

Greenhills Community Church, Presbyterian

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Perspective on Psalm 23

Karen Cartier, REPI

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Lent, it's a good hour to reflect on Christ. It's also the first day of Spring and happens to be Fred Roger's birthday. In light of all of that, I'd like to share a perspective on Psalm 23 that I read a couple of years ago. It is written by W. Phillip Keller and is titled [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](#). The author of the book grew up and lived in East Africa surrounded by native sheep herders. He owned and ranched sheep himself for a number of years, so he speaks from first-hand experience. Later as a lay pastor of a community church he shared truths about this Psalm to his congregation. Keller is quoted regarding his hope of writing the pages of his book "...you will be brought into a bold, new appreciation of the endless effort put forth by our Savior for His sheep. Out of this there will then emerge a growing admiration and affection for the Good Shepherd."

David had written this Psalm from the perspective of a shepherd's view. We may or may not literally understand the literal origins of the lines. Let's take a look...

1 The LORD is my shepherd;

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. In Isaiah 53:6 we read "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." Sheep don't just take care of themselves, they require attention. The author asks the question: Who is my shepherd? -

- God the Father, the originator of all that exists (Col 1:15-20)
- The Son, through His ministry on the earth, the Lord's concepts were made practical
- The Holy Spirit, speaks to our mind and spiritual understanding.

David, the author of the psalm is saying out of love "Look who my shepherd is! The Lord! The quality of care and health that sheep are given depends on the shepherd. The author of this book states "I can see God as my shepherd. He knows my every thought. He knows what's in my heart and He brought me into existence for a purpose. "

As Christ laid down his life for us and for our sins, the shepherd, owner of the sheep, would protect his flock with his own life. We have been bought for a price. The author remembers buying his first 30 ewes after much hard work during a depression. His investment was based on planning for that day after having worked hard to earn the price for each ewe. This was a beginning, this first flock. Because of the sheep cost him dearly, the money earned from the sweat of his brow, they meant more to him and were precious to him. "The behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in ways...our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears, and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance. Christ is ever interceding for us... and guiding us by His gracious spirit...that we benefit from his care"

The author describes the need immediately after taking ownership of his flock the required ear-marking of sheep parallel to human by their relationship and acceptance marked so belonging to Christ.

I shall not want.

The author reminds us to keep in mind a balance in life. Jesus warns us:" I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33) Ask yourself - 'Am I satisfied being under the care of the Good Shepherd?'

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

The author describes how sheep cannot easily be made to lie down unless a few requirements are met, such as:

- They are free of all fear
- They are free from friction or tension with others in the flock
- They are free from pests around them and can relax
- They are not feeling hungry.

The shepherd can provide relief from these things.

[Free of Fear] Sheep are generally so timid that if one becomes startled and runs, others will follow blindly not even knowing why. Sheep have little means for defense. The author learned that nothing reassured and quieted his herd of sheep more than his own presence. As Christians, there is nothing like Christ's presence 'to dispel the fear, panic, the terror of the unknown.' Recall 2 Timothy 1:7 "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."

[Free of tension from others] The author reminds us: "When my eyes are on my master, they are not on those around me. This is the place of peace." It is good and proper to remind ourselves that in the end it is He who will decide and judge what my status really is. After all, it is His estimation of me that is of consequence.

[Free from pests] Here's another way of looking at this from a human point of view – you can go to the Lord in prayer and tell him "Master, this is really bugging me!! I can't sleep, I can't eat... Please take over!"

[Free from hunger] This last requirement to enable sheep to lie down was that they were not hungry. The words "green pastures" in the line of the psalm itself indicates that those sheep were surrounded by good food. In Palestine, where David wrote this Psalm wasn't known for its green pastures. The land required much work and knowledge to develop rich green forage for sheep...to flow with milk and honey. Sheep could graze on rich grass, then rest quietly in the presence of the shepherd. In contrast, a hungry sheep is constantly ill at ease looking for food and lacking vigor.

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

The key to where good water can be found lies with the shepherd. If sheep weren't led to good, fresh water they'll drink from dirty, polluted pools and may then become infected with various parasites. In Matthew 5:6, Christ said "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. To "drink" in spiritual terms means 'to take in' or 'to accept.' There are actually multiple ways sheep can take in good fresh water: dew on the grass, deep wells or springs, streams. If the shepherd enables his sheep to graze early in the morning for example, they can get sufficient fresh water from the pure dew on the grass. It is likewise in the quiet early morning hours that those who rise early also during the peaceful time can feast on God's Word and be refreshed for the day.

3 He restoreth my soul:

The author compares this line to restoring a 'cast down' sheep. Sheep can become so heavy with their wool that if they should lose balance and literally fall over, they are not physically able to get back on their feet by themselves. Once on their backs, they are totally vulnerable to any predators. When a child of God falls, he/she is frustrated and helpless in a spiritual dilemma, maybe thinking that God will be fed up with them and angry with him/her. God has the same compassion for us when we fall – look at Psalm 56:13 "For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling, so that I may walk before God in the light of life." 1 Corinth chapters 10 – 12 speak about not getting too comfortable, not

to allow yourself to think 'I have it made' as of self-indulgence, the easy way, weighed down with focus on lots of stuff. Compare a sheep weighed down with heavy coat of wool – it doesn't like so much the process of being sheared, but after it is over, what a relief to be free of that weight!

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

The author tells us that no other class of livestock requires more careful handling and more detailed direction than sheep. Sheep left to their own would destroy grasslands as they are creatures of habit and will passively stay in one area and graze. The shepherd will keep them on the move to prevent over-grazing in one area. The trouble with us humans is though, that we don't want to be led. We are stubborn, self-willed, proud, self-sufficient. In Mark 8:34 we read "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Instead of doing just what we want to do, we can practice obedience and ask Jesus, 'what would you have me do?'

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;

The author describes times every season when the flock must be driven from the higher elevations down through the lower pastures for the winter. During the time before the drive to the home range, the shepherd and flock are alone together. The drive from higher ground to home range requires going through dark valleys – not stopping in them but going through them. Take heart we heart as we know the Holy Spirit is always with us.

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

During the hours that the sheepman is in the fields with the flock, he carries a rifle slung over his shoulder and a long, slender staff in his hand, a knapsack with food and first aid type supplies. Primitive shepherds truly carried only a rod and a staff. The long, slender rod served as a weapon for defense. The shepherd became adept at throwing it at predators. It also served to correct any wayward sheep from danger such as throwing it just ahead of them to prevent getting into poisonous weeds, thorny patches that they could get caught in.

Do you recall Moses' rod – Moses was directed to use it to demonstrate the power of God to Pharaoh, then to reassure people of Israel. Living today as we do with confusion in our world we can turn to the Word of God and know it to be God's hand of authority with it, we are kept from confusion amid the chaos, with that, is comfort.

The shepherd's staff represents a tool of kindness and comfort. Often we see images of shepherds leaning on their staff in contemplation and peace. The staff could be used to lift a newborn lamb and guide it towards its mother so that lamb has no other scent on it that could cause it mother to reject it. The staff is also used to catch an adult sheep and draw it closer. Finally, the staff is used to simply guide sheep who wander too far.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

There are mesas (the Spanish and African word for tables) that are flat areas of higher elevation where sheep are driven during summer months to graze. In Africa, Table Mountain is one such near Cape Town. Before the drive, the shepherd will carefully survey the high mesa, he will distribute salt and minerals at strategic spots for the benefit of the sheep. The shepherd also plans where his camps will be located as well as the best grazing areas for his sheep. The shepherd will check for poisonous weeds ahead of time to avoid those areas or in some cases pull them out. Also, the watering holes must be cleaned out ahead of time, all in preparation for the herd to be driven there for the summer. The author compares this to the communion table prepared for us.

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Summertime for sheep is also “fly” time – pesky flies that seriously impact the animals' lives. One of the worst is the nose or nasal fly. A good shepherd has an antidote to anoint their heads against these flies with a mixture of linseed oil, sulfur, and tar. Another example of anointing animals includes the rams during mating season they can kill each other competing for females so the author knows about smearing their heads with grease to that when they but heads their heads only glance off of each other.

In the Christian life, we're urged to ask the Holy Spirit to be given to us by the Father. It is the daily anointing of God's gracious spirit on our minds that enables us to respond in life with true joy, contentment, love, patience, gentleness, and peace.

In contrast with temper, irritableness, when we turn our focus to Christ, He always has our best interests in mind. As Christians we are under obligation to be thankful, grateful, appreciative people.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The sheep, under such attentive care of the good shepherd, are under sound, intelligent ownership a we often think we can survive better on our own. We go through the rough patches and ask why?" The author states "I love Him because He first loved me" 1 John 3:16

His well-managed flock good for the land and an unmanaged flock can destroy the landscape. We can ask ourselves how will we be remembered? What do I leave behind me – a legacy of love?

I've read in biographies that some of Fred Rogers' last words were "Was I a sheep or a goat?" to his wife Joanne. Understood to be referencing Matthew 25: 31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked, and you gave me clothing, I was sick, and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, [a] you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."