It isn't to perform strength. It's trust. Trust grounded in what the shepherd has already done — and what he's promised.

Now we come to Acts 2. The early church, just days after Pentecost.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. All who believed were together and held things in common. They broke bread in their homes and ate with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having goodwill of all people."

This is what forms on the other side of the gate when people go through it together. The word Luke uses here — *koinonia* — usually gets translated as "fellowship," and I think that translation has done us a quiet disservice over the years. Fellowship now sounds like coffee in our Parlour. But *koinonia* means *sharing in the same reality*. What one person carries, another can take hold of too. In a Roman world built entirely on rank, hierarchy, and who owes who — this was radical!

What held these people together wasn't a shared background or shared income or a common project. It was a shared passage. They had all come through the same gate. And on the other side, they found each other. And they found out that the full life Jesus talked about isn't something you experience on your own. It's something you live into together.

Let me explore a bit deeper with you for a minute, because I think it's important.

We live in a culture that runs on task. And I want to say clearly — that's not a criticism. That way of life has given us real things. The right to think for ourselves. The freedom to build a life we actually chose. The drive to solve problems and push for better. Those are genuine gifts, and I don't want to breeze past them.

But here's what a task-driven culture does when you're hurting: it can turn on you. It whispers that you're probably not trying hard enough. That there's a method you haven't found yet. That the answer is more research, more effort, more push. And if you're already exhausted and exposed, that message lands like this: *you are failing at your own pain*.

Now here's the other side — because it's just as real. Some cultures, one of which is our Biblical source, organize around the relationship of the group rather than the success of the 'task'. Relationship first, not task first. And that brings its own burden. When you're genuinely struggling inside a group-first culture, the pressure is to keep it hidden. To stay functional for the sake of everyone else. To not disturb the peace. The demand to be well for everyone else's sake is its own kind of 'crushing'.

Both of these — task-first and group-first — when we are truly hurt, can end up serving the system instead of the person. Both can leave you more alone than when you started.

What Jesus offers in John 10 is neither of those.

He doesn't say: here are the steps, here is what you need to accomplish to reach safety. AND, he doesn't say: hold yourself together for the group. He says: *I am the gate. Come through*. You don't earn it. You don't build it. You just enter. And he calls his sheep by name — not as a category, not as a crowd — by name. One by one. Personally known. Called into a life that is both deeply personal and deeply shared, at the same time.

Acts 2 is what that looks like when it actually lands. Personal and communal, held together. That's not a contradiction — that's the shape of what it means to actually be well to have life abundant.

So — when we feel exposed, what does scripture offer for us to do?

First: Name the shepherd. That's what Psalm 23 is doing. David isn't pretending the valley isn't dark. He's saying out loud who is with him in it. When you're afraid — whether your instinct is to solve it or to hide it — the first move of faith is just to get your bearings. Somewhere underneath the noise, to say: *I'm not alone. I'm known. Someone is watching over me.* Not pretending. Not performing. Just orienting yourself toward what is true. Finding your right direction.

Second: Enter through the gate. This means letting go of the idea that you can be your own shepherd right now. Not permanently — this isn't about giving up who you are. But in this valley, in this specific darkness, the gate is not something you construct. Jesus says whoever enters through him will be saved — they will come in and go out and find pasture. The direction is *through*, not around. And the gate is the person of Jesus the Christ, not a process.

Third: Be found in community. Acts 2 isn't a picture of a particularly devoted church, a better church than ours that we should feel guilty about not having created. It's a picture of what the abundant life Jesus promised actually looks like in the world. It's shared. It shows up in meals, in prayer, in teaching, in holding each other's real needs as your own concern. Your questions belong here. Your doubts belong here. The faith you've worked hard to hold onto — complicated and honest as it is — belongs here and does not need to be left at the door. The community doesn't flatten you. It receives you.

The image at the heart of this passage is simple. A man lies down in the dirt across the opening of a fence in the dark. His body is between the flock and whatever is moving at the edge of the dark night. It's not a glamorous picture. It's a faithful one.

The shepherd who became the gate didn't offer a task to complete or a performance to give. He offered himself — present, specific, immovable — between the people he loved and everything that could destroy them.

You are already known by name. The gate is already open. The pasture is already waiting. Enter. **Amen.**