

Chapter 11

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD



"The Lord Is My Shepherd" compliments of Pitts Chapel United Methodist Church, Springfield, Mo.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequently found stained glass windows in churches is that of Jesus as a shepherd surrounded by his sheep. In addition, when searching for a Scripture often quoted by people during times of life-changing events, without doubt, it will be “The Lord Is My Shepherd” from Psalm 23. Even our Jewish Messiah leaned heavily upon the book of Psalm by quoting **Psalm 22: 1: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”** when being crucified on the cross for our sin.

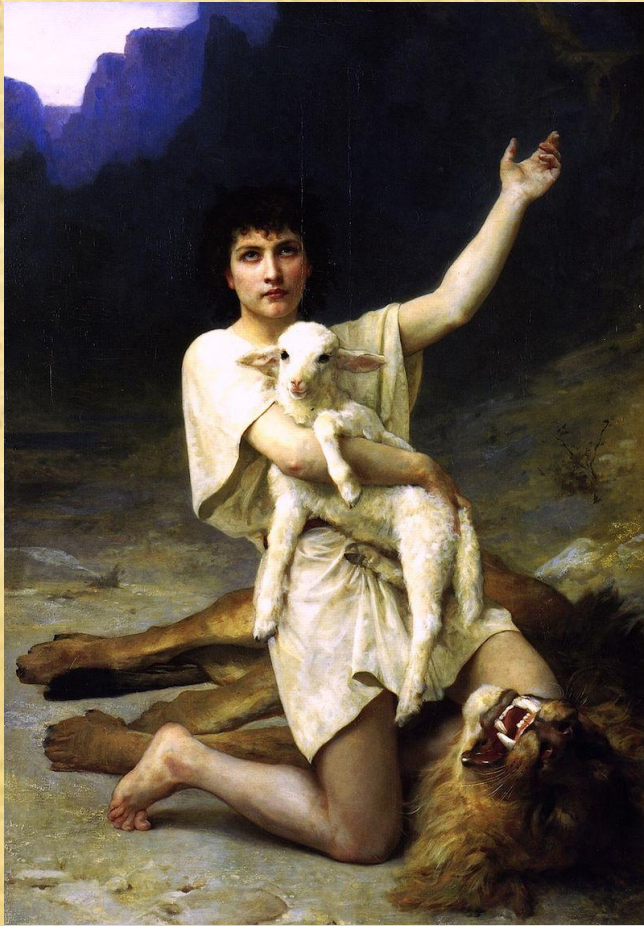
In the book, “Jesus and Scripture”, written by Stephen Moyise, our Lord is said to have quoted from Psalm on 11 different occasions. They are listed as follows:

- *“Jesus outwits the Pharisees with the Psalms on several occasions ([Ps 8:2](#), [110:1](#); [Mt 21:16](#), [22:44](#); [Mk 12:36](#), [14:62](#); [Lk 20:42–43](#)).*
- *He quotes the twenty-second Psalm while dying on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ([Ps 22:1](#); [Mt 27:46](#); [Mk 15:34](#)). He then fulfills the thirty-first Psalm by committing his spirit to the Father ([31:5](#); [Lk 23:46](#)).*
- *Jesus is hated without cause, which he says the Psalms foretold ([Ps 35:19](#), [69:4](#); [Jn 15:25](#)).*
- *He quotes the Psalms when talking about his betrayal ([Ps 41:9](#); [Jn 13:18](#)).*
- *Jesus recalls the manna in the wilderness after feeding a multitude ([Ps 78:24](#); [Jn 6:31](#)).*
- *When the Jews want to stone Jesus for claiming to be God, he responds with a line from Psalm ([Ps 82:6](#); [Jn 10:34](#)).*
- *Jesus quotes [Psalm 110](#) when Pilate asks if he is the son of God ([Ps 110:1](#); [Mt 26:64](#)).*
- *He quotes Psalm to the chief priests and elders, calling himself the chief cornerstone ([Ps 118:22–23](#); [Matt 21:42](#); [Mk 12:10](#); [Luke 20:17](#)).*
- *Jesus references Psalm when foretelling Jerusalem’s destruction ([Ps 118:26](#); [Matt 23:39](#); [Lk 13:35](#)).*”

Although scholars hold different points of view as to the number of verses (songs or poems) in the book of Psalm authored by King David, it can be stated that he definitely wrote a sizeable number; that of being over seventy. Certainly, when reading those attributed to David, his life experiences as a shepherd freely flowed throughout the written Script. From the time he was pulled out of the field and anointed to be the future king of Israel his reliance on the wisdom and skills learned in tending his sheep served as the very foundation upon which he led his people; whether governing or leading battalions of soldiers. However, beyond doubt, David’s greatest strength was that of allowing God to direct his life. Although he stumbled painfully on his journey, he would always find his way back to the Father with his head lowered in reverence; no matter the punishment received.

Even though David, known as “The Shepherd King” is well remembered for his success as a great warrior fighting for God, when reading the work attributed to him in Psalm what becomes abundantly clear is the catalyst for defining him as a human being was **his relationship with God**. The beauty of his soul and love for the Lord shone as brightly as the star filled sky that served as a canopy above him when only a lowly shepherd. The Heavenly Father and this shepherd boy must have spent countless hours together in close communion. How our Lord must have been blessed to hear the beautiful music played just for him as David’s fingers passionately strummed the strings on the harp.

Thus, one only has to open the Bible to the following verses attributed to David below to realize why he was labeled as “a man after God’s own heart”:



*The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want ...
(Psalm 23)*

*The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom
should I fear ... (Psalm 27)*

*I lift my eyes to the mountains — from where will
my help come? My help comes from the Lord,
Maker of heaven and earth ... (Psalm 121)*

Since at age 30, David became Israel’s king and successfully reigned for 40 years, it is no wonder he was so highly regarded in the eyes of his people; prompting them to be desirous of a messiah that would restore the peaceful kingdom as started by the “Shepherd King.” (“David the Shepherd, Elizabeth Jane Gardner” by Picture of a painting by Elizabeth Jane Gardner - National Museum of Women in the Arts. Licensed under Public Domain via Commons)

In addition, many times people have compared the life of David to that of Jesus and found astonishing similarities. Some of these comparisons are as follows:

- 1) King Saul was worried that David would take away his kingdom/power. In **John 11: 48**, the Pharisees worried unless something was done with Jesus, the Roman Government would remove their power.
- 2) Saul plotted to kill David and relentlessly pursued him. **John 11: 53** indicated that the Pharisees and other religious leaders devised a plan to kill Jesus and constantly tried to find ways to trick him into breaking the law; resulting in his trial and death.
- 3) David fled from Saul to escape death. **John 11: 54** reads that Jesus had to be constantly aware and on the move to escape his enemies.
- 4) King Saul commanded his servants to capture David or tell him where he could be found. In **John 11: 57**, the same edict came down from the Pharisees to the people.
- 5) Even though both David and Jesus had helped the Israelites, some of the people they served, provided information to the enemy.

6) Both David and Jesus stayed in close communication with God the Father.

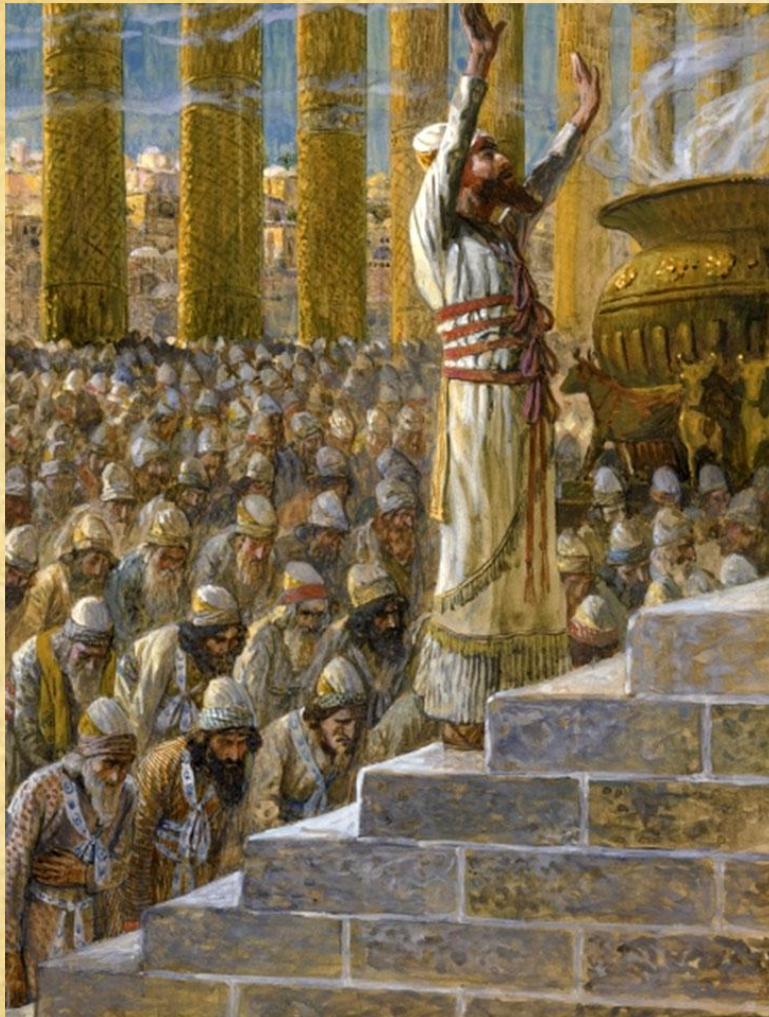
7) However, at this point, it must be pointed out that in spite of the similarities, Jesus was God who came to dwell among us and was totally without blemish; unlike the human being named David. In short, David was an earthly king while Jesus was the promised Spiritual King whose kingdom would have no end.

A SHEPHERD PEOPLE

“We your servants are shepherds, as were also our fathers.” (Genesis 47: 3)

Shepherding is among the oldest occupations that began some 5,000 years ago in Asia Minor. The Holman Bible Dictionary defines a shepherd as a “keeper of sheep”; meaning caring for their every need.” Scholars have reported the Hebrew word for shepherding can be translated as “feeding” which adds even greater meaning to why the words shepherds and shepherding were used over 200 times in the Bible. In addition, the word sheep was mentioned in Scripture over 500 times; showing them as extremely important possessions of the ancient Hebrew people. Sheep were used for food products such as meat and milk, while their wool served as a source for clothing. Also, throughout Scripture, they were used in the Jewish religious ceremonies as sacrifices on the altar.

As early as **Genesis 4: 2**, Abel was described as a keeper of sheep. Certainly Scripture states the



importance of great flocks of animals to Abraham and Sarah as they traveled on their long journeys throughout the Fertile Crescent. In fact, many books of the Bible let us know the importance of sheep (thought to be fat-tailed) to the Jewish people. The fat in the tail was compared to the hump on a camel because of it being a source of reserve strength for the sheep; also providing a valuable food commodity for frying when sold. (**Exodus 29:22**) Job had 14,000 sheep. (**Job 42: 12**) King Solomon at the Temple’s dedication sacrificed 120,000 sheep. (**1 Kings 8: 63**) (From “Manners and Customs of Bible Lands” by Fred H. Wight)

*(Solomon dedicates the Temple At Jerusalem
by James Tissot)*



A painting of Abraham's departure by József Molnár.

History also shows that as cultivation of crops increased, shepherding fell from favor with care of the sheep designated to slaves, hired hands, or the youngest son; an explanation as to why David was called from the field prior to his anointing by Samuel. (**I Samuel 16: 11-13**)

In spite of the move toward agriculture, sheep still held an important place in the economy for people living in the Bible Lands. However, for the shepherds tending the sheep, foraging for food and water became more problematic. The next photograph you see will set the stage as to the role the shepherd played in caring for the sheep. As you view it, think of the temperature, type of climate, lack of foliage, possible sources of water, and predators, all of which, posed enormous challenges to those caring for sheep. Given the importance of sheep to everyday life during Bible times, it is hard to believe people caring for these animals were considered by society to be of such a lowly status. (Pause and relate this to career paths in your world today. Do we have the same issue regarding status?)

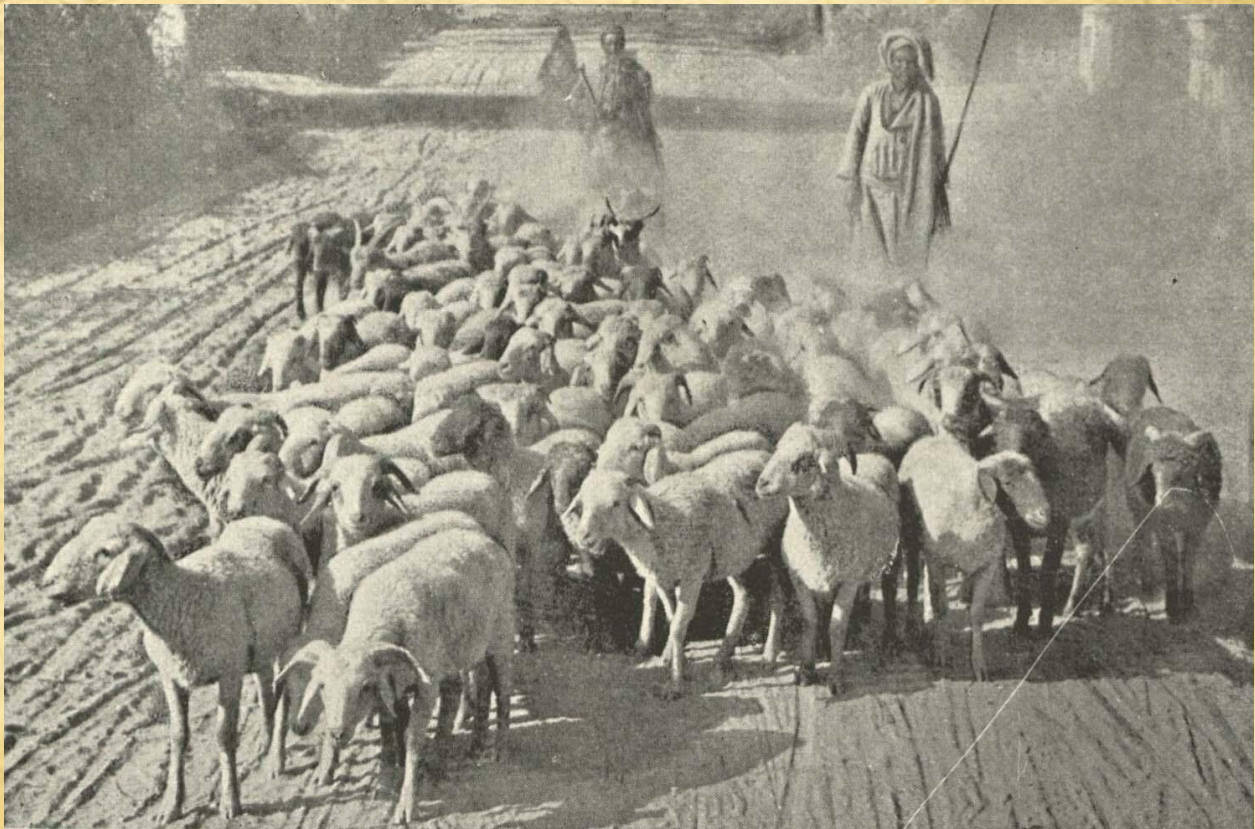
SHEPHERD AND SHEEP

First, by drawing from Old Testament Scripture, it is clear that our Creator placed himself in the role of Shepherd and all his children as sheep right from the start. Shockingly, since the behavior of humans and sheep are mirror images of one another and the survival of the flock rests in the hands of the one caring for them, the word **sheep** in the Bible became a synonym for **mankind**. Simply stated, our Maker understands this thing called "life" is impossible for his children to maneuver alone, thus, sending the message that his presence in the role of Shepherd is essential; a fact announced repeatedly to his children.

In **Ezekiel 34: 11-16**, God speaks boldly about his role as the Shepherd of his people by stating, **"For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out."As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land."I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. "I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy I will feed them with judgment."** (NIV)

Then leaving no room for doubt, he emphatically states in **Ezekiel 34: 31**, **"As for you, My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, you are men, and I am your God," declares the Lord GOD."** (NIV) Given the many times God referred to his children as sheep and his role as Shepherd, it is not surprising that this theme would continue in the New Testament. After all, since God came to dwell among us in the form of Jesus, (being both human and divine), it was only natural that the mantle of Shepherd be passed on to his Son as a part of the New Covenant. In fact, the length to which a shepherd goes to offer protection for his sheep took on a total new meaning because of the actions of our Shepherd Savior.

In addition, simply focusing on the photograph below will provide even greater understanding as to the reason Jesus called himself our Shepherd and referred to us as his sheep throughout Scripture. Mistakenly, when we quote Psalm 23 during our times of hardship, the visual image most often drawn in our mind is that of beautiful pasture lands and crystal clear flowing water. Instead, if we really get back to the basics of the origination of the words for the Psalm, in reality, the image in our mind should be based around the setting pictured below. We will then conclude that it is in times of desperation when we feel like there is nothing but dry cracked desert all around, the Shepherd of our lives will be present to provide for our every need. As this chapter unfolds one thing you will note is that a shepherd's focus was never about self, but always centered on the welfare of the flock.



The Shepherd and his Flock, c. 1905

Thus, IT IS THE WRITER'S HOPE THAT, as you read the remainder of this chapter, YOU WILL FRAME EVERY THOUGHT WITH THE WORDS, "THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD." Through this process, you will internalize what it meant to all of us for Jesus to assume this role. As a descendent of a shepherd people, he not only understood the scope of a shepherd's responsibility, but had lived it from the time he had been born as a Jewish boy until he took his last breath on the cross. Although a carpenter, as a part of this life experience, he had become so familiar with the personality and behavior of sheep that he knew without the love and devotion of a shepherd, they would never be able to maneuver the harsh realities of their environment, thus, the Scripture from **Matthew 9: 36**: *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* (NIV) If the sheep were to flourish, the shepherd had to focus on each one rather than his own personal needs. He had to die to self and center all his efforts on feeding and caring for his sheep.

W. Phillip Keller in his book "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23", states clearly what happens if the shepherd does not put the welfare of his sheep first with the words, *"Sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they 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.” Folks, isn't mankind guilty of this in today's world?

A SHEPHERD'S FOCUS

The following brief description of a shepherd's clothing and equipment will give you an idea as to the type of a life a keeper of sheep led. As you read the list of supplies he used day after day, ask yourself if you would have been able to live the life of a shepherd. *The clothing and equipment a shepherd would have needed during Bible times was very simple and functional as compared to what people today possess. His main garment worn against the skin would have been a tunic with a cummerbund as a belt at the waist. A mantle made of sheepskin would have protected him from the elements; with the fleece side turned inward. Sandals designed with straps that wrapped around his ankles served to protect his feet from being bruised and battered by sharp rocks and thorns. As a headpiece, he wore a simple woven cloth of wool. On his shoulder would hang a bag or srip, sometimes called a keli that was made of leather that held his necessities; meaning food supplies (bread, olives, dried fruit, and cheese) along with medicinal ointment for tending to the animals. A ram's horn would always be on his person that would be filled with oil when anointing the heads of the sheep. In addition, his own personal water flask, rod, staff, sling, dog, and musical pipe would have completed his supplies. (In David's case, it was said that he played a harp.)* wikipedia



Shepherd's equipment

Bedouin Shepherd Boy

ROD

We are told in the book by W. Phillip Keller, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23," (a must read as recommended by the writer), that a shepherd boy would take great pride in selecting just the right equipment when preparing to care for his father's herd. After selecting the ideal sapling, he would shape it into just the right size and weight for his stature. Then once carved and whittled down to perfection, he would practice using it until able to hit his target with amazing accuracy and speed; a skill that meant protecting his sheep as well as his own life. It would also be hurled through the air at sheep that decided to stray from the flock into the path of danger. Then, at the close of day, each sheep must pass under the rod upon entering the sheepfold, not only for the purpose of counting, but also to inspect every animal for signs of disease or parasites. Since the sheep's wool is remarkably thick, the shepherd would move it against the grain of the coat, separating it allowing an inspection all the way to the skin of the animal. Keller labels the shepherd's rod as his weapon of power, authority, and defense.

****The rod for us is the Word of God; with application of authority and divinity. Psalm 139: 23-24 "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (NIV)**

STAFF

The shepherd's staff was a long, slender wooden stick (containing a hook on one end) that was designed and shaped with the needs of the sheep in mind. Keller describes its function as being totally for the comfort of the sheep and sites three important uses for it.

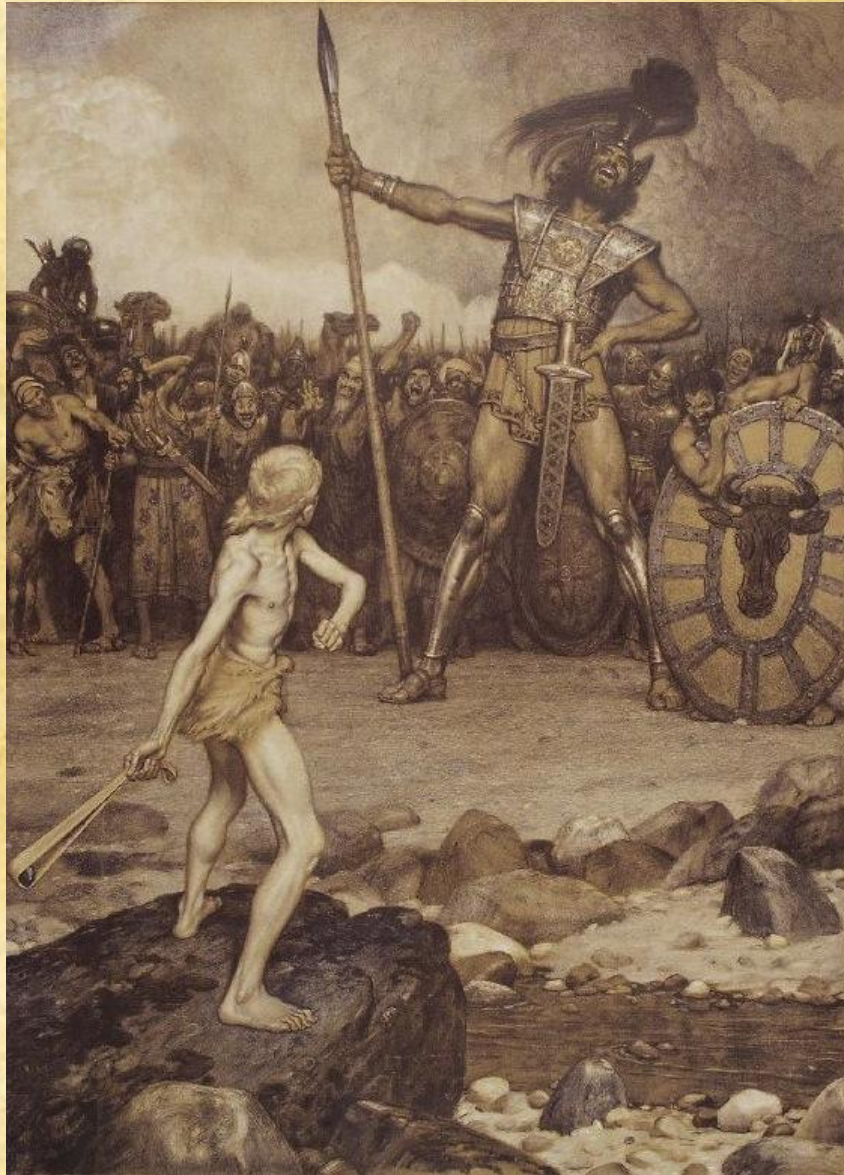
- 1) It was used to lift a new born lamb that had become separated from the mother without having to touch it; thus, preventing the odor his hands bear from being transferred to it. This thoughtful action created an intimate bond between the ewe and lamb.
- 2) Another important use for the staff was to reach out and draw an individual sheep (whether young or old) close to him for a time of personal fellowship.
- 3) Additionally, the shepherd would lay the tip of the long stick against the animal's side and apply pressure when the sheep was straying or when needing to be rescued from danger.

****Keller describes the rod as the Word of God, while the staff is symbolic of the Spirit of God. We know this as the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life; that of our Counselor. Ladies and gentlemen, do you agree that human beings can be placed in all three uses for the staff as listed above?**

SLING

The sling is usually well known because of the Bible story of David and Goliath. "A sling had a small cradle or *pouch* in the middle of two lengths of cord. The *sling stone* was placed in the pouch. The middle finger or thumb was placed through a loop on the end of one cord, and a tab at the end of the

other cord was placed between the thumb and forefinger. The sling was swung in an arc, and the tab released at a precise moment. This freed the projectile to fly to the target. The sling essentially worked by extending the length of a human arm, thus allowing stones to be thrown much farther than they could be by hand.” (Wikipedia)



David and Goliath, a colour lithograph by Osmar Schindler (c. 1888)

****Compare the battles we must face during life's journey to that of David and Goliath. The Lord will be at our side just as he was with David. Since the great Promise Keeper has said he will never leave or forsake us, it is important to focus on him and believe. *"It is the Lord who goes before you. He will***

be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” Deuteronomy 31: 8 (ESV)

CAST DOWN SHEEP

Once again, W. Phillip Keller in the book "A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23" offers information about sheep becoming cast down that will forever shed new light on the Scripture from **Psalm 43: 5** that reads, **"Why , my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."** Keller writes, "Sheep are built in such a way that if they fall over on their side and then onto their back, it is very difficult for them to get up again. They flail their legs in the air, bleat, and cry. After a few hours on their backs, gas begins to collect in their stomachs, the stomach hardens, the air passage is cut off, and the sheep will eventually suffocate. This is referred to as a "cast down" position.

When a shepherd restores a cast down sheep, he reassures it, massages its legs to restore circulation, gently turns the sheep over, lifts it up, and holds it so it can regain its equilibrium." If this is not done, the sheep will not survive.

**** 1 Peter 5: 7 lets us know clearly how to deal with our own troubles in life with the words, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (Stained glass window from United Methodist Church, Waco, TX)**



ANNOINTING

Even though the shepherd had constantly to be vigilant as to the best places for his sheep to receive nourishment, it was equally important that he check daily for the parasites that can make the animals experience sheer misery. Since the goal of the pesky parasites was to lay their eggs in the wet nose mucus of the animal resulting in unbearable inflammation that would drive the flock to madness; each animal must be checked daily. Otherwise, not only would there be a lack of comfort, but the shepherd would witness his precious animals bumping their heads against anything around to stop the distraction; even to the point of killing themselves.

Therefore, in anticipation of this eventuality, the shepherd packed a special ointment in his bag prior to departing for other locations. In ancient Israel, a concoction of olive oil and spices was used to pour over the head of the sheep to prevent the invasion of the parasites. W. Phillip Keller described his solution as follows: "At the very first sign of flies among the flock, he would apply an antidote to their heads. I always preferred to use a homemade remedy composed of linseed oil, sulphur and tar which was smeared over the sheep's nose and head as a protection against nose flies." This treatment resulted in making the wool too slick for the parasites to penetrate.



(Sheep being anointed with oil, artist unanimous, public domain) Note animal horn being used as the tool that held the oil)

Since another meaning for the word anointing is, “Chosen One,” it was a part of the religious ceremonies as a consecration for office or for service to God. ([Exodus 29:7](#); [Exodus 40:9](#); [2 Kings 9:6](#); [Ecclesiastes 9:8](#); [James 5:14](#)). Another name for our Jewish Messiah was “The Anointed One”.



Cornelis de Vos, *The Anointing of Solomon*. According to 1 [Kings 1:39](#), Solomon was anointed by Zadok.

**** Anointing is still used in churches today for those going into religious service, suffering from illness, or for receiving the blessing of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is pointed out that as a Believer of Christ, although not formally being touched with oil, we should daily seek the anointing of the Spirit through prayer and communion with God.**

THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP (JOHN 10: 1-18)

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

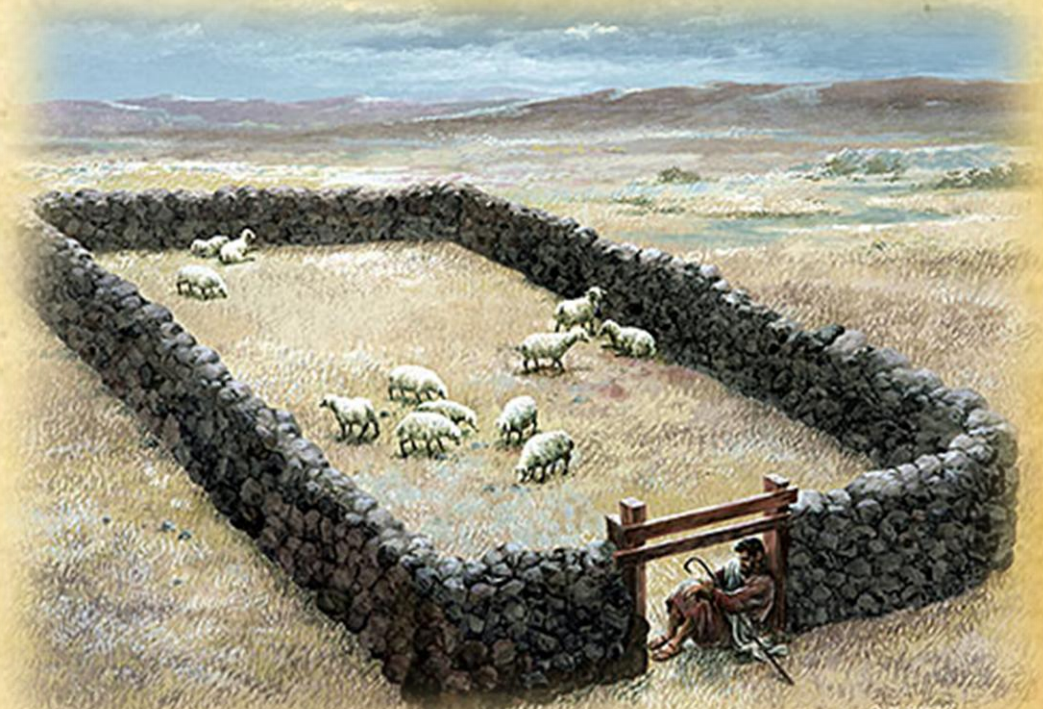
⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.^[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (NIV)

Let us first begin this section with the reason for a sheepfold. As stated earlier, as each sheep entered the gate, the shepherd used his rod as a way of inspecting for parasites. When each animal walked under his rod, his focus was based totally around its wellbeing. Not one passed without notice. Perhaps this is a good indication of why self-centeredness was not even a remote possibility for a shepherd. Then when all was well, the shepherd would recline in the doorway or gate of the sheepfold offering assurance and protection. Nothing entered without his blessing. At anytime the flock became restless, all the shepherd had to do is speak softly; allowing the animals to hear his voice. They were so attuned to its sound that none other could replace it. The sheep would follow no one else but their compassionate shepherd. It was out of love for his flock that he even knew each one by name. That is why it was impossible for an imposter or a hireling to shepherd healthy sheep. They simply lacked the compassion and love for each animal to establish this type of relationship.

*(Sheepfold
public domain
artist unknown.)*

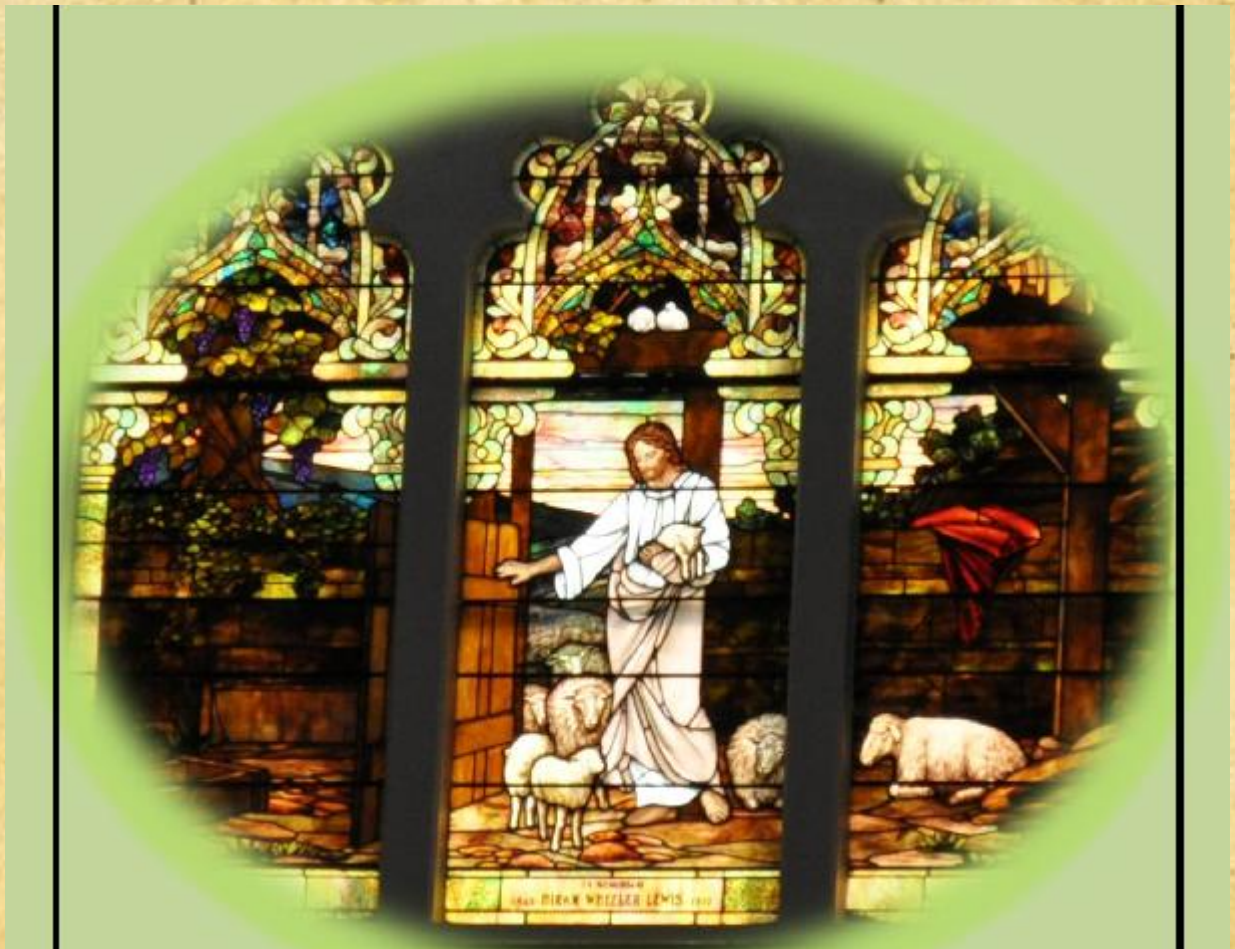


One of the sweetest, most compassionate, incredible Scriptures in the Bible for all of God's children is when our Jewish Messiah calls himself "THE GOOD SHEPHERD." Simply slowly reading the Scripture from John above aloud will allow your mind to understand how our God views his creation. It has been stated often that we are objects of his affection because he CHOSE to create us; to breathe his very life into each individual at birth. Then, in addition to being made by the work of his hands, the fact that he never takes his eyes off each individual from the beginning to the end of life on earth, gives us pause to recognize with certainty that we are a shinned on people. Thus, when darkness falls threatening to cover our soul in thick layers of confusion, misery, and anxiety, knowing we are in the care of our Good Shepherd will provide courage to journey one small step at a time, unflinchingly, toward the light. Under our Lord's tender care, we will not feel constrained or confined, nor ever allow our hope to be diminished.

Certainly, by using the drawing above and visualizing ourselves as one of the sheep inside the sheepfold with Jesus always present at the gate, will allow all of us to face the chill when the cold winds of winter tenaciously blow and howl without ceasing. No failure of a meticulously planned future, broken heart, health challenge, or death of a loved one will ever have to be faced alone. The Good Shepherd knows our every thought and realizes what we need before the prayer for assistance leaves our lips. Realizing we are like sheep that are helpless and always in danger of going astray, he will use his rod and staff to right us once again. In fact Scripture assures us that his love is so great for his sheep that he pursues us all our earthly lives; not wanting one member of his flock to be lost from him.

However, at this juncture, it is important to state that free will comes into play as to the certainty of each individual's future. Although our Lord is always wooing his sheep to become a part of his flock, he will never force the issue. First each person must recognize him as Savior, repent of sins, and invite him to enter our heart which then guarantees the privilege of being forever in his care. It is the writer's hope that you have already committed your life to Christ. **If not, you are encouraged to pause at this moment in time and do so before it is too late.** Once this is done, it is important to die to self and allow your mind to recognize the sound of his voice just as the sheep did as described above. The more you practice listening for him, the easier the process will become. He may speak to you in Scripture, through another individual, or send a thought through your mind unexpectedly. **Matthew 7: 7** offers this assurance with the words, "**Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.**" (NIV) If you have difficulty hearing him, be persistent, keep asking and listening. After all, the Shepherd has the answer and is always right on time; even if the answer is "no". Also, be aware the solution you desire may not be the one he provides. His thoughts are not your thoughts.

Let us now pause for another moment and view the stained glass window called "THE SHEEPFOLD" compliments of First Presbyterian Church, Wichita, Kansas, allowing the fact that our Lord is willing to be the keeper of his flock; meaning all mankind. Please note the warmth, love, and compassion he exudes as he stands at the gate to the sheepfold. He truly is worthy of our praise and adoration!



("The Sheepfold Door" stained glass window courtesy of First Presbyterian Church, Wichita, KS.)

TIME FOR CONTEMPLATION

Isn't it amazing how our thinking process and view toward life changes as we approach the winter season of our earthly journey? The reasoning behind the old adage, "Youth is wasted on the young", seems to become clearer with each passing day, doesn't it? What we think is in our best interest does not even come close to being the proper solution. In fact, how many of us, when thinking about the events of the past say right out loud, "How did I ever make it through that impossible trial?"

Yet, we failed to recognize the answer to this question was in full view right from the start. The inability to solve this riddle of life transpired because the window through which we were peering was clouded by the reflection of our own face, thus, blocking the image of our Lord from sight. Certainly, although the adage was coined about youth, it has been long accepted that lessons are hard for every individual to learn; no matter the season of life. How many bumps on the head do we need to endure before speaking first to our Lord prior to determining which path we pursue?

As we have followed our Jewish Messiah down the highways and byways that would be home to the final three years of his life, as our Great Shepherd, the fact that he was constantly inviting “sheep” into his sheepfold should have been abundantly clear. He made no difference between the rich or poor, sick or healthy, as he extended the offer of eternal life to one and all; regardless of race or color. His behavior served as a living example of how important it is to love the Father first and also thy neighbor as thyself.

Additionally, he stood and fed his sheep using parables that were absolutely stunning due to their structure being filled with picturesque beauty and simplicity. He performed miracles that were filled to the brim with compassion and love; acts that left us speechless and at a loss for words. Then, as he delivered the Sermon on the Mount that announced the kingdom of heaven had arrived on earth, he meticulously described what was expected of its citizens; meaning his followers. Did you, like this writer, feel the power of God flowing from his entire being with every word he spoke? Even though we were receiving his message through the Word, could you still feel the mighty hand of God piercing your soul? Regardless of the fatigue that penetrated his human body, he relentlessly moved forward with determined steps in a resolute manner; all while staying in constant contact with his Father. Ladies and gentlemen, we witnessed in action, the Good Shepherd, lovingly “feeding” his sheep. That is why his words to Peter from John 21: 15 now become so poignant in our minds that read, *“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”* Then, as we read aloud the instructions from *1 Peter 5: 2*, our marching orders are quite clear. We are told, *“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve”.*(NIV)



Finally, let us end by focusing *on* the words of Jesus when he told us that a shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Oh, how telling these words from our Lord were at this point! Although, at the time, the mere human beings that had followed and listened to every word that passed his lips would not have possessed the potential for understanding the true meaning of his words, those of us living at this time in history know exactly what awaits our Savior. Thinking back to the image of the sheepfold that held his contented flock, the Good Shepherd would soon choose to take the place of his sheep by suffering death on the cross; sacrificing his own life for theirs/ours; an act performed out of love, not due to guilt or sin. **GO YE!**

(“The Good Shepherd”), stained glass window on previous page, compliments of First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburg, Kansas)

Sources:

"A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23" by W. Phillip Keller (Recommended Reading by Writer)

"Christian Believer—Knowing God With Heart and Mind" by J. Ellsworth Calas

"Life Application Study Bible" (NIV)

"Jesus and Scripture" by Stephen Moyise

Wikipedia.com

Faith Lessons Series – Ray Vander Laan (1996-2012) DVD

"Manners and Customs of Bible Lands" by Fred H. Wight)



GROWING IN THE WORD



Music: Recommendation to begin your study time by listening to the hymn "Trust and Obey" played by Bradley Jent on the organ. (Located on home page at www.devotionalembbers.com)

Since we began this chapter by focusing on the Psalms written by David, let us also end in the same manner. When reading commentary on the 23rd Psalm, many scholars felt he penned these well loved words, not as a young impulsive shepherd boy, but during his final rein as King of Israel. Although some felt it was based on his experience as a shepherd boy alone with the responsibility of a flock, others surmised the wisdom these words in this Psalm deliver would have come from a wise older individual; that of a king looking back on the deliverance God provided during the many challenges he faced in leading his nation.

1) Regardless, the basic truism that a human being, no matter the age, does not possess the wisdom to conquer life, should give each one of us pause to shout jubilantly, "The Lord "**HE**" is my shepherd! In order to allow each individual to internalize the importance of this fact and write it with indelible ink on the heart, slowly read Psalm 23 in its entirety, allowing your mind to savor each word. If you are with others, join hands and say it together.



"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."(NIV Life Study Bible)

AMEN!

- 2) After reading or saying the 23rd Psalm together, meditate quietly as a group for a comfortable length of time on what it means to you personally. Along your journey in life, when were some instances when you could feel the Great Shepherd's presence close by?
- 3) If you feel comfortable, share these inspiring moments with the group. Do not feel pressure to respond.
- 4) If you are doing this as a church, can you think of times when the Great Shepherd led his flock? Share them.
- 5) List as a group ways in which you can follow Jesus' directions to "feed his lambs." How might you do that on a personal basis, as well?
- 6) Close by reading the 23rd Psalm as the concluding prayer.