

THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP



Psalm 23

(A Psalm of David)

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, 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 your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (NIV)

Dear Opal,

Psalm 23 is probably not only one of the favorite Scriptures of many people, but also the most frequently read in churches, at funerals, and during important times in life. In fact, if a survey were taken of this soothing Scripture, the number of people that have memorized it by heart would be fascinating facts to learn.

On the other hand, how do you think the same individuals surveyed would answer when asked if they thought of themselves as behaving like sheep? After all, when you read about the smartest animals on the planet, sheep will not be found at the top.

Yet, in Scripture, man is referred to as being like sheep over 500 times; a fact that ties the behavior of all of us to that particular species due to the way we behave. **Isaiah 53: 6 reads, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."** W. Phillip Keller the author of "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23", and also having been a shepherd himself, adds credence by summarizing why this is true with the following words: ***"It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways. Our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance."***

As the writer contemplated this information, the concept that came to mind as the reason mans' behavior can be compared to that of sheep is all due to "self" getting in the way; a force that is so incredibly powerful in the hearts of humans that it plagues each of us all our lives, no matter the generation. All of us struggle with the failure to recognize that we are totally dependent on our Creator every second of our lives for survival; meaning for every breath we take, twenty-four hours a day. Then going beyond our physical needs, it applies equally to our emotional and spiritual welfare, as well.

Regardless of having the ability to intellectually understand these truisms, surprisingly, those that are Believers still struggle daily with applying this to their own lives. Even when operating within the church community, no matter

this sacred location, the same human behavior that Keller described above can be applied, actions that puzzle many non-Christians.

Keller then states with joy how our Lord feels about his followers even in the face of their misconduct with the following words: **“Yet despite these adverse characteristics Christ chooses us, buys us, calls us by name, makes us His own, and delights in caring for us.”**

Given this powerful statement, in our letter today, the writer will focus on the 23rd Psalm in a way that will show how much our actions mirror that of sheep, even when our Savior wants the best for us as the Shepherd of his flock.

“I Lack Nothing”



Sheep are notorious for escaping from a good shepherd’s care and have to be rescued from a field that has nothing but bare ground and polluted water. Having not been satisfied with the conditions, no matter how nutritious or plentiful they are, they keep searching for something better. Baa! Sound like anyone you know? There is a misconception that having material wealth makes people happy; a state of mind that prompts man to gamble, steal, and concoct elaborate schemes all for more of the mighty dollar. Yet, when they pass away, they will leave this world as they entered, that being with nothing.

“He Makes Me Lie Down In Green Pastures”



According to Keller, in order for a sheep to lie down contentedly, they must have freedom from fear, tension, aggravations, and hunger. Sound familiar? Baa! Given the lack of sleep reported for a large number of people, plus, the amount of sleeping medication sold, do you think man is resting under the Good Shepherd’s care or toughing it out on his own?

“He Leads Me Beside Quiet Waters”



Bodies of both sheep and humans are composed of a high percentage of water. (Sheep -70%) (Humans-60%) When thirsty, the sheep will search for water and drink from even polluted streams to satisfy their need. Thus, Jesus, recognizing the need of humans to satisfy their spiritual thirst, often invites them to draw from him as the only source of fulfillment. **“If man thirst, let him come unto me and drink.” (John 7:37)** Yet, how often will individuals try various substitutes for quenching their insatiable thirst for God? Baa!

“He Refreshes My Soul”



“Psalm 42:11 reads, **“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God...”**, which is a direct parallel drawn between man and sheep. When a sheep turns over on its back (cast down) and cannot get up, it usually just lies there in frightened frustration and will die without help because of a buildup of gas. How often does a child of God fall, unable to figure a way out of a dilemma? Baa! Yet, the Scripture above clearly indicates the source for being rescued. Fellow Christians have a responsibility to assist, not judge, when a follower finds himself cast down.

“He Guides Me In Paths of Righteousness For His Name’s Sake”



Sheep are notorious for grazing in the same spots until they are nothing but grassless barren land. Yet, they continue to not change their habits to the point of self-destruction. Unless the shepherd intervenes and has their best

interest at heart, they will not flourish or even live. Sound familiar? Baa! How many times does man place himself in this predicament rather than find new friends, all because it also means changing lifestyle habits? Furthermore, as Christians that are supposed to love God first and our fellowman next, the old self gets in the way by saying, "It's not my business. He got himself into this situation, let him get out on his own!" Yet, our Lord demonstrated what we should do in 1 John 3:16 when he laid down his life for us.



"Even Though I Walk Through The Darkest Valley"

Sheep are led down from their summer grazing spot when autumn arrives to lower places due to harsh winter weather; a trek that demands going through a dangerous valley to reach their destination. Just like sheep, humans face many valleys on the journey of life that can be hazardous. Again, Keller states the solution for man beautifully with the following quote, **"There are still valleys to walk through during our remaining days. These need not be "dead end" streets. The disappointments, the frustrations, the discouragements, the dilemmas, the dark, difficult days, though they be shadowed valleys, need not be disasters. They can be the road to higher ground in our walk with God."**



"Your Rod And Your Staff, They Comfort Me"

The shepherd's equipment consists of a rod, staff, and sling shot; all carefully made by him. The rod is hurled at predators or a sheep that is straying away, held above each sheep's head when entering the pen for counting purposes, and for separating each animal's coat to inspect skin for disease.

****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)**

The staff that has a hook on the end is used to rescue sheep in trouble, tend to the baby lambs rather than leave human touch on them when first born, and to pull various sheep close to offer affection. Of course, the sling shot is another weapon.

Now, compare each human's needs to that of a sheep that is taken care of by using the three items listed in the shepherd's equipment list. Again, baa!



"You Prepare A Table Before Me In The Presence Of My Enemies"

Every time a shepherd moves his flock to new grazing land, he must make sure all poisonous weeds are removed and the area is free of predators.

Otherwise, the sheep will partake of everything thing in reach without regard for anything harmful, be it plant or animal.

Now compare humans to this behavior. How many are tempted by the latest fashions, gadgets, technical devices, or almost anything new? Even when warning labels are included, they still will proceed without caution. Baa! After all, bad things will happen to others, not self. A little voice runs through the mind saying, "Go ahead. Try it just once!"

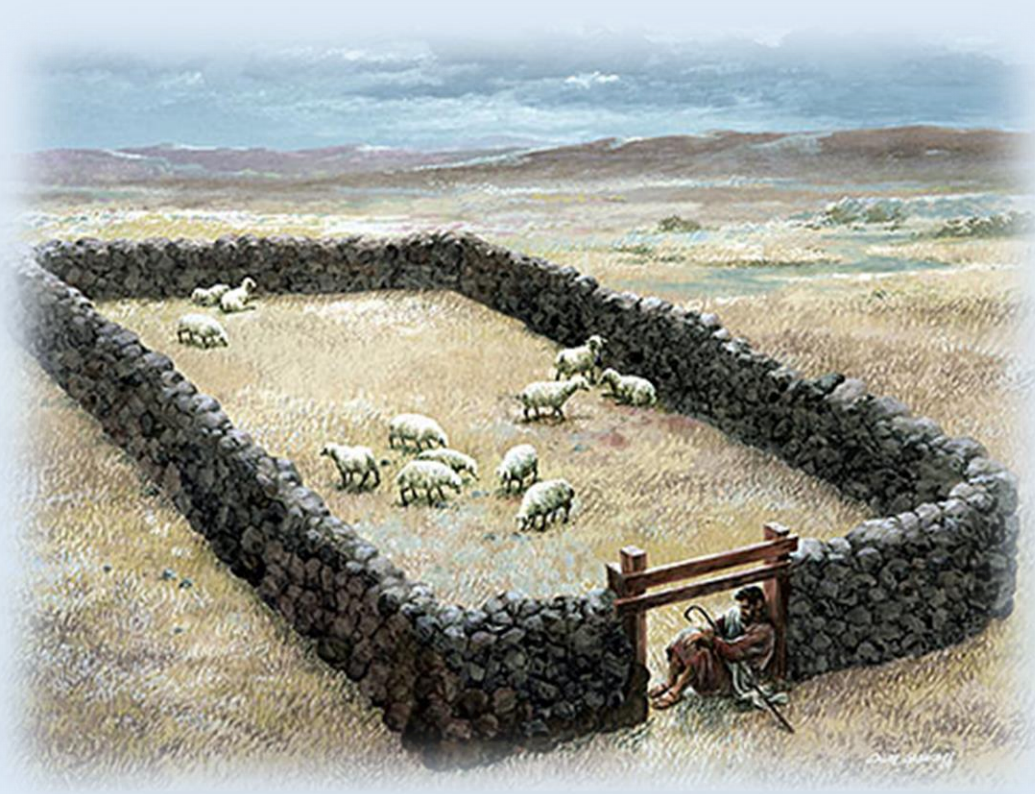


"You Anoint My Head With Oil"

Did you note the little bag in the photo of the shepherd's equipment? There is an ointment concocted by the shepherd that is usually made up of linseed oil, Sulphur, and tar that is applied to each sheep's head, and especially the nose to keep the flies away. Otherwise, they will drive the sheep literally mad, causing them to bump their heads into anything present to the point of killing themselves.

So, do humans have distractions that drive them to the point of insanity? There are things that torment man with such intensity that some even take their own lives. Baa! That is why we all are encouraged to pray daily for an anointing from the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:1-2 reads, **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.”**

Opal, the last photograph is of a sheepfold showing the flock inside and Jesus, our Shepherd, sitting in the opening so we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Our Shepherd has been wooing his children all our lives in spite of us acting just like sheep. After letting this sink in, it makes one realize truly how unconditionally he loves us, doesn't it? Otherwise, why bother with such a flock?



In closing, 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 being wasted on the young, 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? Sometimes I wonder how many new rods he has been required to make because of having so frequently used it to warn this old sheep! Baa!

As an ending to our time today, there is a pray that my dad taught me as a child that I have committed to memory that fits beautifully. My sisters and I said it before each meal.



*"Thank you, God, for this good day
and all that makes it fair.
Our home, and family, food, and
friends,
For your loving care.*

Amen!



*Love,
Colene*