

The Shepherd God – Part 2

Of all the possible human occupations God chose to compare Himself to, He most favoured the illustration of a shepherd. We began in Part 1 of this series to look at Psalm 23 – a beloved psalm by David. We saw there the relationship of God to one of His children. The Shepherd is God – the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd.

The sheep is David – a human being – prone to wandering, being led astray, essentially helpless, and needing the attention of the shepherd-God. David himself says, *“the Lord is my shepherd”* (**Psalm 23:1**) – showing that he willingly identified himself as one of God’s sheep. He placed Himself under the direction and care of God – and was glad to do so. That is the relationship. Now let’s look at the results of that relationship.

The results

Anyone will tell you that it is the nature and diligence of the shepherd that determines the fate of the sheep. One rancher can have sheep feasting on rich pastures, content with clean water, and free from tormenting parasites. Separated by a thin fence, stand weak, sickly sheep, huddled in groups, eating meagre rations in dusty, dirty pasturage.

Tormented by flies and parasites, drinking polluted water, they stare blankly through the fence at the rich green pastures enjoyed by their neighbouring sheep. Their lot in life is due to an uncaring, indifferent, cruel shepherd. This is really a picture of humans under the Good Shepherd, and humans who are not. The nature of the shepherd determines the fate of the sheep.

So what is the result of being a sheep under the direction of Christ as the Shepherd? The answer is found in the next phrase of **Psalm 23:1** – *“I shall not want.”* I will not lack. The two statements are a cause and effect – Yahweh is my Shepherd, so I will not lack. But what does that mean? Does David mean he will be in continual financial and physical comfort, never suffering any lack or privation?

Of course not. David certainly experienced physical suffering, and other emotional and mental hardship – so did all the great saints of the Scriptures and history. Physical health and wealth are but the outermost layer of God’s blessing, and sometimes they are removed or denied so that God can bring the richer and deeper blessings.

No, David means that he will be abundantly satisfied with life. He will be richly content, not feeling that emptiness, that fear, that guilt, that tension, that uncertainty, that soul-hunger and soul-thirst that characterise the sheep not led by Christ. He will overwhelmingly be joyful, content, fulfilled, satisfied. His life will be a portrait of a human having found his life’s goal, his design instructions, his purpose for living, and living it out.

This is what he means a few verses later when he says, *"my cup runneth over."* God has not only quenched my thirst, He gives me so much it is flowing over the cup. I have more than enough joy. I am full, and in fact, overflowing into the lives of others.

We need to pause and see why this is important to God. Sickly, diseased, weak and unhappy sheep are really a reflection on their owner. Certainly sheep are dumb, sheep choose to drink polluted water and follow foolish paths; but sheep that are gnawed with hunger, riddled with parasites, restless and tense, are a tell-tale sign of a lazy, indifferent or cruel shepherd.

Now, when a human comes under the Lordship of Christ by faith in Him, that Christian's life becomes a living testimony of what kind of Shepherd they are under. If that Christian is nervous, fearful, anxious, worrying, tense, touchy, restless, unhappy, depressed and discouraged – generally unsatisfied – it reflects on the Shepherd.

Oh, we know it is not God's fault. As He said to Israel, *"What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (Isaiah 5:4)*. God has done His part. But the point is this: the Shepherd is glorified with satisfied sheep. Nothing so points to His all-sufficiency, to His excellency, than the fact that His sheep are content.

See, all the work we do for Him, all the service we render Him, doesn't glorify Him if we do not find contentment in it, because then we act like we are meeting God's needs at our own expense. We demote God to being our beneficiary, and think that He needs us to do the work for Him. But **Acts 17:25** assures us He does not need us.

Worship, service, obeying God is, in fact, an opportunity to experience the grace of God, and thereby be more fully satisfied in Him. God could find many, many better ways to do the work He has charged us to do. So we can conclude He did not give us tasks because He lacked resources and needed us. Rather, He gave us tasks because He meant for us to experience Him more meaningfully, and in so doing, prove that He meets the need of the human heart.

God is most exalted in a human when that human regards God as their first love, as their soul's satisfaction, as their deepest need. So God's reputation is intimately attached to a believer's contentment, or lack thereof. This explains the latter part of verse 3 – *"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."* God's own name, His own glory, His own reputation is behind His care of us.

That's a comforting thought. It means God's care of us is not fickle. It does not depend on our diligence or faithfulness. His continual guiding is due to His devotion to His own glory, which gives us a rock-solid security. God will not forsake His own reputation – and for that reason, will not forsake those committed to His care. His name is exalted when His sheep are satisfied. This is, according to Psalm 23 – precisely what the relationship does – David is satisfied in God.

Not only that, but David looks forward with total confidence that this will continue to be the case: *"I shall not want"* – I will never truly suffer lack due to the negligence of my Owner. The rest of the Psalm is then an explanation of the phrase *"I shall not want."* David, using the

pastoral themes of herding sheep, explains through vivid imagery how God will meet his heart's needs through life.

David begins by saying: *"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."* David says he is fed, full, and able to rest in his Master. The Christian life is rest, in the sense of being free from the many things that torment unbelievers. A Christian has ceased from their own works and entered into the rest that the book of Hebrews describes.

Shepherds tell us, though, that sheep do not just lie down. Sheep only lie down when certain prerequisites have been met. They have to have freedom from fear – jittery sheep do not lie down. They have to have freedom from tension. Sheep butting each other cause a nervous, restless flock that does not lie down. They also have to have freedom from parasites. The many, many insects that torment sheep can drive them almost insane with irritation.

Sheep also need to have freedom from hunger and thirst – starving, thirsty sheep never lie down. Finally, they have to have freedom from self – their own fleeces that can be too heavy, hot, or filled with irritations. Such a sheep will not lie down. So let us see what these mean – and how they apply to us as Christians.

Freedom from fear

Sheep are exceptionally jittery animals. One stray jackrabbit can cause a whole herd to bolt. Sheep are naturally nervous and timid creatures. Now, once again you can see why God compares us to sheep. Humans are riddled with fears. Fears about the future, fears about dangers, fears about not being loved or liked, fears of suffering, fears of security.

The list is endless of the things we worry about, the things that cause us anxiety, the things that cause to fret and live in fear. A fretting, nervous sheep does not glorify a caring shepherd. Christ's most repeated words in the Gospels are the simple words, *"Fear not."* God has not given us a spirit of fear – but of power, love and a sound mind. It's all well to quote that verse, but *why* should we be free from fear? Well, according to Psalm 23, there are three reasons.

1. Firstly, the *presence* of the Shepherd

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me." Sheep simply have to see their shepherd in the field with them, and they begin to take their ease. He will protect, watch out, guard and guide. If he's there, all the sheep have to worry about is chewing.

We can be free from fear primarily because God is with us. **Matthew 28:20** says, *"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."* He tells us in **Hebrews 13:5**: *"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."* So I am free from all my fear by the simple truth that He is ever-present. If Jesus is asleep in your boat – then ignore the storm, and keep on sailing!

2. Secondly, the *power* of the Shepherd

"Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." A shepherd's rod was usually a weapon used for throwing or clubbing. With it, he could target a predator, fight off animals at close range, kill snakes, and even battle thieves. Shepherds become extremely accurate at throwing and using their rod. Seeing the rod in the shepherd's hand comforts the sheep. He has power, and will use it in the defence of the sheep.

It is our all-powerful Shepherd who comforts us too. We need only reflect on His all-sufficiency, and our fears should dissipate. **Jeremiah 32:17** says, *"Ah Lord GOD! Behold, Thou hast made the heaven and the earth by Thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for Thee."* Whatever our fears are – the power of God is what comforts us.

3. Thirdly, the *preparation* of the Shepherd

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." Many think that David is referring to a literal table, and that may be so. But in keeping with the shepherd theme – it is likely that David is referring to the rich tablelands that shepherds take their sheep up to. These vast, flat lands at high altitude afford the rich green pastures that sheep need. However, they often take some preparation.

A good shepherd, before leading his flock up the winding mountain paths to this terrain, will scout it out himself. In this preliminary trip, he will take out poisonous plants, sprinkle salt and minerals onto the pastures, hunt down predators, clear out waterholes of twigs, stones and debris, open springs that have overgrown, and attend to various other tasks to ensure simple, helpless sheep are able to graze in rest up there.

Christ has been before us. **Hebrews 4:15** assures us: *"For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."* Everything that can face us in this life, our Shepherd has faced it for us. He went ahead of us – He is the author of the race. We are not pioneers, we are followers. He tasted death for every person, bore our sorrows, experienced our shame. He has already removed the soul-threatening stench of sin.

You can be sure that all you face in life is something deliberately left there by the Shepherd. He Who sees all does not absent-mindedly leave the poisonous flower of a tragedy or calamity in our lives. No, He prepares the tableland of our lives, in the very presence of the things and ones that can hurt us.

Nothing takes God by surprise, He is never in a hurry, never reacting. He only acts – knowing perfectly. In His wisdom, He does all things well, and makes everything beautiful in its time. This gives the sheep freedom from fear. He is **present**. He is **powerful**. He has **prepared life** for us.

Freedom from parasites

But sheep need freedom from something else as well – parasites. Sheep, in particular, are tormented by a host of flies and insects. One called the nasal fly even lays its eggs in the

sheep's nose. If successful, the larvae hatch, work their way up nasal passages and cause inflammation in the sheep's head. Sheep have even been known to kill themselves in their frenzied efforts to relieve themselves by beating their heads against trees, posts or rocks.

How does a good shepherd counter such things? Today, like shepherds in David's time, you can apply ointments, substances and oils to the sheep to drive them away. This is likely the meaning of the phrase *"Thou anointest my head with oil."* David sees the Good Shepherd applying oil to his head and fleece, finally giving him relief from the parasites that torment him.

What torments us in this life? Endless annoyances, grievances, troubles, difficulties and problems. When one is solved, two more come to take its place. Sometimes even our own sin, with its consequences and guilt, adds to the load of grievances that keep us from rest.

In Scripture, oil often pictures the Holy Spirit. When we are saved, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. The Spirit is often described in the Bible as the Comforter. He is the one who comes alongside us. For what reason? To soothe us, guide us, teach us, instruct us, rebuke and reprove us, warn us, encourage us. It is He Who gives us the wisdom to avoid evil, the strength to bear troubles when they come, and the joy to be thankful in the midst of them.

All a sheep must do is submit to the application of the oil, and the parasites are far less. A Christian must daily, continually, be submitting to the indwelling Holy Spirit, that He might give us the grace to bear our difficulties. The Good Shepherd, in His kindness, says in **John 14:18**: *"I will not leave you comfortless."* The Good Shepherd is concerned about the troubles, pains, and grievances that unsettle His sheep. So He gives us His Word and His Spirit – for everything we need to lie down in green pastures.

Freedom from tension

Sheep, like other animals, have a so-called butting-order – fights among themselves for dominance. When butting and fighting is going on, the sheep are nervous and restless. They lose weight and do not lie down. So how does a shepherd control the fighting among the sheep?

Interestingly enough, the oil comes in here as well. Shepherds would apply an oil to the heads of the fighting sheep, causing them to glance off each other foolishly when trying to butt each other. The fights end quickly when the oil makes fighting impossible. Secondly, the presence of the Shepherd Himself is generally enough to cause in-fighting to cease. Often, sheep only fight when unaware of the shepherd's presence.

In our lives, seldom are we at rest when there is tension between us and other humans. The friction of failed relationships, of broken families, of church conflict and of difficult colleagues turns our stomachs and gives us no rest. Once again, the oil of the Holy Spirit is the lubricant between personalities.

Ephesians 5:18 tells us to be controlled by the Spirit continually, and then the following verses launch immediately into human relationships. There is a causal link – submission to the Spirit

leads to unselfishness in our behaviour. **James 4** also teaches us that conflict finds its root in a human's single-minded devotion to himself.

Selfishness destroys relationships. Likewise, when we keep the Person of Christ central to our thoughts, it influences how we treat others. Sometimes, we can be so sugary and kind to others, purely because of who we know is watching – the pastor of our church, a strict parent or leader, someone we respect. If only we'd remember Christ, the Good Shepherd, is always watching us – it would bring so much conflict to a wise, God-glorifying resolution.

Since the Good Shepherd wants a flock without in-fighting, He caringly anoints each of us with His Spirit, forever enabling us to have good, enjoyable relationships with the other sheep.

Freedom from hunger and thirst

Hungry and thirsty sheep do not lie down. Food and drink for the sheep are directly related to the loving diligence of the shepherd. *"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters."*

Now, it takes some work to achieve this. Shepherds have to scout out the best land. They have to clean out polluted or clogged water. They have to brave difficult passes to get to the best grass. Sometimes, they have to actually farm the land to create good pastures. Shepherds work hard so their sheep can eat and drink, and then rest. This is the sacrificial heart of Christ.

For us, the hunger which prevents rest is a soul-hunger. It is the restlessness of a soul created to worship God – but not doing so. Christ, in His kindness, makes sure we can feast on Him. He proclaims Himself as the Living Water, from which a man will never thirst again, if we drink from it. So what does He do, so that we can eat and drink?

Christ clears out the rocks of unbelief in our hearts. He pulls out the roots of idols and unworthy loves. He breaks up the hard heart of pride and rebellion. Then He sows the good seed of His Word. Those who receive it heartily bring forth fruit hundredfold. God satisfies our hearts with Himself in the Word.

Sadly, many Christians are emaciated, weak and sickly, simply because they refuse to eat what is put in front of them. God has prepared the very best pastures for them to eat from – but they refuse to eat, and choose to drink from the stagnant pools of the world. They choose to eat the dry and dusty morsels of sin's pleasures, and foolishly ignore the lush, beautiful lawns that God has specifically prepared for His flock.

Freedom from self

Finally, for us to have rest in this life, we need freedom from self. What a tyrant our selfish nature can be. A.W. Tozer put it superbly in his book, *The Pursuit of God*:

"The labour of self-love is a heavy one indeed. Think for yourself whether much of your sorrow has not arisen from someone speaking slightly of you. As long as you set

yourself up as a little god, to which you must be loyal, there will be those who will delight to offer affront to your idol. How then can you hope to have inward peace? The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honour from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest. Continue this fight through the years and the burden will become intolerable. Yet the sons of earth are carrying this burden continually, challenging every word spoken against them, cringing under every criticism, smarting under each fancied slight, tossing sleepless if another is preferred before them. Such a burden as this is not necessary to bear. Jesus calls us to His rest, and meekness is His method. The meek man cares not at all who is greater than he, for he has long ago decided that the esteem of the world is not worth the effort."

A picture of this self-life is the fleece of a sheep. It grows from the sheep and becomes hot, heavy, and often riddled with parasites. Sometimes, a sheep will lie down, and the sheer weight of its own fleece can cause it to lose balance – unable to get up except by the intervention of the shepherd.

As we live lives in rebellion to God – living for ourselves and not for the benefit of others – as we vainly pursue our own lusts at all costs, the fleece of the self-life grows in strength. Sometimes, we simply need a fleecing. The Good Shepherd, in His mercy, steps in to remove some things from our life, stripping us of things we've become dependent on, and freeing us from the tyranny of self. It is uncomfortable, but what relief when the fleece is off.

Often, the shepherd uses his staff to this end. The staff is a hook-shaped stick that shepherds use for various reasons – but they are all good. They use staffs to lift newborns to their mother. They use them to draw timid sheep to themselves. They use them to raise and restore sheep that have fallen into a ditch or a hard-to-reach place. Sometimes, shepherds even use their staff like an extension of their hand – they will put it at the side of the sheep, guiding, even petting.

Assurance of the goodness of God towards us leads us away from fighting for ourselves, and relying on His care for us. Why do I need to struggle to care for myself, if I trust in a Shepherd who does a far better job of it?

This is why David can end his psalm by saying, *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."* With such a Shepherd, all he expects is goodness and lovingkindness all his life. Wherever he turns, there will be goodness and mercy following him – because the Lord is his shepherd.

With such a Master – one who gives freedom from fear, from tension, from grievances, from hunger and from self – who would want to dwell anywhere else but in His household, in His presence? The question to ask is, are you in the care of the Good Shepherd? If so, you will never lack. Instead, you'll be able to lie down and enter into a life of rest in Him.