

A Shepherd Explains Psalm 23

(Part 1: *Psalm 23:1-3*)

Franklin Church of Christ
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October 26, 2003
PM Worship

Introduction:

One of the most widely known Bible passages is **Psalm 23**. It has been sermonized and taught over and over again. It is read at almost all funerals. And is referred to in every situation where comfort is needed. Yet, the meat of its meaning is probably lost on us. For the most part, we modern urbanites miss the thrust of David's pastoral poem because we are unfamiliar with shepherding. In 1970, Phillip Keller, who was raised in East Africa around shepherds and was himself a shepherd for some time, wrote a book entitled **A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23**. I want us to read **Psalm 23** with new ears, learning what David's statements would mean to one intimately acquainted with shepherding. As we examine this information, I realize each of us will be listening with different needs. Some will be listening as the Lord's sheep, finding reassurance in the Lord's shepherding. Others will be listening as the Lord's sheep, seeing for the first time that this Psalm says as much about their responsibility as sheep as it does of the provision of our Shepherd. Some will be listening from the standpoint of sheep on the other side of the fence, starving, weak and diseased, seeing with what care Jesus shepherds His flock and longing to enter this fold. Others, who are already or desire to be shepherds within this congregation or within their homes, will be seeing the model they are to emulate. Because of the constraints of time, I will be unable to describe the meaning behind David's statements and make application to all the different listeners. But, I believe when the shepherd's explanation is given, each of us will easily recognize the application to our particular needs. During this lesson we will examine **Psalm 23:1-3** and we will complete the Psalm tonight.

Discussion:

- I. The Lord is my Shepherd.
 - A. David knew firsthand that the destiny of any particular sheep depended greatly on the one who was its shepherd. Under the care of some shepherds, the sheep would struggle, starve, and suffer disease and endless hardship. Under the care of another, they would flourish and thrive contentedly.
 - B. David was proud to proclaim, "Look who is my Shepherd. Look at who is my owner, my master. Jehovah is." Those who enter Jesus' fold, know their master and are glad (**John 10:14**).
 - C. Jesus has the right to be our Shepherd because He created us (**John 1:1-3**). David speaks of the Shepherd's work in his own creation in **Psalm 139:13-14**. Additionally, He has the right to be our Shepherd because He laid down His life for us. With His own blood, sweat and tears He bought salvation for us, if we would only submit to be His sheep (**John 10:14-18**).
 - D. Phillip Keller described his feelings the day he bought his first 30 ewes, "They belonged to me only by virtue of the fact that I paid hard cash for them. It was money earned by the blood and sweat and tears drawn from my own body during the desperate grinding years of the depression. ... Because of this I felt in a special way that they were in the very truth a part of me and I a part of them."
 - E. His neighbor handed him a knife and said, "Well, Phillip, they're yours. Now you'll have to put your mark on them." While cattlemen brand their herd, shepherds cut a distinctive earmark so all can tell to whom the sheep belong. We too must wear the mark of Jesus. It is not enough simply to say, "The Lord is my Shepherd." We must be marked by a life that is different from the world (**Romans 12:2**). We must be marked by a life of love (**John 13:35**). A life marked by complete obedience to the will of God (**Matthew 7:21-23**). Jesus proclaimed we cannot have two shepherds (**Matthew 6:24**). Whose mark do you wear?
- II. I shall not want.
 - A. Coming from David, this statement is astounding. Here was a man who had been mistreated by family. He had been hounded and harried repeatedly by Saul. He had seen hard days. One of his sons would rape one of his daughters. Another son would murder the rapist. Then that son, Absalom, would rebel and steal the kingdom for a time and eventually be killed. Yet this same man claims he will not want.
 - B. This statement is actually more about the sheep than the Shepherd. Yes, it explains clearly that our Shepherd gives all we need. It calls to mind Jesus' statement about God's provision in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 6:25-34**). Most importantly, it describes the contentment of the sheep, trusting that their Shepherd knows what is best and will be ever vigilant to provide for them. As **Hebrews 13:5-6** describes, we are content that the Lord is with us. David's statement emphasizes our utter contentment with the Good Shepherd's care and our consequent lack of craving and desiring anything more.
 - C. Yet, some Christians are in fact, not content with their Master. They are discontented thinking the grass may be greener elsewhere. Phillip Keller described one ewe that was a fence-crawler. Despite his care of his pastures, she had a seemingly ingrained habit of trying to find the loophole in the fence to the neighbor's pasture. Ironically, when she escaped, she often ended up feeding on bare, brown, burned up pasture inferior to her own fold. The real problem came because she taught her lambs to behave the

same way and eventually led other sheep to escape. In the end, despite the positive qualities she had, Mr. Keller had to kill her. It was the only way to save the other sheep. If we are not content with Christ and His shepherding, death awaits us too. That is the message of the seed sown among thorns in **Luke 8:7, 14**. If other pastures distract us, we will be choked to death.

III. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

- A. We read this today and think of the leisure and comfort we would have if we were able to take some time and just lie down in a green pasture somewhere. But, to the shepherd's mind this entails so much more.
- B. According to Phillip Keller, "The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met." They must be free of fear from outside attack, free of tension and friction with the other sheep in the fold, free from torment of flies and pests and they must be free of hunger. Without these four conditions, the sheep will never lie down in the green pasture. But Jesus is the Good Shepherd who can fulfill all the requirements and pave the way for the sheep to be able to lie down and rest.
 - 1. Fear from outside attack: Sheep have little or no means of self-defense and are therefore helpless, timid, feeble creatures whose only recourse is to run. A stray jackrabbit has been known to stampede a whole flock. The Shepherd however, maintains constant vigilance and watch over the flock to protect against predators. Mr. Keller claimed he learned quickly to keep an eye out for such attacks and discovered that his mere presence did more than anything else to calm the fears of his flock. If we would have no fear, we need to keep our eyes focused on the Shepherd.
 - 2. Tension and friction within the fold: Amazingly enough, a flock of sheep will establish and maintain an order of dominance and status within the group. A domineering old ewe will typically establish her preeminence by "butting and driving other ewes or lambs away from the best grazing or favorite bedgrounds. Succeeding her in precise order the other sheep all establish and maintain their exact position in the flock by using the same tactics of butting and thrusting at those below and around them." The Bible contains a description of this in **Ezekiel 34:20-22**. Mr. Keller learned again, that his mere presence attracted the attention of his flock, causing them to forget their foolish rivalries, stopping the fighting. Again, we learn, instead of focusing on ourselves and those around us, we need to spend more time looking at Christ, forgetting our petty problems and differences within this flock.
 - 3. Free from pests: There will be more discussion of this in our next lesson. For now, let it be known that the sheep have no real ability to keep the pests away themselves. The Shepherd is the one who must treat the sheep with oils and salves to help drive the pests away. The constant watch of the shepherd and application of the antidotes is necessary.
 - 4. Free from hunger: Sheep cannot just survive anywhere. Freeing them from hunger means preparing the ground with salts and minerals so it is useful to the sheep. It means keeping a watch on the pasture because if left to themselves the sheep will graze until they have destroyed even the roots of the grass. It means moving them to proper pasturage and allowing the other to grow back. It means work and sweat on the shepherd's part.
- C. What this all describes in a nutshell is not just some serene picture of rest. It is the picture of toil and sweat on the part of the shepherd for the peace of mind of his flock. That is what Jesus has done for us. He came to this earth as one of us. He prepared the way to defeat our enemies. He established the pattern for overcoming tension among brethren. He drives away the pests. He fills our hunger with His righteousness. It was not a picture of serenity for Him, it was a picture of rejection, beating and death as He prepared the way by sacrificing Himself for us. What shoes modern shepherds have to fill!

IV. He leads me beside quiet waters.

- A. The sheep's body is composed of 70% water and thus, while they thrive in dry, semi-arid cultures, they require water. So too, we require water. Spiritually, the image of water and thirst are used to describe having eternal life (**John 4:10**), righteousness (**Matthew 5:6**) and the word (**Ephesians 5:26**). This is the water we need and this is the clear, pure, still water Jesus provides.
- B. Sheep drink from three sources of water. Yet, these sources are all a testament to the shepherd's work.
 - 1. They drink from springs and streams. But the wary shepherd must first search and discover the pure springs and streams. The shepherd may even have to work to get the water from the spring to a place where the sheep can find it. The shepherd must also take care that his own flock does not spoil the water through trampling up the mud or through their own bodily waste.
 - 2. They drink from the wells. But these wells do not form on their own and must be dug by the shepherd. Then the water must be bailed out so the sheep can access it.
 - 3. Interestingly enough, the sheep also drink the water of the dew-drenched grass every morning. So much so, that if the weather is not too hot, sheep can go months without drinking water if there is

continual heavy dew. Yet again, it is the shepherd who must prepare the pasturage to be edible to allow for this dew to be accessed.

- C. This statement also says something about the sheep. The sheep recognize that the water provided by the shepherd is what is best for them. Some interesting word pictures can be seen as we consider our own place as sheep in God's flock. Do we partake in the daily dew of God's word, spending daily time in the water and word of God? Or do we starve ourselves through the week and hope the Sunday's drink from the well will be enough? Secondly, are we satisfied with the refreshing quiet waters that Jesus provides or do we turn aside to our own way and our own sources of water as **Jeremiah 2:13** describes. Consider the following statements from Phillip Keller.

1. They remind me very much of a bunch of sheep I watched one day which were being led down to a magnificent mountain stream. The snow-fed waters were flowing pure and clear and crystal clean between lovely banks of trees. But on the way several stubborn ewes and their lambs stopped, instead to drink from small, dirty, muddy pools beside the trail. The water was filthy and polluted not only with the churned up mud from the passing sheep but even with the manure and urine of previous flocks that had passed that way. Still these stubborn sheep were quite sure it was the best drink obtainable.

The water itself was filthy and unfit for them. Much more, it was obviously contaminated with nematodes and liver fluke eggs that would eventually riddle them with internal parasites and disease of destructive impact.

2. Of course there is always a percentage of perverse people who will refuse to allow God to lead them. They insist on running their own lives and following the dictates of their own wills. They insist they can be masters of their own destinies even if ultimately such destinies are destructive. They don't want to be directed by the Spirit of God ... they want to walk in their own ways and drink from any old source that they fancy might satisfy their whims. ... People often try this pursuit or that with the casual comment, 'So, what? I can't see that it's going to do any harm!' Little do they appreciate that often there is a delayed reaction and that considerable time may elapse before the full impact of the misjudgment strikes home. Then suddenly they are in deep trouble and wonder why.

- D. The Shepherd has done His part to lead us to quiet still waters. Are we doing our part to drink?

V. He restores my soul.

- A. This statement is somewhat shocking. After all, with the hard work that Jesus does as our Shepherd, how could anyone become cast down and need to be restored. Yet, because of our own weaknesses we do, at times, become cast down and need restoration. The Psalmist of **Psalm 42** speaks of his cast down soul, three times (**Psalm 42: 5, 6, 11**). This soul needs restoration. The Shepherd provides it.

- B. The "cast down" sheep in need of restoration is one who has fallen over on its back and cannot get up. According to Mr. Keller, "A 'cast' sheep is a very pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success. Sometimes it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration. If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die." This is one reason the shepherd must diligently watch for cast sheep. The other reason is because predators know a cast sheep is easy prey.

- C. Again, while this speaks of the shepherd's diligence to watch for His sheep to help them in their time of need. It also says something about the sheep. Because there are three reasons for sheep becoming cast, each of which parallels a "cast down" and vulnerable soul.

1. *Sitting in the soft spot*: Sometimes the sheep find a nice soft spot to lie down in. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out. The sheep's center of gravity shifts so it turns further onto its back and can no longer touch the ground with its feet. Sometimes, we as sheep become tired of the hard work involved and look for the comfortable places. When we start looking for easy lives, we will become cast down. The Shepherd, if we will allow Him, will restore with words of encouragement and rebuke.

2. *Too much wool*: Sometimes the sheep's wool grows too long or thick and becomes ripe for catching in brambles and gathering mud which will weigh the sheep down, causing it to become cast. The shepherd must then shave the sheep of its excess wool. This also has a counterpart as we sometimes seemingly have too much wool allowing the things of this world to weigh us down and cast us. Again I am reminded of the parable of the sower and the seed on the thorny soil (**Luke 8:7, 14**).

3. *Too fat*: The fattest sheep are the most often cast down. They simply have too much weight to be agile and able to stay constantly on their feet. Men sometimes parallel this heavy sheep much like Moses described Israel in his song in **Deuteronomy 32:13-15**. Because of success and prosperity the people turn their backs on God because they have "arrived." Like the Laodiceans of **Revelation 3:17** they think they need nothing because of their prosperity. At this time they have become cast and are easy prey for the devil.

- D. Despite the sinful reasons for which we may become cast down. The Lord wants to restore our souls. He searches for us and rejoices when we are found (**Luke 15:4-7**). We may not like His discipline, but it is for our restoration. Of course, this applies to Jesus' underling shepherds. We must be willing to recognize their efforts to restore our souls and not grow weary or be turned off by their attempts to help us.

VI. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

- A. When we speak of shepherds one of the first aspects we often think of is leading. Do you know why this is the case? It is because sheep must be constantly led to new pasturage. According to Mr. Keller,

If left to themselves [sheep] will follow the same trails until they become ruts: graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes; pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites. ... Because of the behavior of sheep and their preference for certain favored spots, these well-worn areas become quickly infested with parasites of all kinds. In a short time a whole flock can thus become infected with worms, nematodes, and scab. The final upshot is that both land and owner are ruined while the sheep become thin, wasted and sickly. ... The greatest single safeguard which a shepherd has in handling his flock is to keep them on the move. That is to say, they dare not be left on the same ground too long. They must be shifted from pasture to pasture periodically. ... In a word—there must be a pre-determined plan of action, a deliberate, planned rotation from one grazing ground to another in line with right and proper principles of sound mind. This is precisely the sort of action and the idea David had in mind when he spoke of being led in paths of righteousness.

- B. Sheep, left to themselves, destroy themselves. This is much like the Proverbialist's point in **Proverbs 14:12; 16:25**. There is a way that may seem right to us, but it ends in death.
- C. This says a great deal about our Shepherd. He is a caring loving Shepherd. The planning that it takes to lead the sheep so they do not destroy themselves is immense. The planning that God went through so we would not be destroyed was also immense. Consider, it took Adam and Eve only a few minutes to destroy the paradise of Eden. But God took 4000 years to bring about the fullness of His plan in Jesus and the Word. Our Shepherd is not one of the careless shepherds who would leave us to destroy ourselves. He lovingly cares for us and prepares for us, if we will but follow Him.
- D. Once again, this says something about the sheep as well. I cannot say it better than Mr. Keller did.

Now as we turn to the human aspect of this theme we will be astonished at some of the parallels. As mentioned earlier it is no mere whim on God's part to call us sheep. Our behavior patterns and life habits are so much like that of sheep it is well nigh embarrassing.

First of all Scripture points out that most of us are a stiff-necked and stubborn lot. We prefer to follow our own fancies and turn to our own ways. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way' (Isaiah 53:6). And this we do deliberately, repeatedly even to our own disadvantage. There is something almost terrifying about the destructive self-determination of a human being. It is inexorably interlocked with personal pride and self-assertion. We insist we know what is best for us even though the disastrous results may be self-evident.

Just as sheep will blindly, habitually, stupidly follow one another along the same little trails until they become ruts that erode into gigantic gullies, so we humans cling to the same habits that we have seen ruin other lives. Turning to 'my own way' simply means doing what I want. It implies that I feel free to assert my own wishes and carry out my own ideas. And this I do in spite of every warning. ...

The difficult point is that most of us don't want to come. We don't want to follow. We don't want to be led in the paths of righteousness. Somehow it goes against our grain. We actually prefer to turn to our own way even though it may take us straight into trouble.

The stubborn, self-willed, proud, self-sufficient sheep that persists in pursuing its old paths and grazing on its old polluted ground will end up a bag of bones on ruined land. The world we live in is full of such folk. Broken homes, broken hearts, derelict lives and twisted personalities remind us everywhere of men and women who have gone their own way. We have a sick society struggling to survive on beleaguered land. The greed and selfishness of mankind leaves behind a legacy of ruin and remorse.

Amid all this chaos and confusion Christ the Good Shepherd comes and says, If any man will follow me, let him deny himself daily and take up his cross and follow me (Mark 8:34). But most of us, even as Christians, simply don't want to do this. We don't want to deny ourselves, give up our right to make our own decisions—we don't want to follow; we don't want to be led.

- E. The paths down which Jesus leads are righteousness. We must not become distracted by our own desires to be in control. Rather, we must follow the Shepherd. His loving care will take us home to heaven. We must not be like the many of which Mr. Keller spoke. We must be those few sheep who will give up our stubbornness and our pride and follow Jesus completely, lest we destroy ourselves.

Conclusion:

We will conclude **Psalms 23** in our next lesson. As we close, we need to focus on the last point we have made. Jesus will lead us in paths of righteousness. Have you been following Him or your own way? Consider Jesus' way described in **Romans 10:9-10; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38**. While numerous men have set up their own way, Jesus only has one way (**Matthew 7:13-14**). We must hear, believe and confess His gospel. We must repent of our sins. We must submit to Jesus in baptism. Have you followed Jesus in baptism?