

Psalm 23
2018

"The Song of a Shepherd"

February 11,

Well, shall we turn in our Bibles this morning to Psalm 23. If Psalm 22 convinces you of God's love and how far He would go to save you, which we looked at last week, and the suffering that He endured, Psalm 23 really should tell you that you can't live without Him, because it really is a Psalm of dependency. It is written -- it's certainly one of the most well known Psalms, most beloved Psalms. There's more written about these six verses than almost anything in the Psalms. It is the song of a shepherd who has come to know the Lord personally, and he sees himself as one of God's sheep, His flock. David compares his life as a shepherd with God's care for him as the Great Shepherd, and then he paints this beautiful picture and lots of illustration to how that crosses over into our spiritual well being.

There was a fellow named Phillip Keller many years ago that I think wrote probably the most definitive book on this subject or this chapter. He was a shepherd himself for eight years. But he wrote a book called "A Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23." If you don't have it, I would suggest you find it and put it on your library shelf, because it has a lot to offer in terms of understanding this Psalm in particular and the applications that it makes. I'm pretty sure we have it in the bookstore. I don't know if it's still in print. I suspect that it would be. But it's worth getting a hold of.

So David starts with this verse, "The Lord is my shepherd." And literally everything that follows that in this short Psalm revolves around this understanding: David understands that he has a personal relationship with God Almighty and that He is his Shepherd and that David sees himself as one of the sheep, God's sheep. This concept of the Lord being the Shepherd wasn't new, even in David's day. You can go back to Genesis, towards the end of the book, Chapter 49, where old Jacob is ready to die. He's 165 years old. He feels led of the Lord to call his sons that would become the children of Israel together, the tribes and all, and he wanted to prophesy over them. And if you read what he said to them, all that he says to them indeed works out exactly as he has said in the years to come. But he starts with his oldest son, Reuben, his firstborn, and he proceeds kind of

around the bed. He hangs his feet over the bed it says. When he gets to his 11th son, Joseph, he begins to really bless Joseph and speak well of him, though he had been kind of cast aside by his own brothers. But then he says that there was a Messiah coming. He would be the stone of Israel. He would be Israel's Shepherd. In talking about the Messiah to come, He has already been labeled, if you will, early on in your Bible as the Shepherd, one who comes to care for His sheep. The same word that is used for shepherd in **Genesis** 49 is used here. The Hebrew word is "Rohi." "**Rohi**," it's a shepherd. Someone who watches over the flock, if you will. It becomes later on used for the life of a pastor as well, but it is most often used of Jesus, the Chief Shepherd who we need to look to.

The word LORD there, and we pointed it out before, is all in capitals, and for you that are fairly new to your Bible, every time in the Old Testament when you find the word "LORD" in all capitals, **it is the** translation of a tetragrammaton, **four** Hebrew letters without a vowel, and **it is**, you know, translated sometimes by people Jehovah or sometimes Yahweh. Most people that lean towards Yahweh do so because ancient Hebrew had no "J" sounds, so Jehovah may not be right, but **it is** certainly the most popular that you hear today. But it is the name that the Lord took when he met Moses at the burning **bush**, right? And he said to Moses, "I want to send you to Egypt so you can let My people go. You tell Pharaoh and bring them out." And Moses said, "Well, who do I say sent me?" And the Lord said, "Tell them I sent you. I AM," which is what this word Jehovah **or** Yahweh means. I AM whom I AM, or literally I AM all that you need Me to be. I AM the becoming One. It's a name that God uses for Himself to associate His provision for His people. **So that the name Jehovah is** added throughout the Bible to other words to define the character of God.

When Abraham takes Isaac up into Mount Moriah in **Genesis** 22 and at the last minute the Lord -- you know, they find a lamb caught in the thicket so that the lamb could be offered instead of Isaac, and Isaac couldn't have been happier, they said of the Lord, Jehovah-Jireh. The word means the Lord has become our provision, or the Lord provides. In Exodus 17, when the children of Israel go into battle and they're worried about getting **beat**, the armies are far stronger than they. They cry out to the Lord to go before them, and they say Jehovah-Nissi, and the words Nissi means banner or someone under whom you march forward, and they give the name of the Lord Nissi. It means a banner over us, His covering, His protection. He becomes what we need. In Exodus 15 **it is** Jehovah-Rapha, the healer that we

need when we are sick. It is Jehovah-Shalom when we need peace. It is Jehovah-Tsidkenu; it's the word that means righteousness. The Jehovah-Sabbaoth, the Lord of the Sabbath. Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord of the present tense, and so it goes. And then this word, He's the shepherd, Jehovah the Shepherd, Rohi.

The work of a shepherd in ancient societies, and especially in David's day and Jesus' day, was considered a very lowly job. You haven't gone very far up the ladder if you stopped at shepherd. It wasn't a stellar position. In fact, though there were many shepherds in the land and David was the youngest in his family and assigned to that task, their responsibility and their reputation kind of deteriorated with time. By the time that you get to the New Testament, shepherds were not allowed to enter contracts, they were not allowed to testify in court, they were crooked, and seen that way, which was interesting because they -- people trusted the shepherds the very sacrifices that they needed to get closer to the Lord. It's kind of a weird concept, isn't it? We don't trust them, but they have what we need to get to the Lord. So the shepherd ministry, if you will, was seen as kind of a step down for most people.

You might remember when David was sent by his dad to go see his brothers that were out fighting the Philistines there in 1 Samuel 17, and David arrived about the time that Goliath was screaming his epithets against God and His people across the valley, and David began to hear as he was looking for his brothers as to what Saul had offered the army, anyone that would go fight Goliath. Everyone was terrified of him. Saul had offered a tax-free life, the beautiful girl, you know, the house on a hill. And David was appalled. He said, "What in the world are we having to offer anyone anything? This guy is badmouthing our God. I'll go fight him." He was furious. And he questioned the soldiers a couple of time when Eliab, one of his older brothers, in fact the oldest brother, said to David, "What are you doing down here? And who did you leave your poor, miserable, few sheep with in the wilderness?" In other words, he just kind of discounted David's life as a shepherd, where he learned all that he's writing here.

It was a job with tremendous responsibility. In fact, for a shepherd, most of the time the family's wealth or their assets were entrusted to the shepherd. You could count wealth in terms of livestock, and these helpless creatures became really the financial statement for many homes. And they need 24 hours of care and protection. They needed protection from the weather, they needed protection from the environment, they needed

protection from deadly foes. A good shepherd literally, if he's going to do a good job, needed to devote his life to these sheep. And by the way, the sheep weren't thankful, nor were they frightful, but they were valuable to the owner. It was a difficult, very **much** a sacrificial job. **It is** no wonder that the Lord would picture us that way throughout the scriptures and our dependence upon Him as the illustration, that we as sheep need a good shepherd to take care of us. **It is** God's heart to be your Shepherd.

In Luke 15, I think, the Lord sat down with His disciples and He said, "Which one of you having 100 sheep and losing one wouldn't leave the 99 in the wilderness to go look for the one that you lost?" And when you found it, you'd put it on your shoulders. You'd come home and you'd call your neighbors and say, let's have a barbecue. Not the sheep, just let's celebrate. The one that was lost has been found. And then the Lord made a spiritual lesson. He said, "There's more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents than over the **99** folks who see no need for repentance." Jesus was constantly talking about being Our Shepherd. I'm the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd will give His life for the sheep. When you enter the door, follow the Shepherd of the sheep. He's the One that the doorkeeper will open to and the sheep will hear His voice, and He'll call them by name and He'll lead them out and He'll bring His **sheep and** the sheep will go before Him and they'll follow His voice, and on and on it goes, the relationship of the sheep to the Shepherd. I AM the good Shepherd. I know my sheep. I'm known by my own. I lay down My life for them. **The** Shepherd has a flock that belongs to Him and it was His flock that He was assigned to protect and to watch and to keep care of.

By the way, the only protection that sheep have as a means of defense mechanism is to run. They got nothing. They can't hiss at you or stand up on their two feet, and "I'm going to get you." They're dumb. They're just sheep. All they can do is scurry, right? They depend upon the shepherd for their very lives. And if you begin to study sheep at all, you can quickly get angry about the fact that God compares you to one, because they might be some of the dumbest animals on the planet. But they're the perfect illustration for our dependency upon God, which is, I think, why the Lord gives us this comparison to begin with. Sheep cannot forage for food. **If** you leave sheep in a field, they will graze it to the dirt and then lay down and **die**. They won't go, "You know, **maybe** we should go a block over or maybe across the street. Look, there is a greener pasture." They have no desire to do that, they have no ability to do that.

They just go "eh," they're done. "That's it, we're done." Sheep. Sheep have absolutely no sense of direction. If you as a shepherd are leading sheep and you go over the crest of a hill and they don't see you, they're wandering off. They don't go, "I bet he just went over the hill." They just go, "I don't see him," and then off they'll go. And they never find their way again. They have absolutely no homing instinct whatever. A lot of animals do. You put a cat in a bag -- wait, I'm dreaming -- and you drive him across town and you let him out, he's going to find his way home. It's hard to get rid of cats. I've read. I don't know.

Donkeys are just the same. They'll go right home. There was a story in Israel when we were there maybe 15 or 20 years ago of a Bedouin who had robbed a house. Bedouins are kind of the travelers, right? The gypsies. And in robbing a house he had taken a lot of stuff, but he had left his donkey there. So when the police came they went, well, the donkey's here, and they slapped him on the butt and he began to walk and they followed him right to the thief's house. The donkey ratted out the man. There's that scripture in Isaiah, I was reminded of it, that says in chapter 1, verse 3, "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey knows his master's crib." In other words, they have instinct to go home. But then the Lord said, "But Israel, they don't know Me and they don't consider Me." It's kind of like you don't have that natural ability. You got to choose to come.

Sheep cannot find water on their own. They're not bright. They're not self-sufficient. They are as livestock really high maintenance. It's an apt description I think of man without God. It is also an apt description of you and I walking with the Lord and hoping to do well.

David here gives us some analogies and comparisons that he had learned in his job as a shepherd before he would eventually become king over Israel and his realization that God's care for him was pronounced and could be depended upon, but he starts with this declaration, "The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd." Then he adds this: "I shall not want." Literally, because the Lord is my shepherd, I don't lack anything. It's a pretty good statement to begin with. As always, left to themselves, sheep need everything. They have no common sense, they have no survival skills. The sheep are only going to be as well off as their shepherd is good, and to that extent, they'll do well. Jesus when He looked at the world in Mark chapter 6 saw the people scurrying to follow Him, and it says He saw the world as sheep that had no shepherd. They were in need, they

didn't know where to go, they were running around wildly in the dark, they were doomed to failure. He just wanted to be their shepherd. That's why He had come. But He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. And He compares His love and His concern for man with those who are not even very good shepherds. In fact, the Lord will say in John chapter 10, I believe, there is a hireling who really is not a shepherd. He was hired to watch the sheep, but they don't belong to him, and so when he sees a wolf coming, he runs. He leaves the sheep, who are then scattered, and he does that because he's a hireling, he doesn't care for the sheep. And then he said, "But I'm the Good Shepherd. I care for the sheep. I want to take care of them." David had come to know that his shepherd would provide for his every need, the Lord that would lay down His life for us. And it was vital for David to learn that he could depend upon the Lord for everything, because sheeps -- sheeps, that's more than a couple -- sheep don't have any capability to care for themselves, which is a pretty good insight the next time you think you do.

There's a great psalm in Psalm 34, verse 10, and it says this, "The young lions can lack and they can suffer hunger, but those who will seek the Lord will never lack any good thing." And I thought it was an interesting comparison, because, you know, you have a sheep in your right hand and a lion over here. And as far as creation is concerned, very few things can take out a lion. Well, a man with a gun. But everything being equal, he is kind of the king of the jungle, you know. And he has skill and he has prowess and he's sneaky and he's powerful, and everything you'd want to be if you were in the jungle would be the lion. And yet the Lord says of him, even a young lion with all of his energy can still come up short, can still suffer lack, could still suffer hunger, but then He says of His sheep, if you walk with Me, you'll never need anything. Quite a comparison. The best the world has to offer, and then the lack of strength that is shown in the life of a sheep. That you and I, if we can say the Lord is my shepherd, the next thing out of our mouth can be we don't need anything. He's going to provide everything that we need. Even a dumb sheep who trusts the Lord is far better off than a strong healthy lion. And if you'll think about your life, I think you'll see how graciously and constantly and faithfully God has met your needs, even when you fail to acknowledge Him. He's a faithful God. He's a Good Shepherd.

Second of all, he says, "He will make me to lie down in green pastures," or if you will, I won't lack any provision or rest if

He's my Lord. Keller wrote in his book years ago there are four things that every sheep needs before he can lay down and rest: He needs to be free from fear, he needs to be free from the friction that comes between he and other sheep, he needs to be free from flies or parasites, and he has to be free from hunger. It's a beautiful picture. David sees himself as God's sheep lying down to rest in a green pasture; that the Lord has provided as his shepherd everything that he needs that could steal his rest. The Bible is full of the "thou shalt not fear" statements. Look them up sometime in a Bible program and use all of the words like that; you know, don't be afraid and fear not, and you'll find just page after page of the Lord saying to you, you don't need to be afraid. If the Lord is there, you need never be afraid. He tells us to forgive one another and love one another and for His sake to live that kind of life because we've been forgiven, and if you'll do that you'll remove all of the friction in your life and the strife, at least to your abilities.

And He promises to feed us, to care for us, so that our lives can be overflowing. I shall not lack. He'll lay me down in a green pasture where there's plenty of food for me. "Come to Me all ye that are heavy laden," Jesus said, "and I'll give you rest. I'm the Bread of Life. If you come to Me and your heart is troubled, if you believe in Me, you'll never hunger, you'll never thirst." I mean, He makes great promises to the sheep, doesn't He? So that you can just lie down and have rest and be surrounded with all of the provisions that God has provided for you. Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I won't lack anything. Because the Lord is my Shepherd, my provisions will never be lacking. I'll have rest that allowed me to rest. Verse 2 at the end, it says "He will lead me beside still waters." I won't lack refreshment.

It was the duty of a shepherd to find sheep water. Sheep, unlike camels, cannot store water for any length of time. If you were moving a flock of sheep around, you would have to find good drinking water for them at least four times a day, which can be hard if you're moving across the desert and trying to find a place for them to rest. Jesus sat down at that well of water in Samaria and said to the woman there in John Chapter 4, "If you can drink of the water that I will give you, you'll never thirst." That's great. Now I don't have to run around finding water. You'll give it to me. "The water that I give you," He went on to say, "will spring up in you as a fountain of living water that will eventuate into everlasting life."

I shall not lack refreshments. "He leads me beside the still waters." Later on at the temple it was Jesus in John Chapter 7 that stood up and said, "If any man thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. If he believes in Me, as the scripture said, out of his heart will flow rivers, torrents of living water." David learned that in 1,000 BC as a shepherd. The Lord is my Shepherd. I've been a shepherd, but He's mine. And I never need to lack when it comes to refreshment. He always provides. I think, our Bible pretty much ends with the words, you know, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give you the fountain of waters of life freely to those who are thirsty." Showed John a river of pure water, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God there in the New Jerusalem. The Spirit and the Bride saying, "Come if you desire. Take the waters of life freely." Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing. I don't lack provision, I can rest, and I don't lack refreshment.

Verse 3, "He restores my soul." I don't lack overcoming courage. Sheep can do something that few animals can, few can. Sheep can roll on their backs and not be able to get up, and just die. They panic, they "ah." They seem to pass out just about over anything. They sound like us, don't they? But here comes the Good Shepherd that restores the soul. That when we're overwhelmed, He gets us up and moves us on. That we have to learn that our burdens that we carry are not really -- we can't do a good job of carrying them. The load is too great, and so the Lord wants us to be our -- He wants to be our restorer, our strength. Bring them to Me, cast your care here. Let Me have them. I always like that verse in -- I guess it's in Daniel Chapter 11 that says, "The wicked will plot against the covenant with God and will be corrupted by flattery, but the people who know God will go out strongly and they'll carry out great exploits." That's not the good description of a sheep who can't do anything, but if you know God, man, all of a sudden you're restored, you're powerful, you're capable of far more than you could have ever hoped to do, if you will, on your own. God will restore your soul.

He says at the end of verse 3, "And He will lead me in the path of righteousness for His name's sake." To leave the choice to which path to take to a sheep is foolish. Sheep will not pick the right way. The Bible says of us, "All we like sheep have gone astray. Everyone has turned to his own way." But not when I come to the Lord. Then He gives me guidance. He'll lead me in the paths of righteousness for His glory, for His name's sake. It is good to know that if you will turn to the Lord,

that God won't lead you somewhere where you won't survive, but He'll lead you to the right place at the right time with the right purpose. It's exciting to walk with God, and it's certainly good to be a sheep in His flock. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your path." And David saw that. The Lord is my shepherd, and because He is, He's going to lead me in the ways of righteousness. He's going to glorify Himself through my life. Only a foolish sheep would go it alone. When I walk with God, He's glorified.

It says in verse 4, "Though I would walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear any evil; for You're with me; and Your rod and Your staff will comfort me." Danger certainly loses its power when the Shepherd is there. Nothing can defeat you. I remember growing up and we used to walk to school. I guess not too many kids do that these days, but we used to walk to school. I was in third grade, and there was a kid on the corner of our street that just beat the snot out of me probably on a regular basis. I hated this kid. I threw dirt clods at his house. I called him names and made hand signs to him. But he was a scary kid, you know, and he would just -- he would thump me, man. I hated that kid. But when my dad was home one day and walked me to school, I wasn't afraid of him at all, because my dad was huge compared to that little kid. And I figured pops could handle him, so I would make faces at him, you know. What are you going to do about it now, pal? I think that's what the Lord is telling us here, right? I won't lack any safety and I won't lack any hope when the Good Shepherd is with me. Even on the day that I would walk near the shadow of death, and it is a shadow only because, the light on the other side is calling you home.

I think that God's people have the greatest awareness of God's presence when it's about time for them to take off. I've certainly seen it over the years in hospital and visiting folks who are dying, that somehow God graciously gives you, the understanding of what's next and brings comfort with it. It's usually the family that goes, "Don't go!" And the one dying, "Yeah, I'm going. See you later." High five. And off they want to go. Because of Jesus, even on your deathbed you can go there without worry. He's conquered sin and death for you. You're absent from the body, you're going to be present with the Lord. But I want you to notice that when it comes to these personal applications, that the pronoun here changes from "he" to "you." In verses 1 and 2 and 3 and verse 6, it speaks about "He," He who does for me, but in verses 4 and 5, it is You are

with me, it is Your staff that comfort me, it is Your rod of correction, it is Your rod of protection, and the personal is applied and the pronoun changes as well. It becomes personal. When you need God the most, He makes Himself even more personal to you.

The rod of correction or the staff that comforts is really one and the same stick, if you will. If you have gone to Israel with us before, there's still lots of Bedouins, especially raising sheep in the middle of nowhere, and they usually carry a stick and on the one end it's pointed. It's meant to move sheep that are less than cooperative. He didn't want to -- "Hey, I'm going. There I go." And then on the other side there's a hook and it's usually used when sheep get caught in thickets or maybe near an edge, and the shepherd can actually pick the whole sheep up by its neck, just pull them to safety. So I think that's the reference here as well. It certainly fits right into the story, that sometimes the Lord has to prod you along. Other times He had to just pull you out, of a dangerous situation. But either way, the Shepherd will be there equipped to handle whatever comes your way, even to the last day of your life. Because the Lord is my Shepherd I won't lack safety and I'll never lack hope.

Verse 5, "You set a table before me in the midst of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil." I love the fact that He says, "I will set a table before you in the middle of your enemies," because if the Lord is your Shepherd, you won't lack victory. You know, David was a kid that was despised by everybody in his family. How badly? You remember when Samuel came to David's house directed by the Lord to anoint a king that would replace Saul, and when he walked into Jesse's house, Jesse brought all of his kids in except for David. Why? Because he's out there with them sheep. And it was Samuel goes, nope, nope, nope, huh-uh, nope, huh-uh, nope. Got any more kids? And they said this: That stinky kid in the back. Smells like sheep. Yeah, bring him in here. He wasn't exactly loved, if you will, in the position God has given him to make him king. Throughout his life David was surrounded with enemies. For the first seven and a half years of his 40-year reign he had no place to sit. He was running from Saul, who made it his life's goal to kill him. Wherever David went, Saul was on his tail. And yet God delivered David out of them all.

When you walk with the Lord, you're going to run into enemies. Why? Because you love God. Your relationship with Him brings out the animosity. Your life convicts. And so often you want

to fight the enemy on their turf. But David had learned that God could just give him victory in the midst of his enemies. Now, what a beautiful picture, that God would establish you even though you're surrounded by those who would seek to destroy you. Because He's the Shepherd.

David as a young shepherd **faced** lions and bears in the field to protect the sheep. He mentions that when he goes to fight Goliath and he's questioned, "Hey, you're kind of a little punk. You're not going to win this battle." And he goes, "Well, maybe not, but I've seen **what the** Lord can do. I killed a bear with bare hands. And a lion too. They tried to get the sheep, but they didn't **get the** sheep. The Lord was with me." And he was remembering. What he learned in secret, he was now able to live out in public. "God will establish you before your eyes, before **the eyes** of your enemy." I love that. You don't have to worry about enemies. God will establish your life.

"And You will anoint my head with oil." If the Lord is your Shepherd, you won't lack any intimate care. There are several species of flies that are particularly bothersome, if not dangerous, to sheep, especially in the summer. There is one species of flies that likes to lay eggs in the moisture of the sheep's nostrils. And if the larva gets to moving, it crawls into the brain, and the sheep will actually bash his head till he dies trying to get rid of this thing out of his brain. But a good shepherd will, in David's day, mix sulfur with oil and place **it around** the nose and the **eyes** and all to protect the sheep. Intimate care. He had to look in your nose. Let me see in there. Who's going into a sheep's nose? I don't know. But I love the way the **Lord** will keep irritants and hurtful things out of our lives by the oil of His spirit, to refresh you and keep you from the ills of this life, to surround you with protection, because He's your Shepherd. Verse 1, **you got** to go back to it every time.

"My **cup** runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of **my life; and** I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." **I will** dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And everything that God gives to me, I will not lack anything. From here to eternity I will have more than I need. Goodness to cover my steps, **mercy** to cover my stumbles. Every hour of the day, more than I could have imagined, my cup runneth over. Mercy and goodness now, eternity then, more blessed than I can count. And David could sing this with joy because he saw himself as one of the sheep in God's pastures.

It's good to be in his flock, isn't it? You're blessed. You could have had -- in fact, you had a god that was far worse before you met Jesus, one that wanted to destroy you. Now this One wants to give you life. "I am the Good Shepherd," He said. The Good Shepherd would give His life for the sheep. Beautiful verses.