



from the desk of . . .
Rande Wayne Smith
D.Min., Th.M., M.Div.

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Trinity Sunday

A SHEEP'S RESPONSE TO THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The 23rd Psalm

Almost everyone has heard of the 23rd Psalm. (X) It's a poem that has no equal, & has been called "the sweetest song ever sung". Abraham Lincoln read it to cure his blues, & President Bush proclaimed it publicly to calm our nation's fears after September 11th.

I preached from this Psalm at Susan Badame's Memorial Service last Saturday.

It was the 1st Scripture that I ever memorized.
And the last passage that I read to Sandy Bozin.

But the problem with this Psalm, which is also the situation with the Lord's Prayer, is that it's so familiar that we run the danger of missing the depth of its' meaning/message.

And because none of you, to my knowledge, are or ever have been sheep herders, the richness of this passage can easily slide right past us. My only hands-on encounter with sheep was an opportunity (X) to shear a couple of them while Kathy & I were in Ireland.

Would you be surprised to learn that Scripture refers to us, you & me, as sheep some 220 times? ... Of all the animals God created ... that's what He compares us to ... not dogs or cats or horses or cows ... but sheep.

And if we're sheep ... then the Lord is our shepherd.

So, with that thought in mind, I'm going to read the 23rd Psalm to you, & I want you to listen to it as if this were the very 1st time you've ever heard it.

God's the shepherd ... & you're the sheep.

Within your hearing now comes the Word of the Lord ...

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside the still waters,

he restores my soul.

He guides me in the paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

your rod and staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

This morning we're going to take a close look at this awesome Psalm. There are 2 main characters ...

the shepherd & his sheep. And there are 3 main ideas:

- The Shepherd's **provision is personal** (1-3)
- The Shepherd's **protection is pervasive** (4-5)
- The Shepherd's **pleasure is paramount** (6)

The Shepherd's provision is personal. God provides for us personally because of who He is. Look at the 1st 2 words in the Psalm ... "The LORD". And you'll notice that "LORD" is all uppercase letters. As we read the O.T., more often than not, we find "LORD" in all capital letters. That's because the Hebrew language has several different words that English simply translates as "Lord".

And when we find it capitalized it's referring to "Yahweh." (X) This is the name that was 1st revealed to Moses at the burning bush ... "I AM." (Exodus 3:14)

Ordinary Hebrews considered this name too holy to be spoken by human lips. In fact, it was so revered that it was only said out loud once a year on the Day of Atonement, & then only by the High Priest when he was in the most holy place of the Temple. If the name needed to be written, the scribes would take a bath before writing it, & then destroy the pen afterward.

To be honest, the name "Yahweh" is difficult to define.

It simply means that God is who He is.

He's the one who causes everything else.

He's unchanging, & the one who inhabits eternity.

And this is the name David chooses to begin his Psalm. The great "**I AM**" is "my" **shepherd**.

This is very similar in thought to the 8th Psalm.

"O LORD, our Lord." (The Psalm 8:1) ... "Yahweh, our Lord."

He is other than us ... & yet He is ours. He is powerful & He is personal. He is majestic & He is mine. He is a consuming fire & yet He is my sensitive shepherd.

I love Isaiah's image of Yahweh as shepherd ... (X)

"He will take care of his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs together
& carry them in his arms." (Isaiah 40:11)

Because the Lord is my shepherd, He cares for me personally. This is seen in 4 specific ways:

- God's provision makes us **content**

David says that since "the Lord is my shepherd" I will not lack anything that is really necessary & good for me ... "I shall not be in want."

I remember one of my S.S. teachers up in Niagara Falls telling me about a 5-year-old in her class mis-reciting this passage. The little girl stood up & said ...

"The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I want."

She had the words mixed up
but understood the message perfectly.

If Jesus is our shepherd, everything else is 2ndary.
We could say it this way ...

"If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want.
If I am in want, then the Lord is not my shepherd."

And that's really David's point.

Since God is our **Shepherd** our **needs** are taken care of.

Listen to these words written by Jason Lehman:

It was spring, But it was summer I wanted,
The warm days, & the great outdoors.
It was summer, But it was fall I wanted,
The colorful leaves, & the cool, dry air.
It was fall, But it was winter I wanted,
The beautiful snow, & the joy of the holiday season.
It was winter, But it was spring I wanted,
The warmth, & the blossoming of nature.
I was a child, But it was adulthood I wanted,
The freedom, & the respect.
I was 20, But it was 30 I wanted,
To be mature, & sophisticated.
I was middle-aged, But it was 20 I wanted,
The youth, & the free spirit.
I was retired, But it was middle age I wanted,
The presence of mind, Without limitations.
My life was over. But I never got what I wanted.

If our happiness comes from something that we don't have right now ... then we're in the "prison" of want.

Here's the best definition of contentment I've ever heard ... "Contentment is not having everything we want. Contentment is wanting everything we have."

We need to allow the powerful simplicity of this opening statement to sink into our soul ... what we have in our Shepherd is greater than what we don't have in life.

Do you believe that? ...

#2 ... God's provision **nourishes** us.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside still waters."

Notice that the shepherd "makes" us lie down. Bible scholars tell us that sometimes a shepherd would institute forced rest periods for his sheep, especially for the pregnant ewes & frolicking lambs. The shepherd would take the sheep & fold their legs in such a way that they'd become paralyzed for a while & therefore, had to lie down & get some much-needed rest.

I wonder if some of us have been made to "lie down" at times? ... In looking at my own life, when my priorities have gotten out of whack, when I've allowed other "things" to become temporary "gods" ... then my Shepherd allowed me to have stress fractures, or occupational issues, etc. ... so that I'd get back on track.

Our Shepherd slows us down for a reason. Some of us need to slow down in order to "chew" on the "green pastures" of God's Word. We're good at allowing the frustrations of life to knock us off center & we don't ponder on the richness & sweetness of Scripture like we should. God wants us to lie down & think about Him.

When a sheep laid down in the meadow, that indicated it felt safe & had no worries. So many of us are filled with anxiety today. Last week's issue of Time reports that one out of 3 Americans are severely lacking sleep. Most often it's because of stress & anxiety.

I recently read about a guy who was so whacked out with worry that He decided to hire someone to do his worrying for him. He found a man who agreed to be his hired worrier for a salary of \$200,000 a year. After he accepted the job, his 1st question to his boss was, "Where are you going to get \$200,000 to pay me?" To which the boss responded, "That's your worry, not mine."

After being fully fed, the sheep are then led to still waters. Sheep by nature are afraid of running water & will refuse to drink unless everything is tranquil & quiet. Shepherds would often divert water from a rushing creek to make a private pool of refreshment. But even then, the shepherd had to lead the sheep to the good water because otherwise they'd stop & drink from polluted puddles where they could pick up parasites.

We're a lot like that, aren't we? ...

God has provided so much for us
& yet we often "drink" from places that will only harm us.

#3 ... God's provision **restores** us. Because sheep are careless, & curious, & cantankerous creatures,

they often need to be restored. Hence the next line ...

"He restores my soul."

The word "restore" (שׁוֹבְבִי) means to "bring back to a former or normal state, to make new." Sheep can get lost faster than any other animal. This can be serious for many reasons. They may fall & get hurt. A predator may pounce on them. Or they may simply tip over & become "cast." (X) This is a term for a sheep that's lying flat on its' back, with its' legs flailing in the air.

Often sheep that are too fat, or have too much wool, will lie down in a little crevasse in the ground & then, when their center of gravity changes, they'll actually tip over & are unable to get back up.

When a sheep is missing, often the 1st thought to flash through the shepherd's mind is that one of his sheep may be cast. Buzzards & coyotes know that a cast sheep is easy pickings & death is not far off.

When the shepherd finds the sheep, he rolls it over & lifts it to its' feet. He then rubs its' legs to restore circulation ... all the while talking to it gently.

What a picture of what God does for straying saints!
 He looks for us when we've wandered off, (Luke 15:4)
 & restores us when we are cast down.

God is the God of the 2nd chance.

I'm so thankful that Christianity is a series of new beginnings. I've experienced that blessing more than once ... & I know you have as well.

#4 ... God's provision **guides** us. "He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

The word used for "paths" (מִעֲגָלֵי־בַּ) refers to a "well-defined & well-worn trail." This is one more bit of evidence about how stupid sheep really are. Even when the path is perfectly clear, sheep will still stray.

But since the shepherd knows the trails,
 he can guide them in the best way.

God longs to lead us in paths of righteousness.

Most of us know the right road we should take ...
 but our selfishness & sinfulness often lead us astray.
 We need the Shepherd to guide us in the right way
 because like sheep, we often have no sense of direction.

And our Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness for the sake of His name. God guides us for His sake, not for ours. His reputation is at stake. His character is on display. His name is Yahweh ... & He will accomplish His purposes & lead us on proper paths.

At this point in the Psalm notice that there are a couple changes. Up to now the sheep are in the sunshine. But here they're in the shadows. God not only takes care of us during the delightful times,

He guides us through those **dark seasons of life**.

Notice also that the pronouns change.

In the 1st $\frac{1}{2}$, David is extolling the virtues of the Shepherd, using "He" & "His" to refer to God.

Now, he speaks to the Shepherd directly ...

"You are with me ... your rod & your staff ...
you prepare ... you anoint."

When times are tough, God becomes more real to David. Have you experienced that? ... Boy I have! Our promise-keeping God guides us through times of gloom & despair.

We see that God's protection is pervasive, covering every aspect of life, from green pastures to the shadows of death. Because God will protect us ... there's no need to fear death. Look at the 1st part of the statement ...

"Though I walk through the valley of
the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The picture here is of the shepherd leading his sheep back home in the evening. As they go through the rocky ravine & narrow gorges, long shadows dance across the trail, frightening the flock. The shepherd knows from experience that predators like bears & lions lurk in these cliffs in ambush for some fresh lambchops.

Notice it says that we walk "through" the valley.
 We don't have to stay there. We're passing through.
 Through the darkness there's brightness.
 Through the gloom there's glory.

Notice also the word "shadow." In one sense the shadow of something is far more ominous than what it represents. (X) On the other hand, the shadow of a dog cannot bite & the shadow of death cannot harm us ...
 if we stay close to the shepherd.

When there's a shadow there must be light somewhere.
 As Paul reminds us, Jesus has removed the sting of death; only the shadow of it remains. (1 Corinthians 15:55)

David continues ...

"Your rod & your staff, they comfort me."

(X) The rod was like a club that hung from the shepherd's belt. It was used to protect the sheep. Shepherds were very adept in their aim & would throw this club at attacking animals. The staff was a slender pole, with a little crook on the end. It could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull it from harm.

It was also used to direct the flock,
 & occasionally to discipline the sheep.

Not once do we read of sheep carrying rods & staffs. They must rely completely on the shepherd for safety & direction.

Likewise, we must lean on the Lord for all that we need & find comfort in His power & corrective discipline.

David then writes ... "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

Ideally, the best place for the sheep to graze is on a flat mesa, or tableland. Before letting the lambs romp around, the shepherd inspects the area for poisonous plants & makes sure there aren't any predators prowling around. The sheep can eat & rest even though there are enemies nearby because the shepherd is doing his job.

"You anoint my head with oil."

In ancient Israel shepherds used oil for 3 purposes: to repel insects, to prevent conflicts, & to heal wounds.

Sheep are really bugged by bugs.

Flies like to deposit their eggs into the tender membrane of the sheep's nose. When the eggs hatch, the larvae drive the sheep insane, causing them to beat their heads against rocks & trees. When sheep see flies they freak out. They shake their heads up & down for hours. The shepherd knows what flies can do so he covers their heads with an oil-like repellent.

This oil is also used to prevent injury to rams as they butt heads to win the affection of the ewes. Whenever the shepherd would hear 2 rams say to the same lady, "I want ewe, babe" ... he knew trouble was coming.

He'd quickly smear this slippery substance over their horns so the "gladiators" would glance off each other rather than splitting their heads open.

The 3rd reason for the oil is because the flock gets a lot of wounds & cuts simply from living in a pasture. They get pricked by thorns & receive abrasions from the rocks. The oil serves as an ointment to protect their sores from getting infected.

What a beautiful picture of what our Shepherd does for us. He deals with our problems by protecting us from those things that can wipe us out. He helps us have harmony with others. And, He comforts us & heals us when we're beat up. We're wounded sheep in need of a healing shepherd. Do you have any "wounds" today? ...

Because God's protection is pervasive, we don't have to **dread** death, we don't have to be **anxious** about what enemies may do to us,

& we don't have to be **paralyzed** by our problems.

We come now to the final truth of the Psalm:
God's pleasure is paramount.

God's pleasure is demonstrated in 2 ways ...

1st of all ... God blesses us more than we need right now.

"My cup runs over.

Surely goodness & mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life."

The shepherd would always carry something to drink with him & would often share it with his sheep when they needed it. He would be generous because he knew they had to have liquid or they'd perish.

God's goodness & mercy will follow us.

The word "follow" (רָדַפוּנִי) literally means, "pursue."

The Message Bible translates it this way ...

"Your beauty & love chase after me every day of my life." Ponder that thought! For those who have come to faith in Jesus, we've been given much more than we **deserve** & we have much more than we **need**. That's His goodness.

We're also recipients of His mercy ... by not receiving what we deserve. If God gave us justice, we'd be punished for our disobedient wandering. But because of Jesus, we can have confidence in His mercy.

His goodness & mercy led Jesus to the Cross, where the Shepherd gave His life for His sheep. (John 10:14-15)

Why did He do this? ... To bring honor to His name.

And then 2^{ndly}, God is preparing us for everything we'll need later. We have more than we need right now, & we'll have everything we need for eternity.

"And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

We began with a joyous statement, "The Lord is my shepherd" & end with an equally positive affirmation,

"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The sheep have been following the shepherd to green pastures & through shadowy valleys.

The seasons have changed & now they're coming home. The sheep are now ready to winter in the safe harbor of the good shepherd's home. They're so satisfied with the flock to which they belong & with the ownership of the shepherd, that they have no desire to change a thing.

They want everything to just go on forever.

Because we enjoy the presence of the Shepherd & have more than we even need in this life, we can't wait to spend eternity with the Lord in His house. Forever we'll praise Him, (The Revelation 19:5-7) giving glory to His name as we recognize that His pleasure is paramount.

I see 3 lamb lessons as we wrap-up this morning.

Join the shepherd's flock. The Lord is looking for lost sheep right now. If you've never asked Jesus save you from your sins & shepherd your life ...
you're not yet in His flock.

The story's told of an actor with a wonderful voice who was invited to recite the 23rd Psalm. The actor stood up & gave a dramatic presentation with wonderful intonation & modulation. When he finished ... everyone applauded. At a later point a preacher was asked to give his rendition of the passage. He stood up & in a very rough voice, broken from many years of preaching, quoted the 23rd Psalm from memory.

When he finished, people sat in holy silence.
Sometime later someone asked the actor what made the difference. He responded ...

"I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

Do you know the Shepherd? ...

2nd ... Stay close to the Shepherd. Sheep would regularly come to the shepherd & rub against his legs & wait for a pat on the head. They wanted assurance that the shepherd was there for them. Sheep that stay close to the shepherd reach the water 1st. Those next to the shepherd get to the sweetest grass 1st. But most of all, they got to enjoy it all with the shepherd by their side.

Are you staying close to the Shepherd? ...

3rd ... follow wherever He leads. When we know the Shepherd through salvation, & stay close to Him as part of our discipleship, we'll want to follow Him wherever He leads. Sometimes it's through the valley. Other times we experience green pastures. The Shepherd has a plan for us & wants to lead us in paths of righteousness.

Are you willing to follow Him, regardless of the direction He takes you? ... Sheep trust their shepherd.

They know he has their best interests at heart.

We can say the same about our good Shepherd.

Will you follow our good Shepherd? ...

MARANA THA